

# Hyouka: The Complete Series

Honobu Yonezawa

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米澤穂信

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You can't escape

角川文庫

# 1 - Letter from Benares

Dear Houtarou,

I am currently staying in Benares. Although in Japan this place is commonly known as Benares, calling it Varanasi is probably more accurate in terms of pronunciation.

Benares is a great town, Houtarou. This is a town of funeral ceremonies - after all, it has been since a long time ago. It seems like whoever dies here can ascend directly to heaven. Or am I wrong?

Oh yes, this place is said to be "free from the wheel of reincarnation." What it means is that dying here is equivalent to becoming an enlightened being in the Buddhist sense. In China, a long austerity is required to reach this state of "release". But here you simply pass away and then everything is okay.

Well, that's a pathetic story for the Chinese.

It might be a bit late, but congratulations for being successfully admitted into high school. It is Kamiyama High School after all, isn't it? What a boring choice. But congratulations anyway.

As your big sis, let me give you, someone who has safely become a high school student, a piece of advice.

Enter the Classics Club.

The Classics Club is a humanities club in Kami-High with a long tradition. Also, you might already know this, but I also belonged to the club in the past.

I heard this from someone else, but it seems that our tradition-rich club has had no newcomers for three years and currently has no members at all. If no one joins the club this year it will be disbanded. As a former member of the club it is certainly not something I can stand.

However, if there are newcomers in April then the situation will turn out differently. Houtarou, safeguard the Classics Club, the youth of your big sis. For now you can join the club in name only.

Moreover, it's not really that bad of a club. It's particularly great in autumn.

After all, you don't have anything better to do, do you?

I'll call you after reaching New Delhi.

With love,  
Tomoe

## 2 - The Rebirth of the Traditional Classics Club

It's often said that life in high school is rose-coloured. As the year 2000 comes to an end, the arrival of the day that matches that description as defined by a Japanese dictionary isn't too far off.

However, that doesn't mean that all high school students would wish for such a rose-coloured life. Whether it's studying, sports or romance, there will always be some people who would prefer a grey-coloured life rather than all that; I know quite a few within my own reckoning. Still, it's quite a lonely way to live one's life.

Here I was striking up a conversation of such a topic with my old friend Fukube Satoshi in the classroom filled with the light of the sunset. As always, Satoshi would carry a smiling face and say, "That's what I thought as well. By the way, I never knew you were so masochistic."

How unfortunately wrong he was. So I protested, "Are you saying my life is grey-coloured?"

"Did I say that? But Houtarou, whether it's studying, sports, or what was the other one? Romance? I don't think you've ever been forward-looking in any of those."

"I'm not exactly backward-looking either."

"Well, true,"

Satoshi's smile broadened.

"You're just 'saving energy' after all."

I gave my approval to that with a snort. It's fine as long as you understand that I don't exactly hate getting myself active. I simply dislike wasting energy on anything bothersome. My style is to save energy for the betterment of the planet. In other words, "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick."

As I utter my motto, Satoshi would shrug his shoulders as usual.

"Whether it's energy saving or cynicism, it's the same thing, isn't it? Have you ever heard of instrumentalism<sup>[1]</sup>?"

"Nope."

"In short, it means that for a person like you who has no particular interest, just by observing the fact that you have not joined any club here in Kamiyama High, the Holy Land of high school club activities, makes you a grey-coloured person."

"What? Are you saying death from murder is no different from death from negligence?"

Satoshi answered without hesitation, "From a certain perspective, yeah. Though it's a different matter completely if you're trying to convince a dead person that his death is due to your negligence in order to exorcise his soul."

"..."

Cheeky bastard. I once again looked at the person before me. Fukube Satoshi, my old friend, worthy opponent and deadly rival, is rather short for a guy. Even as a high school student, he could be mistaken as a feminine-looking weakling, but he's totally different on the inside. It's quite difficult to explain just what that difference is — anyway, he just feels different. Besides carrying a smile all the time, he's always seen with a drawstring bag, as well as his trademark cheekiness. He's also a member of the Handicraft Club, don't ask me why.

Arguing with him is just a waste of energy. I waved my hand to signify the end of this conversation.

"Yeah, whatever. Just go home already."

"Yeah, you're right. I haven't got any club activities today... maybe I'll go home."

As Satoshi stretched his waist, he suddenly realized something and looked at me.

"'Go home already'? That's rare hearing that from you."

"What is?"

"If it's going home, wouldn't you usually have done so before even uttering that sentence? Just what business would you have after school when you aren't affiliated with any clubs?"

"Ah."

I raised my eyebrow and took out a piece of paper from the inner right pocket of my uniform jacket. After quietly handing it to Satoshi, his eyes widened in amazement. No, he's overreacting. It's not like he's really surprised, though it's true that his eyes have widened. Satoshi is well-known for such exaggerated reactions after all.

"What?! How can this be?!"

"Satoshi, behave yourself."

"Isn't this a club application form? I'm surprised. Just what on earth has happened? For Houtarou to actually join a club..."

It was indeed a club application form. Upon seeing the club name that was written in, Satoshi raised his eyebrow.

"The Classics Club...?"

"You heard of it?"

"Of course, but, why the Classics Club? Have you suddenly found an interest in classic literature?"

Now how should I explain this? I scratched my head and took out another piece of paper from my inner left pocket. It was a letter with scribbled handwriting, which I handed over to Satoshi.

"Read it."

Satoshi promptly took the letter and started going through it, and as expected, began to laugh.

"Haha, Houtarou, now that sure is troublesome. A request from your sister, huh? No way you could refuse that."

Why was he looking so gleeful? On the other hand, I was very aware that I was showing a bitter expression. This airmail from India that arrived this morning was attempting to make adjustments to my lifestyle. Oreki Tomoe is constantly like that, sending letters to derail my life.

'Houtarou, safeguard the Classics Club, the youth of your big sis.'

When I had opened the envelope and read through that brief letter this morning, I became aware of its self-centered content. I had no obligation to safeguard my sister's memories, but...

"What was it that your sis is specialized in? Jujutsu?"

"Aikido and Taiho-jutsu<sup>[2]</sup>. It can be pretty painful if one has the intent to hurt."

Yup, my sister, a university student proficient in both academics and martial arts, was not content with conquering Japan alone, and had decided to go out and challenge the world as well. It would not be wise to incur her fury.

Then again, while I could attempt to resist with what little pride I had, it was also true that I had little reason to oppose her. Indeed my sister has hit

the bullseye by pointing out that I don't have anything better to do anyway. I decided I might as well be an invisible club member rather than an unaffiliated student, and so without hesitation, "I submitted that application this morning."

"You know what this means, Houtarou?"

Satoshi said while glancing at my sister's letter. I sighed and said, "Yeah, there doesn't seem to be any benefit from this."

"... No, that's not what I meant."

Lifting his gaze from the letter, Satoshi said with a strangely cheerful tone. He tapped the letter with the back of his palm and said, "There are currently no members in the Classics Club, right? This means that only *you* get to keep the club room for yourself. Isn't that great? A private base within school for your own use."

A private base?

"... That's an interesting way to look at this."

"Don't you like that?"

Such strange reasoning. Satoshi was basically saying I could have my own secret base in school. I could never come up with such an idea. A private space, huh? It's not like I really desire such a thing and would strive to work hard for it... But it's not so bad if it comes as a perk. I took back the letter from Satoshi and replied, "Guess it's not so bad. I might go have a look."

"Good. Opportunities are there for you to try out."

Opportunities there to try out, huh? Well, it's not like it doesn't suit my personality at all, so I smiled bitterly and picked up my shoulder bag.

I was still faithful to my own motto.

From the opened windows, the shouts of the Athletics Team could be heard.

"... Fight! Fight! Fight!..."

I wouldn't want to get myself involved in such wasteful energy consumption. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that saving energy is the superior option, so I'm not dismissing those active people as fools at all. I headed towards the Classics Club room while hearing them continue with their chants.

I walked along the tiled corridor and up towards the third floor. Upon meeting the janitor, who was carrying a large ladder, I asked him where the Classics Club room was, and was directed to the Geology Lecture Room on the fourth floor of the Special Purposes Block.

This school, Kamiyama High School, was neither copious in its number of students nor large in its campus area.

The total number of students was somewhere around a thousand. While the school provides curricula for university entrance exams like most high schools, it wasn't particularly noted for its academics. In other words, it's a normal high school. On the other hand, the school had an extraordinarily large number of clubs (such as the Water Paint Club or the A Capella Club, as well as the Classics Club), hence it was quite well known for having a lively annual Cultural Festival.

Within the campus grounds there are three large buildings. The General Block which houses the regular classrooms, the Special Purposes Block with its special purposes classrooms, and the Gymnasium. That's quite normal really. There's also the Martial Arts Dojo and the Sports Equipment Storage Room. The fourth floor of the Special Purposes Block, where the Classics Club room is located, is relatively remote.

While cursing at such a waste of energy, I walked across the connecting corridor and up the stairs towards the fourth floor, where I quickly found the Geology Room. Without hesitation I proceeded to slide the door open,

but found that it was locked. This was to be expected, as most special purposes rooms are normally locked. I took out the key which I borrowed beforehand in order to save energy and unlocked the door.

After turning the lock open, I slid the door open. Inside the empty Geology Room, the sunset could be seen from its westward facing window.

Did I say empty? Nope, turns out it was not what I expected.

Within the sunset drenched Geology Room, which is the Classics Club room, there was already someone inside.

A student was standing beside the window looking towards me. It was a girl.

While "graceful" and "neat" weren't exactly the first words that came to my mind upon seeing her, there were no other words that I could think of to describe her properly. Her long black hair flowed past her shoulders, and her sailor uniform suited her very well. She was tall for a girl, probably taller than Satoshi. While it was clear she was a high school girl, her thin lips and forlorn figure reinforced this old-fashioned image of what a school girl would look like within my mind. In contrast, her pupils were big, and rather than graceful, they looked energetic.

It was a girl I didn't recognize.

Yet upon seeing me, she smiled and said, "Hello. You must be Oreki-san of the Classics Club, right?"

"... Who're you?"

I asked candidly. Though I was never good at interacting with people, I didn't intend to treat someone I just met for the first time coldly. While I didn't know who she was, for some reason, she seemed to know who I am.

"Don't you remember me? My name is Chitanda, Chitanda Eru."

Chitanda Eru. Even though she's given her name, I still haven't got a clue. By the way, Chitanda is quite a rare surname, and so is her first name, Eru.

It was not possible for me to forget such a name.

I looked once again at the girl called Chitanda. After making sure that I don't know her, I replied, "I'm sorry, I don't think I remember who you are."

While maintaining her smile, she tilted her head, apparently confused.

"You're Oreki-san, right? Oreki Houtarou of Class 1-B?"

I nodded.

"I'm from Class 1-A."

*So do you remember now?* Was what she seemed to be hinting at... Was my memory really that bad?

Hang on. I'm from Class B and she's from Class A, was there any chance of us having met before?

Even within the same grade, it was not possible for students from different classes to interact with each other at all. The only chance they get to do so was via club activities or friends. I had no such links with both. Then it must have involved the entire student body, but the only event I could think of was the school's opening ceremony at the start of the semester. Besides, I don't think I was ever introduced to anyone from outside my class then.

No, wait. I remember. That's it, there were chances for us to interact with other classes during lessons. If it involves the use of special equipment, then it's more feasible to teach more than one class at the same time. That must mean during PE or arts-related subjects. During middle school, there would also be vocational classes, but as this high school is a mainly academic school, that's out of the equation. And PE is gender separated, so that leaves...

"Could it be that we had music lessons together?"

"Yes, that's it!"

Chitanda nodded her head greatly.

Despite figuring that out myself, I was still surprised. For the sake of my remaining pride, I must confess that I have only attended any of those optional arts lessons once ever since enrolling here. So it was of course impossible for me to remember any faces or names!

But on the other hand, this girl called Chitanda managed to remember me after seeing me just once, so here was living proof that it was not exactly impossible... Let me tell you this, she must have possessed a frightening level of observation and memory.

Still, it could also be that it's all coincidental. Different people could interpret different meanings from reading the same newspaper article, after all. I regained my senses and asked, "So, Chitanda-san. What brings you here to the Geology Room?"

She quickly replied, "I've joined the Classics Club, so I thought I should come to greet you."

Joined the Classics Club, in other words, a member.

At that moment I had wanted her to guess how I was feeling. If she's joining the club, it would mean the end of my private space as well as having to fulfill my obligation to my sister. I had no reason to join the Classics Club. I sighed within my heart... *It was a futile effort.* While thinking that, I asked, "Why are you in the Classics Club as well?"

*I didn't want to join this club!* I tried to convey this implied message within my question, but it seemed like she totally didn't get it.

"Well, I have personal reasons for joining."

She even evaded my question. Unexpectedly, this Chitanda Eru is quite suspicious.

"What about you, Oreki-san?"

"Me?"

Now that's tricky. How should I answer her? I don't think she'd understand that I came here due to an order from my sister. But as I began to think about it, I realized she didn't really need to know my reason.

Suddenly the door slid open and a loud voice boomed inwards, "Hey! What are you guys doing here?"

It was a teacher. Probably patrolling the campus after school time. With a firm body and tanned skin, he seems to be a PE teacher. Though he wasn't carrying a bamboo sword, it wouldn't look too far fetched to imagine him with one. While he's way past his prime, he still has that air of authority around him.

Chitanda shirked back for a bit upon getting yelled at so suddenly, but soon reverted to her calming smile. She then went to greet the teacher.

"Good afternoon, Morishita-sensei."

She made a perfect salutation by the way she bowed her head with the right speed and angle. Seeing how she maintained her manners regardless of where she was, I couldn't help but feel envious of her. The teacher called Morishita was briefly stunned into silence by her courtesy, but soon went back to talking loudly again.

"I saw the door unlocked so I came over to see what was going on. What are you doing entering the classroom without permission? What's your name and class?"

... Hmph, without permission, huh?

"I'm Oreki Houtarou of Class 1-B. By the way, Sensei, this is the Classics Club room, and I'm afraid you've interrupted our club activities,"

"The Classics Club...?"

Without hiding his suspicions, he continued, "I thought that had been abolished."

"Well, that was before today. It's been reactivated this morning. You can confirm with our supervising teacher, umm..."

"Ooide-sensei,"

"Yes, you can confirm with Ooide-sensei."

A suitable explanation at a suitable moment. Morishita quickly lowered his volume.

"Oh. I see. Well, continue with what you're doing."

"But you've only just seen us."

"And remember to return the key when you're done."

"Yes, sir."

Morishita once again turned to gaze at us before shutting the door roughly. Chitanda once again cowered her body at the loud sound, but then gently whispered, "He's..."

"Hmm?"

"He's quite loud for a teacher."

I smiled.

Anyway.

Guess I have no more business here.

"Alright. Now that we're done with the introductions, shall we go home?"

"Huh? We're not having any activities today?"

"Well, I'm going home."

I picked up my shoulder bag, which doesn't have much stuff in it, and turned my back towards Chitanda.

"I'll count on you to lock the door. You don't want to get yelled at like that again, do you?"

"Eh?"

I then proceeded to leave the Geology Room.

Or rather, I was about to leave, when I was stopped by Chitanda's discerning voice.

"Please wait!"

I turned around to look at Chitanda, who looked as though she had been told something quite unthinkable, and who said blankly, "I, I can't lock the door."

"Why's that?"

"Because I don't have the key."

Oh, yeah. The key's with me. There weren't that many spare keys available to be borrowed, it seems. So I took the key from my pocket and held it towards her.

"Here, you take care of... Sorry, I mean, please take care of this, Chitanda-san."

But Chitanda didn't respond. She simply stared at the key hanging from my finger, and before long she tilted her head and asked, "Oreki-san, why are you carrying that?"

Is she missing a few screws in her head?

"Well, I couldn't have come in without a key... Wait a minute, how the hell... sorry, how did you come in to this room, Chitanda-san?"

"The door wasn't locked when I came in. I thought someone else had entered before me, so I didn't need a key to enter."

I see. Since unless she received a letter from a former member like I have, she wouldn't have known that there were no other members in the Classics Club.

"Is that so? When I came the door was locked."

Turns out it was a mistake for me to utter that so nonchalantly, as the expression in Chitanda's eyes changed instantly and her gaze became sharp. Was it me or have her pupils gotten larger? Indifferent to my startled expression, she slowly asked me, "When you said the door was locked, do you mean that door which you came through?"

While feeling confused at such a change in expression for such a graceful girl, I nodded. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Chitanda took one step towards me.

"So this means that I was locked inside, right?"

The clear batting sounds made by the Baseball Team could be heard from the outside. While I have no more business with this room, Chitanda seemed to want to talk for a bit longer. I sighed and relented, and placed my shoulder bag down on a table nearby.

Locked inside, was what Chitanda had said. Is that so? I thought for a bit. The key was with me, while Chitanda was inside the room. I have no memory of ever locking the door. Then the answer was simple.

"Wasn't it you who locked the door from the inside?"

Yet Chitanda shook her head and denied that unequivocally.

"I never did that."

"Well, the key's with me. Who else could have locked the door besides you?"

"..."

"Well, there are times when people forget whether they've locked the door or not,"

Yet Chitanda doesn't seem to be paying attention to my explanation, and suddenly pointed right behind me.

"By the way, is that your friend over there?"

I turned around, and found the silhouette of a black uniform collar from behind the gap of the slightly ajar door. His gaze quickly met with mine. I remember seeing those brown eyes that look as though they're smiling, so I raised my voice and called out, "Satoshi! That's some sick hobby you've got, eavesdropping on other people's conversations!"

The door was opened, and as expected, the person that entered was Fukube Satoshi. Totally feeling unashamed, he said brazenly, "Well, sorry. I wasn't intending to eavesdrop."

"You may not be intending to, but you ended up doing so anyway."

"That may be so. But I just couldn't barge in when I saw the usually inactive Houtarou spending quality time alone with a girl in a special classroom during sunset. I don't want to end up getting kicked out."

What's he talking about?

"I thought you went home already."

"Yeah, I was about to, but then I saw you with this girl inside this room from downstairs. Guess I'm still inexperienced as a peeping tom."

I ignored Satoshi's comments about seeing us from the outside, as that's his usual way of joking. Yet for people who're not used to such light-hearted jokes, they might end up taking him seriously.

Seems like Chitanda too has been fooled.

"Eh, eh, I..."

Her calm expression from a while ago had disappeared, being replaced by a flustered look. She seems to be the type that wears her expressions on her face, as she appears to be saying "Look, I'm feeling flustered right now" with a nervous look. While it was fun to see her like that, I wasn't going to let it go on any longer.

Fortunately, in order to expose Satoshi's joke, all you needed to do was ask him, "Are you serious?"

"Of course not."

*Phew.* Chitanda breathed a sigh of relief. Such was Satoshi's motto: "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away."

"... Oreki-san, who might this be?"

After recovering from Satoshi's joke, Chitanda asked a bit warily. Guess I should introduce Satoshi to her, or we won't get anywhere. I said briefly, "Oh him? That's Fukube Satoshi, a pseudo-human."

"Pseudo?"

A most suitable introduction, which Satoshi seems to have taken in good humour as well.

"Haha, great introduction, Houtarou. Pleased to meet you. And you are?"

"Chitanda, Chitanda Eru."

Upon hearing the name of Chitanda, Satoshi gave an unexpected reaction. For once, he actually went speechless. For someone so talkative like Satoshi, it was rare to see him like that.

"Chi, Chitanda-san? *That* Chitanda?"

"Hmm? I don't know which Chitanda you may be referring to, but I believe I'm the only one with that name in this school."

"Then it must be that. I'm surprised."

Satoshi's surprise was genuine. And if he was surprised, then I should be too. I learned some time ago that this fellow has a way of finding out all sorts of amazing information. Yet what was it that made him so surprised? I couldn't even guess.

"Hey, Satoshi, what is it this time?"

"What is it, you say? I know you're not that well-informed, but are you telling me that you've never even heard of the Chitanda Clan?"

This time, Satoshi shook his head and sighed in an exaggerated way. Of course, this was one of Satoshi's ways of joking. Since I know he's extremely well-versed in all sorts of useless knowledge, I was not at all ashamed about being ignorant of one of them.

"What about Chitanda-san's family?"

Nodding satisfactorily, Satoshi began to explain.

"While there are quite a few old prestigious clans in Kamiyama Town, the most prominent are the four 'Exponential Clans'. The Juumonji (十文字) Clan that runs the Arekusu Shrine, the Sarusuberi (百日紅) Clan that operates the bookstores, the Chitanda (千反田) Clan with their large farmlands, and the Manninbashi (万人橋) Clan of the mountain. The first kanji character of their surnames is represented by an exponent of the number ten (十百千万), hence they're called the 'Exponential Clans'. The only other clans to be on equal footing with those four are the Irisu Clan that runs the local hospital, and the Toogaito Clan with their dominance in the field of education."

Dumbfounded, I blinked suspiciously and asked, "Four Clans? Satoshi, are you serious?"

"How rude. Have I ever lied about stuff like this?"

If Satoshi says it's true, then it's most likely true. Yet, prestigious clans in this day and age? While Satoshi was still scowling, Chitanda came to his aid.

"Umm, I've heard of that story before. Though I'm not quite sure about my family being a famous clan."

"So it's all true?"

"But, this is the first time I've heard about the four 'Exponential Clans'."

As I stared at Satoshi, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't say I was lying."

"But that was all made up anyway, wasn't it?"

"Well, I always wanted to be the one to get a legend started,"

As though wanting this topic to end, Satoshi clapped his hands together and said, "Anyway, Houtarou, what seems to be the trouble here?"

You sure are inquisitive. So in order to make a long story short, I briefly explained the details to him.

It was getting a bit dark, so Chitanda went to turn on the lights.

After hearing the story, Satoshi crossed his arms and started to groan.

"Hmm, it is a strange case."

"How so? It's just that Chitanda happened to forget that she locked the door, isn't it?"

"No, it *is* strange."

Satoshi uncrossed his arms and clapped his hands.

"Lately, schools have been very demanding on how their campuses are run. Kami High's management of its classrooms is particularly bothersome. In case you haven't noticed, none of the classrooms here can be locked from the inside. The reason is to prevent students from doing anything suspicious inside."

As Satoshi explained triumphantly, a suspicion was raised in my head. I know Satoshi can be particularly diligent in finding out such trivial knowledge, but isn't he learning a bit too much? Considering he's only been in this school for less than a month.

"How'd you know about this stuff?"

"Well, I was trying to hide myself in a classroom in order to experiment with something last week, but then I found out I couldn't lock the door from the inside."

"You know? I think the school designed its doors to prevent specifically the likes of *you* from 'doing anything suspicious'."

"Well, I guess so."

"You bet."

We both laughed. As a result of our dry laughter, Chitanda took a step backwards. Noticing this, I cleared my throat and said, "Well, something must be wrong with the lock then. It's getting dark, so I'm going home."

I stood up from the table I was sitting on.

I felt someone grab my shoulder. I turned and saw Chitanda, who had somehow approached me from behind without me realizing.

"Please wait!"

"What is it now?"

"I'm curious about it."

Upon seeing Chitanda's close-up face, I winced.

"So?"

"Why was I being locked inside? ... If I wasn't locked inside, then how did I manage to come inside in the first place?"

Chitanda's gaze had a sort of power that seemed like it wouldn't accept a foolish answer as a response. Feeling overwhelmed by this, I replied meekly, "So, what about it?"

"If it was a mistake by someone, then who is it? And how did they end up locking me in by mistake?"

"No, I think there's something wrong with the lock..."

"I'm *really* curious about it."

She said as she advanced forward, forcing me to move back.

At first I thought Chitanda to be a sort of graceful lady, but that was merely my first impression based on her appearance. I now realized that I was looking at her true self. Especially her large energetic looking eyes, which are in contrast to her overall appearance. Those eyes reflected her true nature. "I'm curious about it", that sentence alone had made this "Exponential Clan" lady the poster child for curiosity itself.

"Why has this happened? Oreki-san, and Fukube-san as well, will you help think about this?"

"Why do I have to..."

"Well, it looks interesting."

Interrupting me, Satoshi accepted her challenge right away. As expected from Satoshi, but, "Well, I'm going home. Not interested."

It goes without explanation, for me, it's a waste of energy. And if I don't have to do it, I'm out of it.

Yet, Satoshi, who ought to know my modus operandi very well, said, "Oh, come on, Houtarou, help us out. I'd do it if I could, but I can't come to any conclusions just based on my own database alone."

"This is stupid, I'm..."

As I was about to continue, Satoshi glanced sideways. Following his glance, I saw Chitanda.

"... Ugh."

With her mouth tightly shut, and her fists clutching her skirt, she glared upwards at me. I subconsciously took another step backwards away from her. If it's just comparing the intensity of personalities, she wouldn't lose to my sister. It was a warning from Satoshi: *I think you're better off going along with her whims.*

Glancing alternately between Chitanda and Satoshi, I nodded softly towards Satoshi and honestly took his advice. Otherwise, we might incur misfortune upon ourselves.

"... Yeah, I guess it *is* interesting. I'll think about it."

I had no choice but to say that in a deadpan tone. Yet that response was enough to get Chitanda to relax her glance.

"Oreki-san, have you thought of a solution already?"

"Hold it right there. Houtarou is the type that likes to think before he moves. Yet once he's put his thoughts together, he's capable of getting things done."

Stop being so talkative. Though moving before thinking is never good.

And so I began to think.

When Chitanda entered this room, the lock was opened. Yet when I arrived, it was clearly locked.

If Satoshi is to be believed, then there's no way Chitanda could have locked the door from the inside. However, rather than such an arbitrary reason, it could be that it was the result of an unconscious action. For example, the door was in a semi-locked state when Chitanda entered the room, and the spring within the lock must have somehow been triggered after she was inside and locked her in as a result.

After explaining this theory, Chitanda tilted her head while reserving her judgment, though Satoshi instantly raised his voice.

"That would be impossible. There is no way the locks in Kami High could have gone into a semi-locked condition based on its design. The key would not have come out in such a state."

No room for middle ground, huh?

If that's the case, then that leaves the lock being locked knowingly by someone. So I asked, "Do you remember what time you entered this room?"

Chitanda thought for a while and said, "Right before you. About three minutes, I think."

Three minutes, that's too short. There wouldn't be time, as the Geology Room is the most remote place in Kami High.

... Now this is getting tricky. As I was starting to think all over again, Chitanda suddenly shouted, "Ah!"

"What is it, Chitanda-san?"

"I know. Think about it, who else has the key?"

"Huh? Who?"

Chitanda had a joyful look in her smile... For some reason, I had a bad feeling about this. As expected, our lady here turned towards me and said, "Oreki-san, of course. He has the key."

Just as predicted. Rather than concluding that it was a good deduction, she realized something and said, "Ah, but is this even possible? Isn't Oreki-san a trustworthy person?"

... Are you supposed to say such things in front of the person concerned? While I was speechless, Satoshi laughed and said, "Well, I don't know about Houtarou being trustworthy or not, but I don't think he's the sort of person that would have fun by locking you inside. He's got nothing to gain from it, after all."

Spot on there. You know me well - I wouldn't do anything that doesn't benefit me.

This means it wasn't me that locked the door.

Then... who was it?

I don't get this. So I proceeded to scratch my head.

I don't even have a clue. For some reason, I felt guilty as I asked, "This is no good. You got any clues?"

"Clue? What do you mean by that?"

What a straight counter question.

"A clue is a clue."

Satoshi helped elaborate on my over-simplified explanation.

"Something that's different from the norm. Did you notice anything that feels different or strange, Chitanda-san?"

"Hmm, now that you mention..."

*Is there something different?* While I wasn't exactly expecting much, Chitanda was looking around the Geology Room before turning her gaze downward and said gently, "A while ago, I heard some sounds coming from beneath my feet."

Sounds?

So someone did lock the door? I had no idea.

No, what if, that's the case?

... I see. I've somehow come to an understanding. Satoshi noticed my expression and said, "Houtarou, you seemed to have realized something."

I silently picked up my shoulder bag.

"W, where are you going, Oreki-san?"

"We're going to witness the reenactment of the scene of crime. If we're lucky, we might get to see it."

I sensed Chitanda frantically following me, and Satoshi is right behind her, no doubt.

It was already quite late as closing time was approaching. The Baseball Team could clearly be seen tidying up their equipment. Chitanda and Satoshi, whom I should have already left behind long ago, ended up accompanying me. Or rather, they were following me.

Chitanda walked beside me and asked, "Tell us already. How come you've figured out already?"

Satoshi too asked from behind, "She's right, you know. We're not supposed to have secrets between us."

Stop saying something so gross. Without turning my head, I said, "It's not exactly a secret. It's just that it's so simple that it doesn't require much explanation."

"It may be simple for you, Oreki-san. But I still can't understand."

Chitanda pouted... While it's bothersome to explain, evading her questions is also a waste of energy. I straightened my shoulder bag and wondered where I should start.

"Alright, how about if I say that you were locked inside by someone using a master key?"

As I said something that was a matter of fact to me, Chitanda's voice was raised in surprise. Looks like we'll have to start the explanations here.

"Ehh? How is that so?"

"The Geology Room is located far off in the campus. If someone were to lock you inside using the regular key, he would need to return it to the staff room before I could have borrowed it. Three minutes would be too short for anyone to attempt to do that."

"I see. So it must be another key, and since there's only one regular key, that would leave the master key, right?"

Exactly. And naturally, it's to be expected that the master key couldn't normally be used by students.

Furthermore, there is another piece of decisive information.

"Chitanda-san, you said you heard something coming from the floor below you, right?"

"Yes."

"If the sound comes from the floor of the fourth floor, what would you normally have thought of first?"

Satoshi, who looked quite relaxed, answered, "The sound comes from the ceiling of the third floor?"

"Right. And that's our master key user."

The only person who would work on fixing stuff on the classroom ceilings after lesson time would be...

"I'm amazed you managed to figure out that it's the janitor."

Chitanda said while nodding eagerly.

The person that we saw on the third floor was the janitor, who was carrying a large ladder. As he emerged from a classroom, he placed the ladder on the floor and took out a key from his pocket. And right before our eyes, he began to lock the doors of the third floor classrooms one by one. In other words, he first unlocked all the classroom doors, then proceeded to do whatever he was working on inside the classrooms. And when he was done, he would then come back to lock them all at once. If someone happens to enter the classrooms when the doors were unlocked, then that unlucky person would have ended up getting locked inside... Much like Chitanda here.

As to what the janitor was working on, I had no idea. By going through so many classrooms and carrying a large ladder with him, it could be that he's changing the light bulbs for the classrooms, or perhaps checking on the glow starters or fire alarms or something like that. At any rate, Chitanda's question has been largely solved.

And thus a case is closed.

"You see? Told you he'd get things done if he puts his thoughts together."

"You're right. I'm amazed."

I don't see myself as that amazing... After all, it was Satoshi that told me about the key management system, while it was Chitanda that noticed the sound coming from below. I was planning on playing dumb all along... Oh well, they can think whatever they like of me. At any rate, I was made to go through all that trouble, but upon looking at Chitanda and seeing such honest admiration reflected in her meaningful eyes, I ended up swallowing any complaints that I may have had.

"Well, anyway. Even though you were in an indoor environment, I still don't understand how you didn't hear the door being locked."

Yet Chitanda didn't take that as a criticism or sarcasm, and merely smiled.

"Well, I could explain that. I was... yes, I was looking at that building from the window."

She said and pointed towards a building by the road. It was the Martial Arts Dojo. It was a shabby looking wooden building, worn down after being exposed to the elements for so long. I decided to take a leaf out of Chitanda's book and voiced my honest opinion, "Seems like you're really mesmerized by that."

"No, it's just that I find this building to be quite mysterious."

"Hmm."

I don't see how this building was mysterious, but Satoshi seemed to have understood something when he muttered, "Well, it does look particularly old."

"Yes, it is."

Is that so? It could be, though for her to have been distracted by such an old building, I had no idea whether she was being elegant or just carefree.

Before long, we came upon a red traffic light. Like us, there were other students heading home from school.

"By the way, we haven't properly greeted each other yet," Chitanda gently said.

"Greeted?"

"Yes, the Classics Club is going to commence its activities from now on, after all. Let us have fun together."

The Classics Club! I've totally forgotten about that! I was supposed to just go take a look at the club room, but it was all for naught as Chitanda had joined the club... But this is all in hindsight now. My application has already been submitted and subsequently filed on record. In this school, it was impossible to quit a club after joining it for one month.

As I lowered my head, Chitanda turned to smile at Satoshi.

"Are you joining the Classics Club as well, Fukube-san?"

Satoshi crossed his arms and looked as though he was thinking, but very soon replied, "Well, it sounds interesting. Alright, I'm in."

"It'll be a pleasure to get to know you, Fukube-san."

"No, the pleasure's all mine... Pleased to meet you as well, Houtarou."

I glanced mockingly at Satoshi, who decided to play dumb.

As the traffic light turned green, I started to walk. Sticking my hand in my pocket, I felt the letter inside. It was the letter from my sister. Indeed, ever since this letter from Oreki Tomoe had arrived, I had this feeling that something had been set in motion.

You happy now, sis? There are now three people within your youth that is the Classics Club. The traditional Classics Club has now been resurrected. This is also probably goodbye to my peaceful energy saving days. As for why...

"Ah yes, we still haven't decided on a president yet. What should we do?"

"You're right. Though Houtarou definitely doesn't seem to be the sort of person to be a club president."

These folks probably wouldn't put up with my energy saving ways. If it were just Satoshi alone, I could still handle him somehow, but the main problem is...

Our eyes met. Chitanda Eru smiled with her big eyes.

The main problem is with this lady here. I just have a vague feeling about this.

# **Translator's notes and references**

1. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instrumentalism>
2. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiho\\_Jutsu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiho_Jutsu)

# 3 - The Activities of the Prestigious Classics Club

Now that I think about it, what *does* the Classics Club do anyway? The only students that do know what it does are no longer with the school, and I couldn't be bothered to ask the teachers about it. I could ask my sister about it, but unfortunately she's in Beirut. Still, while it's rare to have a club that does not know what it does, there are plenty of clubs whose existence can only be classified as a mystery, so it's not something worth fretting about.

It has been a month since the resurrection of the Classics Club. The club room - the Geology Room - was no longer a private space, but it was still a relaxing spot. It was a place where I could kill some time after school whenever I'm feeling bored. Satoshi might be inside. Or Chitanda might be inside. Or both of them might be inside. Or not. It doesn't really matter either way. We could choose to converse, or we could also choose to keep quiet. Satoshi was the sort that could calmly endure silence to begin with, while our lady Chitanda was the sort of graceful lady befitting of her image, as long as she doesn't let her curiosity explode. Therefore, while unintentional, this club appears more like a leisure club than a school club.

Thus I do not get weary even amidst their company, since I was never apprehensive of other people to begin with, though Satoshi does sometimes mistake that I am.

Today was a drizzly day, and I was inside with Chitanda. I was leaning back on a chair by the window, reading a cheap paperback while Chitanda sat at the front of the room reading a thick book for some reason. One would say this was a sluggish afternoon after school.

Looking at the clock, I noticed only 30 minutes had passed. The time that was spent unconsciously was still short. Although you could say I was feeling quite relaxed, that isn't exactly correct. Rather, it was because I was feeling nervous and stressful that I had to enter into a state of relaxation. I'm really just consciously trying to extend my energy saving mode for as long as possible, that's all.

The silence was only broken by the sound of pages turning and the raindrops outside.

"..."

I'm getting sleepy now. I think I'll go home as soon as the rain stops.

*Thud* The sound of a book closing was heard, as Chitanda, who sat in front with her back facing towards me, sighed and said,

"How barren."

While she wasn't looking at me, it was clear she was speaking to me rather than to herself. Though I had no idea how to respond to her sudden comment. Anyway, I'll try asking.

"What? The crops in your family farmland?"

"Those have two crops."

Chitanda answered as though reading it out and turned around,

"And they're semi-annual. So it's hardly barren."<sup>[1]</sup>

"As expected of a lady of a farmland owner."

"No, there's no need to praise me..."

The sound of rain, followed by silence.

"No, that's not what I was saying."

"You were saying something about 'barren'."

"Yes, that. It's barren."

"What is?"

Chitanda looked firmly at me, and then raised her right arm as though showing the whole room,

"All this time spent after lessons. We don't seem to have any purpose or do anything productive at all."

Of course, this was merely a way to kill time, not to produce anything. I closed my paperback and looked up towards her,

"Well, I'm all ears. Is there something you want the Classics Club to do?"

"Me?"

It was kind of a mean question, as not many people are aware what they themselves would want to do when asked directly. By the way, I'm at least aware that I desire nothing.

However, Chitanda replied without hesitation,

"Yes, there is."

"Hmm."

That's surprising. To answer yes right away. As I was about to ask what was it she was interested in doing, she explained, "Though that's for personal reasons."

In that case, there was no need to ask further.

Chitanda then continued,

"But we're talking about the Classics Club. So we should be doing something club related. We can't just sit around and do nothing."

"Very well, but we aren't even sure what the club's purpose is."

"No, there is a purpose."

Whether she's speaking with the authority of a club president or the aura of a prestigious clan member, Chitanda declared, "We will publish an essay anthology this October in the Cultural Festival."

### The Cultural Festival?

I had visited the Kamiyama High Cultural Festival before, so I was familiar with it. To put it briefly, it was the essence of youth culture around this area. And according to Satoshi, the Kami High Cultural Festival's Nodate tea ceremony is highly recommended for anyone interested in learning the art, while its break dancing contest is a hotbed for future professionals. Quite a number of arts-related clubs of various qualities would participate. During her three years in high school, I remember seeing my sister carrying a boxload of essay anthologies to school.

So to speak, that was the crystallization of the rose-coloured high school life. As to how I feel about all this, I guess it's better for me not to say anything about it. Let's just say that I hardly felt anything at all, not even once.

However, an essay anthology, huh? I gave some thought to Chitanda's proposal, and asked a question that naturally came to mind, "Chitanda, making an anthology is just an end result, and not the whole purpose of the club itself, isn't it?"

Chitanda shook her head and replied,

"No, if the purpose of the club is the making of the anthology, then by creating the result we could achieve its purpose."

"What?"

"Like I said, if the result *is* the purpose itself, then all we have to do is aim for the result, right?"

Hmm, I raised my eyebrows. I think I get what she's trying to say, but isn't that tautology?

Anyway, an anthology just sounds bothersome. While I could not say for sure that anthologies, or anything else that requires me to write something on my own, are bothersome, it would be better if I don't have to do it. Whether it's the purpose or the activity itself, either requires me to come up with something. Unnecessary activities cost effort, which is a waste of energy.

"Let's not do an anthology. It's too labour-intensive. Besides... right, three authors is a bit too much."

Yet Chitanda was steadfast with her proposal,

"No, it has to be an anthology."

"If you really want to publish something, we can set up an exhibition booth or something like that."

"Kami High's Cultural Festival traditionally forbids exhibition booths. So, no, it has to be an anthology."

"... Why?"

"Our club budget specifically refers to 'Anthology Publication', it would be troublesome if we don't publish one."

Chitanda took out a piece of neatly folded paper from her chest pocket and showed it to me. Indeed, for this year's Classics Club annual budget, the tiny amount of money that was allocated was specifically set for the purpose of "Anthology Publication".

"Even so, Ooide-sensei has requested that we publish it, as it's become a tradition for over 30 years for the Classics Club to publish an anthology each year, and he was not going to watch it come to an end."

"..."

As a rule of thumb, reasonable people tend to be smart. Yet it doesn't mean unreasonable people are dumb. Chitanda was definitely not dumb, yet she was clearly being unreasonable. To begin with, she appealed to the sentimental side rather than the financial side, and decided the club's activity based on tradition. Still, I realized it was inefficient to try to argue against something done in the name of tradition, so I smiled bitterly and relented,

"Okay, okay. We'll publish an anthology."

So ends unceremoniously my purposeless carefree days. At least I'm still in good health, I guess.

The rain is still falling outside. Since it's still not time to go home yet, I decided to ask, "So, how are you going to publish this anthology?"

"How? What do you mean?"

"What kind of essays were written every year?"

While it's not likely, I was already resigned to writing academic-like essays along the titles of "Review of 'The Eight Dog Chronicles<sup>[2]</sup>'", "'Tales of Moonlight and Rain<sup>[3]</sup>' - With regards to the Emperor's role in 'Shiramine'", or "'The Great Mirror<sup>[4]</sup>' - Concerning observations of social changes in the novel, as well as counter-argument to last year's essay". Just to be safe, I should include an appendix as well. Though I was prepared to accept that I would probably not produce anything up to the standards of past essays. At any rate, as to just what kind of format this so-called tradition adopts for its essays, I have no idea.

However, the answer I received was in the negative.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I wonder what should we write?"

It was to be expected. As she was president, it was easy to forget that she too was only in the club for about a month or so.

"I'm sure we could find out if we can find the back issues."

"They should be around. You know where they are?"

"In the clubroom?"

I see.

I suddenly feel pathetic for going along with her pace. I promptly pointed my finger towards the floor for her to see.

"... Oh! This *is* the club room."

Exactly.

"Though it hardly feels like a club room..."

She's right though.

This Geology Room had nothing else inside it besides standard teaching equipment. All we could see were a blackboard, tables and chairs, as well as cleaning equipment. A typical looking classroom, all in all. There didn't seem to be anywhere books could be stored.

"The back issues don't seem to be stored here."

"So it seems."

"Well then... shall we head to the library?"

That sounded appropriate, so I nodded. Chitanda picked up her handbag and stood up.

"Let's go."

Without waiting for my reply, she opened the door and walked out. She's quite proactive for an elegant lady. Oh well, the library is just along the path to the school entrance, which isn't too far from here.

No, wait. Today's Friday, which means today's librarian on duty is...

"Well, if it isn't Oreki? It's been a while, though I've hardly missed you."

Upon entering the library, I was instantly greeted with sarcasm. As expected, the person sitting behind the counter was none other than Ibara Mayaka.

Ibara and I go back a long way, as we've been in the same class for nine years since primary school. Her baby-face features have been in place since childhood, and have only grown-up a bit after becoming a high-school student. You may find her child-like features and short stature cute, but do not be fooled by her appearance, for she carries a hidden weapon with her at all times. If you let your guard down, you would be greeted by her colourful blend of sarcastic wit. I was even told to stay away from her based on stories of guys who were fooled by her pretty looks, only to be sunk instantly. Not to mention as a result of her never admitting her mistakes, most people would mistake her for being a callous person.

Though I personally don't really believe such assessments of her.

I made the most unpleasant expression I could make and replied,

"Hey, I came just to see you."

"This is a sacred ground for cultivation, it's not made for the likes of you to visit."

Ibara sat cross-legged on her chair behind the counter. Since all a librarian ever does is to handle the lending and borrowing of books from the library, there doesn't seem to be much else for her to do. While one of her main responsibilities was to take the box containing the returned books back to their respective shelves, the Return Box was still filled with a whole pile of books. Ibara was not the type to slack off, so she's probably attempting to do them all in one go. In her hand was a large book, which she's no doubt reading to kill time.

The library was quite crowded at this time. There were about ten four-person tables, and each of them was occupied by one or two students reading. There were probably people who were indeed reading for leisure, though I'd also understand if there were people killing time while waiting for the rain to stop. I then noticed one of the boys looking up at us. I recognized him at once, since it's Fukube Satoshi of all people.

Satoshi met my gaze and stood up with his usual smile,

"Hey, Houtarou, didn't expect to see you here."

Ibara looked at us with a sullen face and said,

"Still good buddies as ever, aren't you? As expected from the Best Couple of Kaburaya Junior High."

I knew it was pointless to argue back at her, but still I said, "Oh, shut up."

Ibara merely replied flatly, "My, you're quite a crybaby for a gloomy person."

... A crybaby, huh?

She then turned towards Satoshi with a composed expression,

"Fuku-chan, you know how my feelings are, so you should know I was joking, right?"

"Ahh, don't worry about that, Mayaka. No offence taken."

"What? You're just gonna let her use joking as an excuse to let her off the hook again?"

Satoshi glared at me, and then turned his gaze away. I smiled bitterly, as I knew Ibara has been pursuing him for some time. I have no idea when she started doing so, though Satoshi has been dodging her advances ever since.

Satoshi pretended to cough in an attempt to change the subject.

"Anyway, what business does the Classics Club have in the library?"

Ah, yes, I didn't come to the library just to see Ibara. I urged Chitanda to say something. As though suffering from stage fright, our lady said nervously to Ibara, "Uh, umm, hi there. May I inquire something of you?"

"Sure, how may I help you?"

"I'd like to ask if there are any essay anthologies here in the library."

"Yup, they're at those shelves right over there."

"Do they have those for the Classics Club?"

Ibara tilted her head and wondered,

"The Classics Club? ...Hmm, I'm sorry, don't think I'm sure of that. Should I look for them for you?"

Just as Chitanda was about to express her gratitude, Satoshi stopped her,

"You won't find any. I've occasionally looked up on those shelves, so I should know. Mayaka, where else could they be found if they're not on the shelves?"

"Hmm, if they're not in the open shelves, then they must be in the archives."

"The archives, huh?"

Satoshi thought for a while before asking,

"Chitanda-san, why're you looking for essay anthologies anyway?"

"We're going to publish one for the Cultural Festival, so we were wondering if we can have a look at the back issues for reference."

"Oh, so they're for the Kanya Festival, huh? Didn't know you were knowledgeable on such stuff, Houtarou."

Knowledgeable? Rather, I was obliged to work on it. Besides, Chitanda probably doesn't even need me to be knowledgeable.

Wait, what festival again?

"Satoshi, what did you just call the Cultural Festival?"

"The Kanya Festival. Haven't you heard of it before? It's the nickname for the Kami High Cultural Festival."

A nickname, huh? Something like the Sophia Festival for Sophia University, or the Mita Festival for Keio University? Then again, like the story about the four "Exponential Clans", I find it hard to believe.

"Sounds suspicious. Is that true?"

"Of course it's true, though it's an unofficial nickname. I heard all my seniors in the Handicraft Club call it the Kanya Festival. Is it the same in the Manga Studies Club, Mayaka?"

So Ibara's in the Manga Studies Club, huh? While it does suit her image, it still feels unbecoming for her.

"Yup, everyone there calls it the Kanya Festival. Even the festival committee calls it that."

"Kanya? How do you spell that in kanji?"

Satoshi placed his hand on his chin and said,

"Dunno. Everybody just calls it that."

It seems like it's true that 'Kanya Festival' is a nickname. However, I just couldn't think of any word that matches with the spelling of 'Kanya'. Oh well, seeking out the etymology of such a silly name is probably a profession in itself. As I was thinking of that, Satoshi added,

"Perhaps it's abbreviated from 'Kamiyama', turning it into 'Kanyama', and in turn evolving into 'Kanya'."

As expected for an expert of trivial knowledge.

As we were going off topic, Ibara firmly pulled us back,

"Anyhow, anthologies, is it? We'll probably find them if we look up the archives, though the Head Librarian's in a meeting right now, so we can't go in without her permission. She'll probably be back in half an hour, you wanna wait?"

Half an hour, huh? Not even Chitanda was in a hurry to want to see them at once, so she looked at me and whispered, "What do we do now?" I was fine with whatever decision, but I noticed it's still raining heavily outside. The weather report did say the rain will stop sometime in the afternoon and we'd have a starry night tonight, but as the rain showed no signs of stopping right now, we had no choice but to wait.

"Guess we'll wait."

"Even though you could go back?"

I decided to return to my paperback novel and resume at the page where I was reading. Satoshi tugged at Ibara's sleeve and said, "Mayaka, why don't you tell Houtarou about the story you were telling me earlier?"

Ibara lifted her eyebrows and thought for a while before nodding.

"Okay. Oreki, do you ever feel like exercising your brain once in a while?"

Nope.

But neither has Ibara.

"What story are you talking about?"

Satoshi answered Chitanda's question with his usual smile on his face,

"The one about the popular book which no one ever reads."

"As you know, my shift is every Friday after school, and I've discovered lately that the same book has been returned during this time every week. This is the fifth week in a row now. Don't you find it strange?"

Ibara began to speak while I was busy looking for a desk where I could sit down and read my book. Unfortunately, there just weren't any available seats in such a crowded place. So I had no choice but to sit on top of the table that Satoshi had occupied.

As the table was close to the counter, we could hear Chitanda and Ibara's voices from here.

"Is it a popular book?"

"Does this look like one?"

Ibara showed us the thick book she was holding.

"Oh, such a beautiful book..."

Chitanda gasped in awe, and then turned her gaze towards me. Our lady's delighted expression was as though I'd just bought a splendidly bound book for her. The book was bound in a leather cover decorated with finely detailed patterns. Its darkish blue colour emitted an aura of solemnity about it. The title of the book was "Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years". Besides being thick, it was also quite a large book in its length and width.

"May I have a look inside?"

"Sure."

Upon taking out my paperback novel from my shoulder bag, I started searching for the page where I last read. Yet my vision of the novel was quickly replaced by that of high quality pages. It was Chitanda, who upon opening the aforementioned book - "Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years" - placed it on top of my novel in order to show it to

me. While I wasn't exactly interested, I didn't ignore it either, and had a quick look at its contents. It's got nothing else on it besides a description of the school's history, and goes as such:

## 1972

### Events in Japan and the World:

- May 15th: Return of Sovereignty of Okinawa. Establishment of Okinawa Prefecture.
- September 29th: Signing of the Joint Communique of Japan and China. Normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries.
- Sudden rise in land and commodities prices this year.

### Events in Kamiyama High School

- June 7th: First victory for the Kamiyama High School Archery Club in the Prefectural Newcomers Tournament.
- July 1st: Cancellation of 1st Year Field Trip due to typhoon.
- October 10th-14th: Cultural Festival.
- October 30th: Sports Festival.
- November 16th-19th: 2nd Year Field Trip - Sasebo, Nagasaki.
- January 23rd-24th: 1st Year Skiing Course.
- February 2nd: Memorial service for 1st Year student Ooide Naoto, who died in car accident.

It was full of such details. It would take a particular set of skills to actually read through all that. I wouldn't go so far as to borrow the book once a week in order to read it all, but I wouldn't be surprised if someone actually did that just for its contents.

"Houtarou, you were just thinking 'I wouldn't be surprised if someone actually borrowed that once a week', weren't you?"

Stop reading my mind, you damn telepath.

Seeing as I didn't rebuke her, Ibara puffed up her particularly small chest and said,

"It's not that simple. You rarely come here to borrow books, so you wouldn't know. Listen carefully, the longest period one can borrow a book is two weeks. So there was no need for someone to borrow a book and return it just a week later."

"And yet this book was returned here every week."

... I see. This is indeed a strange occurrence.

"Is there a way to find out who has borrowed that book?"

"Of course. There's a list detailing the borrowing records behind the cover. Have a look."

Chitanda promptly turned to the cover and saw the list,

"Huh?"

She gasped.

"What's wrong?"

The list contained the names of the borrowers as well as the dates that they had borrowed the book. We could indeed tell that they had borrowed the book once every week. But that was not the reason Chitanda had gasped, as her finger pointed out the list of names to me.

The borrower this week was Machida Kyouko of Class 2-D. Last week, it was Sawakiguchi Misaki of Class 2-F. Two weeks ago, Yamaguchi Ryouko, Class 2-E. Three weeks ago, Shima Saori, Class 2-E. And four weeks ago, Suzuki Yoshie, Class 2-D.

"In other words, it's borrowed by a different person every week?"

"That's not all."

Chitanda showed me the dates. As I looked carefully, the latest date was today. And the previous borrowed date was exactly seven days ago.

"The book was lent out on Fridays."

"Exactly. The book was borrowed and returned on the same day. This Machida Kyouko borrowed the book earlier today, only to return it later. It's the same for the other borrowers for five consecutive weeks. We can also tell the times that they borrowed the book; it was always during lunch time on a Friday. To borrow a book during lunch time and then return it after school, where would they even find the time to read it?"

"..."

"So? You curious?"

Upon returning the book to Ibara, Chitanda nodded her head gently,

"Yes... I'm *very* curious."

She spoke in a firmer tone than usual. Much like last time, her pupils looked as though they'd gotten larger, revealing a strong interest within them.

"Why is it?"

Thanks to Ibara's mystery, our lady's flame of curiosity had been ignited. Satoshi was no use as a water source to douse this fire, as he'd probably play dumb and say "I wouldn't know anything about it." I decided to return to reading my novel.

But I was naive, for I never expected the spear to be pointed right at me. Once again, Chitanda placed the thick book "Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years" on top of my novel and said,

"So what do you think, Oreki-san?"

"Huh, me?"

Rather than his usual gentle smile, Satoshi was now smiling teasingly at me. I instantly realized what had happened. He'd succeeded in ensnaring me in his trap. Curse him and his evil plans.

"Let's think about this together."

"..."

"Shall we, Oreki-san?"

Why? Why me? While I was fine with Chitanda's vigorous curiosity, and while I might admit that Satoshi may have some positive qualities about him, even if it's as a joke, why should I be obliged to play his games and put up with her?

Still, it was true that things have developed to a point where talking my way out of it would have been bothersome. So I had no choice but to reply as such, "... Yeah, I guess it *is* interesting. I'll think about it."

Ibara stood beside Satoshi and asked, "Fuku-chan, is Oreki actually smart?"

"Not at all. He's usually not reliable, but occasionally he can be up to the task."

Why you, getting all cheeky.

And so I began to think.

For a book to be borrowed and returned on the same day for five consecutive weeks by completely different people, the possibility of a coincidence could not be ruled out, but I wasn't going to believe that it was all due to some God of Coincidence. Besides, Chitanda wouldn't have accepted that as an explanation. Getting her to accept things was more important than the truth.

So throwing out the theory that it was a coincidence was a no-brainer. It was also clear that the book was not borrowed for the purpose of reading it, as there wouldn't be time to read it between it being borrowed during lunch time and it being returned after lessons. If you think about it, it would have been more logical for one to either take it home to read, or just read the book in the library after school. For the latter case, there would have been no need to borrow the book out of the library at all. Thus this book was not borrowed for its original intended purpose.

"... So if the book was not borrowed to be read, then what was it being borrowed for?"

Chitanda answered, "It's heavy, so maybe it's used to compress pickled vegetables?"

Satoshi answered, "Maybe it's used as a shield or something?"

Ibara answered, "It's thick, so it's probably used as a pillow."

I should never have asked you guys.

I decided to switch the focus.

Why was the book being borrowed by a different person every week? Besides being a coincidence, which was already ruled out, there were two points for consideration. First, the girls don't seem to have anything in common, though it's clear that they were using it during Friday afternoons for some sort of ritual, and took turns to borrow it.

As to what ritual, maybe fortune telling? Something like "Your lucky item this month is School History. If you borrow it every Friday afternoon and

return it on the same day, you shall meet the man of your dreams"?

... Nah, sounds too silly.

That leaves the second point, that the girls do have something in common.

A look at their names reveal that they're clearly all girls. But just that alone is not enough to establish a common trait. Within Kami High, if five people were randomly picked, there was a high possibility that they could all be girls, but it was already common for people of the same gender to gather together in a co-ed environment anyway.

Their other common trait would be that they're all second years, but their classes are different.

Hmm...?

Now that I think about it...

"What is it? Did you think of something?"

... I may have thought of something, but my thoughts were blown apart by Satoshi's interruption. Now where was I?

Anyway, I'll start from where my thoughts first started to connect,

"There must be a sign or something. For example... maybe they were secretly communicating with each other, where returning the book facing upwards meant 'yes' and facing downwards meant 'no'."

"What were they communicating for?"

"It's just an example. Anything could do."

Chitanda began to tilt her head and started thinking. Yes, that's it, you just slowly digest all this.

Though the one who rebutted me wasn't Chitanda, it was Ibara.

"That would be impossible, look."

Ibara pointed to the Return Box. There were loads of books stacked up inside. I see, there was no way of telling whether that book was returned facing upwards or downwards. The only person who would know which way the book was facing would be the one opening the box, and that would be the Librarian on duty.

Darn. Any careless ideas would end up as easy prey for Ibara to shoot down.

I couldn't think of anything. They might have a spare key to open the box, but I have no way of knowing. Now if only there was some hint. I looked at the well-decorated bound hardback in Ibara's hands and wondered where I could find any declaration of surrender within the book.

This was when Chitanda suddenly entered into my vision. She stretched her body over the counter and just stared at the book that Ibara was holding tightly in front of her chest.

"Eh? Eeh?"

Ibara was dumbstruck at such a reaction. I knew how she felt.

"What is it, Chitanda? Did you find some hidden symbols on the cover or something?"

Chitanda remained motionless and said,

"... This book... seems to have some sort of scent."

She muttered.

"Really? Ibara, can I borrow that? ... I don't smell anything."

"No, I'm sure of it."

"The book itself wouldn't have any odour. Perhaps it's the ink, or that of the library?"

Chitanda shook her head at Satoshi's suggestion.

Both Ibara and Satoshi also took turns to smell the book, but couldn't detect any scent, and both raised their eyebrows and tilted their heads in puzzlement.

"I can't really tell what the scent was, but it was strong, like paint thinner."

"Stop saying something so dangerous."

"It was? ... I couldn't really tell."

Neither could I, but I had a feeling that Chitanda was right. Our lady had been adamant about it, after all. And I never would have thought that she would say it was paint thinner.

If we assume that it is, then... Hmm.

... I may be getting into something here.

But it's bothersome to explain it all.

As I was wondering what to do next, Satoshi had already read my thoughts and said, "Houtarou, your face tells me you've figured something out."

"Eh? Oreki actually has?"

Noticing Ibara turning towards me looking completely skeptical, I nodded and replied honestly,

"Sort of. While I'm not entirely sure... Chitanda, do you feel like getting some exercise? I'd like you to go somewhere for me."

Chitanda was probably the sort who would dash out at once upon telling her where to go, but Satoshi stopped her while smiling.

"Don't be fooled by him, Chitanda-san. You don't wanna end up doing errands for Houtarou now, do you? Or you'll end up doing exactly what he wants. So where is it you were thinking of?"

How reprehensible. Satoshi does tend to say too much whenever Ibara's around. Still, as he wasn't exactly off the mark, I was hardly displeased. It was true that I wouldn't get things done if I don't have someone else do it for me.

"Very well, I'll go along as well. As we didn't have PE lessons due to the rain, I still have some residual energy left inside of me."

Chitanda was bound to come along as I said that. And then...

"Hmm, guess I'll tag along too. I'll be a little shocked if Oreki actually manages to solve this... Fuku-chan, mind filling in my shift for me?"

Ibara exited from the counter upon saying that. Satoshi looked dumbfounded as he replied, "Uh, okay," and kept silent while walking behind the counter. It's been a while since I've seen him this sad.

After being satisfied with the results we'd obtained, we returned to the library.

"How did it go?"

"Fuku-chan, Oreki's a bit strange."

"Of course he is, didn't you know?"

"How did he manage to figure all that out..."

She seemed troubled as she kept muttering "How come". It's as though she sees me as a victor in a sparkling aura, though I would not have been able to sparkle without some luck.

"I'm truly surprised by Oreki-san. I am very curious as to what is inside his head."

An image of Chitanda doing a lobotomy over my head in the basement of a (Gothic) mansion during a stormy night came flashing across my mind. Just imagining it gave me the chills. While I wouldn't say it out loud, Chitanda's ability to smell out such a faint scent when no one else could was a bigger mystery for me.

"If it's Oreki-san, then he could..."

? Then I could what? Please don't tell me I could be used as the ingredients of some cybernetic organism.

Upon swapping places with Ibara at the counter, Satoshi asked, "So, let's hear the explanation. Houtarou, just where did you guys go?"

Placing my elbows on the counter, I replied, "The Arts Preparation Room."

"The Arts Room? At the opposite end of the campus?"

"That's why I didn't want to go myself."

"What did you find there?"

"Just listen."

I repeated what I had explained to Chitanda and Ibara previously,

"This book was used between the fifth and sixth periods every Friday, probably over these two periods altogether. First, no girl would have any use for such a huge book during lunch break, reading it is also out of the question. And thus, this book was used during lessons which involves different classes from the same year."

My thoughts had previously come to this point before being blown off by Satoshi's interruption. It was the same reason that Chitanda remembered my name after seeing me just once. And where was it that she had seen me?

"It must be either during PE or Arts. No matter how you see it, nobody would have much use for a book during PE. Have a look at the book's cover. Something seems to be accumulated on it; do you notice a nice hue

of colour? These five girls were using the book for their lessons, and they decided to take turns borrowing it every week."

Satoshi interrupted and said, "But I don't understand why they would do it once a week, I mean, you could borrow up to two..."

"Stop saying the same stuff as Ibara. You two must really be getting along well to say the same stuff. Satoshi, would you keep a book that you have no intention of reading? It would of course be more efficient to return it to the library instead of lugging it home."

"... I see. And what did you show them there?"

"Surely you should have guessed by now. Paintings, drawn by the students of Classes 2-D, 2-E and 2-F, who held their Arts lessons together."

Over there were various paintings of different styles of similar objects. They were portraits of their own classmates, sitting beside a table decorated with a flower. And in each girls' hand was none other than the elegantly bound hardback, "Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years". It was a quite detailed drawing, and artistically speaking it was rather bewitching.

"Amazing, Houtarou. Then, what was the scent that Chitanda-san smelled?"

"The smell of paint, of course. She figured it out as well, since the Arts Room was filled with painting equipment, after all."

Satoshi began clapping without reservation.

"Wow, that was fantastic. Thanks to you, I've managed to kill some quality time here."

Chitanda smiled gently in approval.

"Yes, it was fun. It felt as though time has flown by quickly."

"I'm not sure how much time has passed to begin with... but I can't believe Oreki actually managed to solve that!"

While they all looked amazed, it was different for me. Ibara was the one who thought the whole thing was strange to begin with, Chitanda was the one who decided to investigate out of curiosity, and Satoshi merely wanted to enjoy the ride; they were all different from me. As they were having a catharsis, I began to wonder if I would have a similar reaction by embracing the Kanya Festival.

How should I put this... Oh well, whatever.

The rain seemed to be getting weaker. Guess it's time to go home.

As I was about to pick up my shoulder bag, Chitanda stopped me.

"Ah, we can't go without waiting."

"What? Is there something else?"

I noticed Satoshi and Ibara staring at me coldly. Did I do something wrong?

"Oreki, just what did you come here for to begin with?"

To solve the mystery of the popular book that no one ever reads...

No, wait. That's it! The anthology. Satoshi laughed.

"Now come on guys. Houtarou will occasionally have a few screws loose."

"Occasionally? Fuku-chan, you're being too kind."

Argh, I've just acted stupidly in front of you two.

Ibara looked as though she was about to go on when a voice came from behind the counter.

"Ibara-san, thanks for the good work. You may go home now."

"Ah, yes of course. Are you leaving as well, Itoikawa-sensei?"

It was a teacher, and though I'd never seen her before, I knew she was the Head Librarian. For a woman nearing the end of middle-age, she was quite short in stature. A glance at her name tag revealed her full name - Itoikawa Youko.

Upon the arrival of the Head Librarian, Satoshi immediately got down to business.

"Sensei, I'm Fukube Satoshi of the Classics Club. We're planning on publishing an essay anthology and would like to see the back issues for reference, but we can't seem to find them in the open shelves. So we're wondering if we may please search the archives for them?"

"The Classics Club? ... Essay anthology?"

Itoikawa seemed surprised as she raised her voice. She probably thought that the Classics Club had been abolished or something.

"You're with the Classics Club? I see... I'm sorry, but the library does not hold any anthologies that I know of."

"Eeh, then what about the archives?"

"There aren't any there either."

"Maybe something has been overlooked..."

"I don't think that's possible."

Strangely, she answered quite firmly. I see no reason for the Head Librarian to hide anything from us. Perhaps the archives have been overhauled recently?

Upon receiving a negative answer, Satoshi had no choice but to give up.

"Is that so? I understand... What do we do now, Chitanda-san?"

"... This is indeed troubling."

Chitanda looked at me with a depressed look. Even if you give me that look, there's nothing I can do besides shrugging my shoulders.

"I'm sure we'll find them eventually. Let's go home." I said, and as I picked up my shoulder bag, Ibara said coldly, "You sure are quite laid back, looking all relaxed after solving a problem."

Just because I've solved a problem doesn't mean I'm all relaxed. Ibara, your accusation is way off the mark. Though that's what my mind was saying, it was pointless to say it out loud, so I shrugged my shoulders.

"Yes, you're right. Let's go home... We did get something worthwhile."

Chitanda said something totally incomprehensible.

Anyway, our business was done here. This time, I hung my bag over my shoulder and walked out to find the rain had stopped, and rays of sunlight were shining through the clouds. As I turned and looked around, I could hear Chitanda whispering the same thing again,

"That's right, if it's Oreki-san, then he could..."

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ TL Note: The last few sentences involved a few complicated puns concerning "barren" 不毛 and "dual crops" 二毛作, so I had to modify them a bit for it to make sense in English.
2. ↑ [The Eight Dog Chronicles](#)
3. ↑ [Tales of Moonlight and Rain](#)
4. ↑ [The Great Mirror](#)

## 4 - The Descendants of the Eventful Classics Club

It was on a Sunday that I was invited out by Chitanda. She said she wanted to see me outside school, though she counted on me to arrange where to meet, so as a result, here I was waiting at the "Cafe Pineapple Sandwich". The coffee shop, which serves the sourest seasoned Kilimanjaro coffee I've ever known, was decorated in a sombre dark brown hue. The conspicuous advertising board outside was quite hard to miss.

This coffee shop was quiet as there was no radio or TV being broadcast. Though it was indeed a pleasant environment, it was quite a boring place to wait for someone. There were only a few minutes before the appointed time, so I was getting a bit fidgety about Chitanda not yet arriving as I stared at my cup of coffee within the compartmentalized table I was seated at.

Finally, Chitanda arrived, and according to my watch, right on time at half past one. It's quite a small coffee shop, so she quickly found me. Dressed in a mostly white one-piece dress, she came over and got herself seated. One could say there's no other person more well-dressed than this casually dressed Chitanda.

"Sorry for calling you out on such short notice."

"It's fine," I replied as I emptied my cup of coffee, and then called for the waiter. Chitanda had a look at the menu and said, "I'll have a Vienna Cocoa, please."

She decided on something sweet. As an ordinary high school student, I wasn't wealthy enough to make another order myself.

Before getting to the main agenda, we had some small talk, which started with Chitanda's favourable impression with this coffee shop. I then commented on how a person like her who doesn't order coffee in a coffee shop was like a person who visits Ueno Zoo but doesn't go to see the giant pandas. As Chitanda began listing many examples of coffee which were weak in caffeine, her Vienna Cocoa had arrived. I was startled to see the amount of cream on her cup. Seems like she has a sweet tooth.

Chitanda began to use the spoon to stir in the cream. She seemed to be enjoying herself while she was at it. At this rate, she'll just be drinking her coffee and engaging in small talk all day before going home. Being half serious and half fearful about that happening, I decided to get the ball rolling.

"So, what do you want?"

"Huh?"

Is this the attitude you should have for asking people to take time out of their holy weekends?

"What is it that you asked me out for?"

Silently sipping her coffee and muttering "That was delicious", Chitanda tilted her head and said, "Well, it was you who chose to meet at this place."

"That's it, I'm going home."

"Ah! Please wait!"

Placing her spoon and cup down, Chitanda quickly sat upright and said, "I'm sorry. I, I was a bit nervous."

Though she looked as though she was calming herself down, her expression was hardly stiff to begin with. It would seem it's her nature to just blurt anything out whenever she's nervous. So I decided to tease her by asking, "Nervous? You have something to confess to me?"

Upon saying that, I quickly noticed that such a generic joke had a subtle effect on her.

"No, I..."

As though trying to conceal her embarrassment, she looked hesitant as she slowly nodded.

I started to panic, and quickly called for the waiter.

"... I'd like another coffee, please."

Not minding my reaction, Chitanda silently spoke.

"While it might be a confession, it's more of a request I have for you. In truth this is my problem alone, so I don't know if I'm justified to make such a request. So, would you please hear my story first?"

Chitanda was no longer staring at her cup of cocoa. Is that so... Though I'm no good with such solemnness, I replied, "Okay, let's hear it."

"Thank you."

And so, after taking a gulp, Chitanda began to slowly speak.

"... I have an uncle, he was my mother's older brother. His name was Sekitani Jun. Ten years ago he went on a voyage to Malaysia, but he has been missing since seven years ago.

"When I was young... no, I'm probably still young right now — ten years ago, I was quite attached to my uncle. From what I can remember, he could answer any question that I could ask him. As a child, what he said naturally sounded amazing to me, though I can't exactly remember anymore the things he told me. The image I have of my uncle is that there was nothing that he didn't know of."

"Sounds like an amazing fellow."

"He was knowledgeable and eloquent, though I don't know if that's still true now."

I smiled and replied half-jokingly, "Well, at least you knew he was when he was still around. I have two to three uncles myself, though none of them are missing. So why are you asking a request of me? You're not expecting me to go to Malaysia to search for him, are you?"

"No. My uncle was last seen in the Bengali region, umm, in India, that is. What I wanted to request from Oreki-san is... to help me remember what it was that my uncle said to me."

Chitanda finished her sentence upon saying that, which seemed appropriate, as I had no idea what she had just said. She's asking me to help her remember what her uncle told her?

"... That's too ridiculous."

"I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? My memories relating to my uncle come from my childhood, so I can't exactly remember them myself. But, there's this one event that left a strong impression in my mind. I really want to recall that moment."

As her lips were getting dry, Chitanda took a sip of her cocoa. She then continued in a lower volume, "It was when I was still in kindergarten. For some reason, I managed to hear my uncle mention something about a 'classics club'. I always thought this 'jurassics club' had something to do with dinosaurs, so I became interested in this 'classics club' of his<sup>[1]</sup>."

"Jurassics Club", "Classics Club", it was a silly pun, though kids that age usually pronounce things wrong. Maybe that's why. This must be when Chitanda Eru, the incarnation of Curiosity itself, was born.

"I heard many stories about my uncle's 'classics club'. Then one day, I went looking for my uncle to ask him about something concerning the 'classics club'. Normally he would answer me as usual, but on that day, he seemed reluctant to answer. He began wringing his hands with this regretful look,

and when he finally calmed down, he answered my question. Upon hearing his answer, I..."

"What happened?"

"... I cried. Whether it was something fearful or sad, I cried out loud. My mother was so startled that she came to see what was going on, and that's all I could remember. The last thing I can recall is that my uncle didn't come to console me like he normally would."

"You were shocked?"

"Yes, a bit, I believe. I've remembered that day all this time. Afterwards, yes, sometime during Junior High School, I began to be bothered by that event. Why did my uncle look so regretful? Why did he not console me? ... Oreki-san, what do you think?"

Upon being asked, I started thinking. Why would a person who would so patiently answer every single question asked by a young kid leave her crying by herself at that moment?

I quickly figured out the reason, and explained with as much composure as I could muster, "Your uncle told you something he could not take back. He didn't want to lie to a kid, and probably wanted you to know that what he said was true."

Chitanda gasped and smiled.

"Yes, that's what I thought of as well."

She said while looking straight at me... Umm, when's my coffee gonna come?

"Upon realizing that, I began to wonder in earnest just what it was that he had told me that day. So I began to take things into action, first by attempting to reenact the environment of that day. I sneaked into the residence of the Sekitanis, whom we have become estranged with."

She's definitely the sort that would go to all lengths in order to get things done.

"I see. So that's what you meant by 'personal reasons' when you said why you joined the Classics Club."

Chitanda nodded.

"Yes. I wasn't aware that the Classics Club was nearly abolished until recently. I knew it wasn't easy, but I didn't expect that there would be no one left behind who would know the truth. I considered asking the teachers, but the teachers who were around when my uncle was a student 33 years ago were no longer at the school."

"So, why are you asking me to help you?"

"That's because..."

As Chitanda stopped her sentence midway, the waiter arrived with my coffee. Working mechanically, the bearded waiter withdrew my empty cup and replaced it with a new one. After the waiter had left, Chitanda sipped her cup of cocoa as though remembering everything and said, "... During the incident with the clubroom key, and the library mystery that Ibara-san raised, you have managed to deduce their solutions in ways beyond my imagination. While it may be shameless to say this, I believe Oreki-san is the one who can figure out the answer to my question."

I felt myself frowning.

"You overestimate me. I just relied on some insight, which required some luck in itself."

"Then I'm seeking help from this luck of yours."

"I don't think I can help you."

The reason I didn't think I could help her was firstly, I had no obligation to assist her in such a bothersome errand; secondly, if I couldn't figure out anything, then I would let Chitanda down, as well as feel very helpless

myself. This wasn't some quiz show, but merely Chitanda's exaggerated way of finding out the meaning of a moment in her life. You expect an energy saver like me to bear such a responsibility? You must be kidding me.

"Why does it have to be me? Surely there are others who could help you."

Chitanda's eyes widened. Without knowing the meaning behind that, I continued, "Wouldn't it be more efficient to rely on more people to help out? You could ask Satoshi, Ibara, or other friends of yours."

There was no response. Chitanda merely remained silent at my refusal. She lowered her head and slowly muttered, "I... Oreki-san, I'm not the sort of person who would tell everyone about my past."

"..."

"I... I've never told anyone else about this story before."

I was taken aback. I see, now it makes sense.

Why would Chitanda purposely call me out on a Sunday just to talk to me alone? The answer was simple, she did not want many people to know about her uncle's story. Chitanda had decided to put her trust in me, a person she barely knew, and yet I had told her to "rely on more people".

It would of course be embarrassing for many people to find out such private information. Who wouldn't have their own deepest secret that they want to cherish?

I felt myself going red, and I lowered my head.

"... I'm sorry."

Seeing Chitanda smile at me, I felt that she'd probably forgiven me.

Silence then followed. Chitanda seemed to be waiting for me to speak. Yet I couldn't find anything appropriate to say. The steam from my cup of coffee rose between us. Chitanda's Vienna Cocoa had gone cold by now, as no steam came from her cup.

I held my cup in my hands. As though to break the awkwardness, Chitanda said with a gentle expression, "I've said something unreasonable. I know I've involved you in something I shouldn't, but yet, I..."

"..."

"Oreki-san, when you managed to solve my queries... you probably reminded me a lot of my uncle. No offense to my uncle, but you too have managed to answer my questions. That's why... Oh no, I'm being too selfish here."

"You still have three years of high school remaining, so you could take your time finding out. If you're still troubled, then I won't necessarily stand aside and not help."

Chitanda slowly shook her head.

"I wish to remember what happened that day with my uncle before he dies. I wish to find out before his funeral why my uncle had told me something that he could not take back, and what it was that he told me."

"Before he dies?"

What a strange way of describing a person. A dead person would already be dead, while a missing person isn't exactly dead.

... No wait.

That's right, people who have gone missing, *are* dead.

"It has been seven years since my uncle, Sekitani Jun, has gone missing. In case you didn't know, people who have been missing for seven years are declared legally dead... The Sekitani family has been informed of such by the Missing Persons Bureau and will be holding a funeral in due time. So I wish to settle my questions regarding my uncle before then."

Chitanda sighed after informing me as such, and then turned her gaze outside the window. I followed her gaze as well, and saw only a generic street view.

I took another sip of my coffee. It seemed Chitanda was done speaking.

I began to think.

There is a memory that needs to be remembered, and it was a memory worth remembering. This matter was hard to define according to my motto. For someone like me who was used to dodging crisis after crisis, I don't have many memories worth remembering myself.

However, for Chitanda, she would seek to recollect any memories that she may have forgotten. Now that I think about it, that curiosity of hers is what's driving her to dig for her own memories, so it wasn't strange for her to be digging into her own past. She was digging not just for her uncle's sake, but for herself as well. And what would happen if she is not able to achieve what she had intended?

As I was thinking, a passage from my sister's letter flashed across my mind: "After all, you don't have anything better to do, do you?"

... Indeed. I am Houtarou the energy saver. I will not do anything if I don't have to.

In that case, it wouldn't be too strange if I were to help someone do something that needs to be done, right?

I placed my cup down and flicked my fingers as I felt a strange feeling within me. The ceramic cup made a thudding sound as it touched the table, causing Chitanda to turn her gaze away from the streets and towards me. I slowly spoke as though trying to catch her attention.

"I will not be responsible for what you intend to do."

"?!"

"That's why I won't say that I'll accept your request. However, I will take your story into consideration, and if any hints should come my way, I'll let you know right away. That'll save me the trouble of having to explain too much."

"... Okay."

"If that's fine with you, then I'll help you."

Chitanda quickly sat up straight, and bowed at a perfect 45 degree angle.

"Thank you so much. This may cause you a lot of trouble, but I am gratefully in your debt."

Cause me a lot of trouble, huh?

I turned my face away where Chitanda couldn't see and smiled softly. I was quite amazed with myself for not refusing a request from someone. If Satoshi ever finds out, I wonder what he'll say about it. He'd probably widen his eyes in surprise, and express his amazement using vocabulary I've never heard of before, saying something like, "But Houtarou's the sort who would turn down a request at once."

I wonder how I should explain myself to him then.

I went into deep thought while being thanked many times by Chitanda. I'd already finished two cups of coffee, but her cup of cocoa had already gone cold.

# **Translator's notes and references**

1. ↑ TL Note: Modified to fit the pun

# 5 - The Hidden Seal of the Pedigree Classics Club

While Kamiyama High School does provide curriculum for university entrance exams, it does not particularly do much to improve its university entrance rankings. It only holds mock exams for prospective university students once or twice annually, and they do not hold extra lessons during holidays. All in all, it was a pretty laid back school.

Even so, Kamiyama High still has regular exams. If a high-school student's life is rose-coloured, then the exam halls would be his natural enemy. And so the Classics Club activities had come to a halt as club activities are prohibited during the End of Semester Exams for the First Semester. Though it's not like we have much to do anyway, we still had to hand the club room key over to the school.

Today is the final day of the exams. I laid down on my bed in my own room and stared at the ceiling. And as usual, there was nothing particularly different about this white ceiling.

In terms of exam results, the members of the Classics Club yielded some interesting revelations.

First, Fukube Satoshi. Though he's well-versed in all sorts of useless trivial knowledge, he doesn't have much interest in regular studies. As the exams have just ended today, I can't exactly tell how he performed, but I do know that he was terrible in the Mid-Term Tests. At any rate, back then Satoshi explained to me, "That's because I was busy studying why Japanese people nowadays no longer write their kanji in the cursive style<sup>[1]</sup>." If Satoshi thinks something is important, then it must be important enough for him. No disrespect to him, but in the long-term, I think it probably sounds

foolish. Though I don't think Satoshi would care one bit. If I call him a free soul because of it, he'd probably take it as a compliment. To put it simply, he's just a generic fool.

Though she's normally with the Manga Studies Club, in order to continue pursuing Satoshi, Ibara Mayaka too has joined the Classics Club. She's probably the hard-working type. As she would usually make sure to check up on any mistakes made, her grades are in the upper half of the class. However, devoting so much time to studying does not seem to improve her grades at all. To put it simply, Ibara's a bit neurotic — you could say she's a perfectionist. Though her tongue may be sharp, her downside is probably that she is too obsessed with perfection, and would end up struggling to find the perfect answers to her exam questions. I think she applies the same standards to herself as well.

Then there's Chitanda Eru, who stands out among the rest with her high scores. A look at the score ranking board reveals she's ranked 6th in the entire grade. Though she doesn't seem satisfied with that, or even the high school curriculum for that matter. She once told me she wasn't content with just learning the parts, she wanted to learn the entire system. I had absolutely no idea what she meant by that. Though her words were vague, I could tell why this lady was so intent on getting her curiosity resolved. For example, the case involving her uncle — she probably wanted to find out the entire "system" regarding the information concerning what her uncle said to her back then. She's the sort that wants to find out the cause by all means.

As for me, my grades were normal.

Out of 350 people, I ranked 175th. As though it was some sort of prank, I was ranked right in the middle. I was not concerned about Chitanda's curiosity getting her good grades or Satoshi's eccentricity getting him bad grades, nor did I think much about Ibara being unhappy with the mistakes she's made. While I wasn't that laid back as to not study for the exams, my studying was lukewarm at best. Occasionally, I would get people telling me how much I've changed, but to me, it simply means they aren't really that observant. I am positioned below the cream of the crop and above the bottom of the heap. I have no desire to go either up or down. I see, so that's

why Satoshi said that he can't think of anything apart from grey for the colour of my high-school life.

Of course, colour isn't confined to academic grades. There's also club activities, sports, hobbies, romance... The things that constitute our humanity. There is the saying that one can't see the forest for the trees, after all, and one result cannot be used to generalize for the whole picture. Though the Japanese dictionary defined life in high-school as rose-coloured, these roses would still need to be planted in the right places in order to blossom.

Let's just say I'm not the suitable type of soil for roses to grow in.

As I lay on my bed thinking all these things, I heard a sound coming from downstairs. It sounded like a letter had arrived.

After making sure it was indeed a letter, I was dumbfounded. The envelope was covered in red, blue and white stripes, that could only be international mail. After checking the recipient name was correct, I concluded that the only person who could send international mail to the Oreki residence was Oreki Tomoe. Now where was this sent from... Istanbul?

I opened the letter right there and found many letters inside, one of which was for me.

Dear Houtarou,

I am currently in Istanbul. Due to some mishaps I'm hiding out at the Japanese consulate, so I haven't been seeing much of the city yet.

I'm sure it's an amazing city. If I could take a time machine and visit this place in the past, I think I'd want to try to lock the city gates myself,

perhaps I'd change history as a result. I'm no historian, so I'm no good at speculating at these "what ifs".

It's an interesting trip, I'm sure I'll look back ten years from now and view every day I'm out here without regret.

So how's the Classics Club? Have the members increased?

Do not be discouraged even if it's just you alone! Solitude helps make a man grow stronger.

If there are other people, then excellent. It helps to improve one's interaction with others.

Anyway, I'm writing because there's something that I'm concerned about.

Have you (guys) started work on publishing an essay anthology yet? The Classics Club always publishes one every year, so I'm wondering if you're continuing with that.

If you are, I figured you're probably at a loss for what to write. After all, the anthologies aren't stored in the library.

You should be able to find the back issues inside an old chemical safe in the club room. The key's broken already, so you can just open the box right away.

I'll call you when I arrive at Pristina.

With love, Tomoe.

Hiding in the Japanese consulate? Just what have you done this time, Sis? Anyway, it's not that I'm worried. The details are probably written in the letter for my old man. Now where have I heard of Pristina? I can't quite remember. Since it's my sister going, it's no doubt some ancient battlefield or something.

Anyway, I couldn't help but sigh. Does my sister have some sort of intelligence network that collects information about my activities? And I didn't know the Classics Club kept their back issues so secretly for generations either. Indeed, we were looking for the back issues but couldn't find where they were.

It was only a few days since Chitanda tasked me with a personal errand of hers, though she also has another errand for us as President of the Classics Club - the publishing of the essay anthology. Chitanda looked troubled when she found out the library archives did not store the back issues, but if my sister is right, then it could be of great help.

If the purpose is the result itself, then achieving the said result will fulfill that purpose. Though I sense another layer being added to such a bothersome definition, it just felt cruel if I withheld such information. As usual, Oreki Tomoe is messing with my life.

At any rate, I stuffed the letter in the pocket of my uniform trousers that I hung in the closet.

The following day after classes, I went straight towards the club room. The weather was rather pleasant for a relaxing day after the end of the exams, that one would be in a mood to join any club. The training sounds of the sports teams could be heard from the sports ground, while music was being played by the Brass Band, Light Music Club, Japanese Traditional Music Club, etc. While the sports teams are the most visible of the lot, the Kanya Festival is better known for its flurry of activities organized by the arts-

related clubs. During this time of day, the Special Block which holds these arts clubs would be full of people.

And within the uppermost corner of this Special Block lies the Geology Room, where Chitanda and Ibara were. Though they've only just met during the case of the peculiar library book, it seems like they're getting along well with each other already. Today they were sitting facing each other, as though they were engaged in some conversation. As summer had arrived, the summer uniforms that they wore felt breezy. Ibara's tanned arms from her short sleeve shirt were in contrast to Chitanda's pale white arms. It was already the season when the sun is shining more often, yet our lady here doesn't seem to have much melanin in her. I tilted my head over to hear what the girls were talking about.

"In other words, the articles need to be on topic."

"Do you mean we can count on others for our anthology?"

"Don't you worry, I think I can get some connections within the Manga Studies Club."

"Can you do that?"

Ah, talking about the anthology, huh? Well, good luck.

Suddenly, Chitanda's body went stiff as she covered her face with her hands.

What's happening?

"... Ah-choo!"

She sneezed. And she's doing it in an old-fashioned quiet way.

"Ah-choo! Ah-choo!"

"What's wrong? You have cold? Or is it hay fever?"

"... Ah, I'm feeling better now. This is quite embarrassing, but it seems to me that I have caught a summer cold..."

Hmm, a summer cold is tough. Come to think of it, her voice sounded different from usual.

Anyway, I decided to call them out.

"Hey, Chitanda, Ibara,"

"Ah, Oreki-san,"

"Ibara, is the Manga Studies Club okay with you being here?"

"Yup, it's all settled. What, you have a problem with me?"

Why should I?

Anyway.

I decided to cut the niceties and went straight to the point as I took out my sister's letter from my trouser pocket,

"My sis used to be with the Classics Club, so she wrote me a letter showing us where we could find the anthology back issues."

Chitanda merely looked puzzled. It seems she still didn't understand.

"I know where we can find the Classics Club anthology back issues."

She bit her lips many times while struggling to find the right words.

"Is,"

She was so lost for words that her eyes went wide.

"Is that true!?"

"Of course it's true. What do I gain by lying to you anyway?"

As though affirming what I said, Chitanda's thin lips broke into a smile. While the elegantly fine lady of the Chitanda clan wasn't exactly grinning from ear to ear, she was clearly quite happy. Even if I were to obtain something that I desired a lot, I would not be able to make such a face. Compared to this, the Chitanda I saw in the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich with her deep expressions felt like a different person altogether.

"I see, the anthologies, huh..."

I could hear her whispering softly,

"... Tee hee, back issues..."

This Chitanda Eru can be quite a dangerous person.

However, Ibara raised her eyebrow and questioned, "Are you sure about that? Why would someone write a letter just to say that?"

A good question. No one in their right mind would think of seeking information about where to find stuff concerning the Cultural Festival in a letter from Istanbul. But this was indeed a letter from my sis, and no one could ever guess just what it is that Oreki Tomoe would consider important.

"Well, fact is I've got the letter here, so you'll be able to tell whether it's true or not. Wanna read?"

I unfolded the letter and laid it on the table for Ibara and Chitanda to see. As they followed every word in the letter, they gradually went quiet. The first to break the silence was Chitanda.

"... Does your sister like to visit Turkey?"

"She likes to visit the world."

"Such an amazing sister you have."

While her interest was drawn by the curious part of the letter, that's not where I wanted her to look.

"'I'll look back ten years from now and view every day I'm out here with much nostalgia.' Ahh, such a melancholic sentence."

Well, I agree, but that's not it either.

As they read on, they both opened their mouths at the same time.

"... The chemical safe?"

"The chemical safe, huh?"

Ibara looked around the Geology Room, and then put her arms on her waist and puffed her chest.

"Hmm, I don't see anything like that here."

"Guess so."

That's not hard to figure out. Though Chitanda seemed to have gone pale all of a sudden.

"Eh!? T, then w, where are... the anthologies..."

"Chi-chan! Calm down, calm down!"

As to who Ibara was calling Chi-chan, I could think of no one else but Chitanda. "Chi-chan", that Ibara sure has given her quite a cute nickname. So her sharp tongue is not used against Chitanda, huh? Though it is indeed difficult to be hostile to a person like Chitanda anyway.

I waved my sis's letter to a now calmed-down Chitanda and said,

"Chitanda, this letter said 'old chemical safe in the club room'. It's been two years since my sis graduated from here. The club room has probably changed during that time."

"Ah... Is that so?"

"So, Oreki, do you know where the club room was two years ago?"

To avoid any oversight, I made sure to visit the staff room beforehand.

"I've asked the supervising teacher, and he said it was in the Biology Lecture Room."

"You sure are quite prepared for this."

"Well, it's efficient."

"How enthusiastic of you."

That's not exactly true, I'm normally not that enthusiastic.

"The Biology Lecture Room... that's just one floor below us. Now that we know, shall we head over there?"

Having said that, Chitanda left the room at once.

If there's anyone that's enthusiastic, it's her.

The Biology Room was, as Chitanda said, right under the Geology Room. If the Geology Room, located in the corner of the Special Block, was the remotest region of Kamiyama High, then the Biology Room, located on the third floor, would also be considered a backwater area. While I did say the Special Block was full of people, there were exceptions. Like the Geology Room, which was hardly surrounded by any other club rooms, was extremely quiet. It seems the Biology Room was the same as well. While the corridor was lively with people, the path towards the Biology Room was full of empty classrooms, and there was no one else heading towards it besides us.

Along the way, Chitanda sneezed many times.

"Is your cold that bad?"

"Please don't worry too much about me. I might not be able to stop sneezing, but it's just a sensitive nose... Ah-choo!"

I don't know. If it were me, I would have felt terrible sneezing this many times. As expected of our lady here, who can be extremely modest.

Walking ahead of us, Ibara turned her head around and said to us,

"Oreki, do you have the key with you?"

"Nope, someone else seems to have borrowed it."

"Ah-choo! ... The key's been borrowed? Does that mean the Biology Room is currently being used by some club?"

"As long as it isn't some fool that's borrowed it, it could be possible."

"Oreki-san... it's rude to call people fools."

I got scolded. If she gets upset by even that, then not even Satoshi or Ibara would have been able to retort, so I smiled bitterly and looked around, and something by the corridor wall entered my field of vision. I wonder what that was. Neither Chitanda nor Ibara seemed to notice it... It was a small box, and as it was painted in the same white colour as the corridor walls, it was rather inconspicuous. Looking at the opposite side of the corridor, I saw another similar box. I wonder if someone left these behind? As it didn't seem valuable, I paid no more attention to it. Bending down to pick up something that's worth less than one yen is not worth the effort, as the energy spent is more or less equivalent to one yen. So it's basic common sense for energy savers like me.

We now stood before the Biology Room. While considering whether to knock or not, Chitanda had already reached out for the door knob.

"Huh?"

The door wouldn't open.

"It's locked."

"So it seems."

The two girls turned to look at me, Chitanda looking concerned while Ibara stared coldly. It's bothersome to have them to look at me with such eyes.

"No, I really don't have the key with me. So I wouldn't know why the door's locked."

Once again, Ibara tried to open the door, but could only hear the lock creaking. Quite aptly, Chitanda said what I was about to say, "... Again?"

Yes, that again.

"Chi-chan, what do you mean?"

"Umm, it happened in April..."

I don't think Chitanda knows this, but it seems Kami High's classroom doors are jinxed. As Chitanda recounted that story in April, I began to think of how to get around this situation without a key.

"... And that's how it was."

"Hmm, so Oreki managed to do all that, huh?"

I turned my heels around and shouted through the door jokingly,

"IS ANYONE IN THERE?"

Of course, I expected no answer.

However, there was an answer. The blunt sound of the door being unlocked was heard.

"Yes?"

The door then opened from the inside.

Standing there was a male student wearing a thin shirt and uniform trousers. He was quite tall and slender. Though he looked more like the intelligentsia type than the athletic type of person. Upon identifying our grades from the colour of my collar, he smiled politely and said, "Oh, sorry about that. I had the door locked. You guys interested in joining the Wall Newspaper Club?"

If you're inside then you should've opened the door right away, dammit. Rather than what I was thinking, I said, "This is the Wall Newspaper Club?"

"That's right. Aren't you here to join?"

The male student shut the door upon coming out of the room. At that moment I smelled some sort of alcoholic disinfectant odour coming from him. It seems our intelligentsia fellow here has a penchant for deodorants. He raised his brows upon seeing me twitch my nose at his deodorant odour, as though saying "You got a problem with that?" Though he quickly reverted to his courteous manner and said, "Then, how may I help you?"

We exchanged glances with each other, and decided it was best for our President Chitanda to speak.

"Good afternoon. I'm Chitanda Eru, President of the Classics Club. You must be Toogaito-sempai from Class 3-E, right?"

The guy called Toogaito raised his brow in amazement,

"How do you know my name?"

A good question. Anyone would be amazed if they were suddenly addressed by name by a complete stranger. After all, that's what I felt back in April. And like back then, Chitanda merely smiled gently.

"We met at the Manninbashi mansion last year."

"Manninbashi... Wait a minute, you said your name's Chitanda, could you be related to Chitanda-san from Kanda?"

"Yes, he is my father. Thank you for taking care of him."

...Hmm, this feels like a high-society reunion. I knew that as an old clan, the Chitandas were farmland owners, but I never expected them to be so well-connected. It seems this world that I've never seen before really does exist. Come to think of it, Satoshi did mention something about the old clans of Kamiyama, and the Toogaito clan was amongst them.

"Ah, no, the pleasure's all mine. I see, you're with the Chitandas."

"Yes... Ah-choo!"

"Summer cold? Must be bad for you. Take care of yourself."

Upon learning that Chitanda Eru was from the Chitanda Clan with their large farmlands, Toogaito's attitude changed in a strange way. While he was still courteous, his gaze was now more stiff. Was he scared of Chitanda or something? I can't begin to imagine, but it does seem there is some sort of power influence between the old clans. Maybe it's just me, but Toogaito didn't seem to meet Chitanda's gaze and he spoke as though picking his words carefully.

"Well, what is it?"

On the other hand, Chitanda didn't seem to mind Toogaito's reaction and said, "Yes, actually, I heard that the back issues for the Classics Club's essay anthology were stored here in the Biology Room. This used to be the club room for the Classics Club, right?"

"... It was when I was still in first year. Though they moved the club rooms all over the place last year."

"Then, do you know where the anthologies are?"

Toogaito paused for a moment before replying, "Nope, never seen them."

Quietly listening to their conversation, Ibara turned and looked at me, to which I nodded gently. Anyone with an intuition would realize that Toogaito was behaving strangely.

"I see..."

Though she has an amazing memory, Chitanda's intuition level was below average. And so Chitanda looked dejected and was about to leave when Ibara interrupted, "Excuse me, Sempai, do you mind if we search around for them?"

"And you are?"

"Ibara Mayaka of the Classics Club. Since you have no use for the anthologies, maybe you haven't noticed them before, right?"

Though I see no point in doing so, I decided to go on a fool's errand and back them up.

"We'll try to do so without obstructing your club activities. Or is that too much trouble for you?"

"Please."

"I ask of you as well."

Upon our constant barrage of requests, Toogaito gave a sullen look.

"Well, I would rather not have outsiders in the club room..."

Upon hearing that line, Ibara quickly jumped on it.

"But Sempai, while this is a club room, this is also a classroom, right?"

I held back my laughter, since Ibara was basically saying "You have no right to refuse students entry into the school classrooms". Toogaito looked rather troubled as a result, but as Ibara was rather persistent, he finally relented.

"... Alright then. You may come in, but, just try not mess anything up."

And so the President of the Wall Newspaper Club opened the door to the Biology Room.

The room we entered was designed in the exact same layout as the Geology Room, from the blackboard, the chairs, the table, to the cleaning tools, they were generally the same... Though it does have one extra door. Above that door was a sign that read "Biology Preparation Room". In the fourth floor, this would be where the storage room was, and it was not possible to enter it directly from the Geology Room.

There were hardly any other members in the Wall Newspaper Club today. Though Toogaito explained, "We normally have four members, though as there's no activities today, only I'm here to think about what to publish for the Kanya Festival."

If I remember correctly, the Kanya Festival starts in October. So about two and a half months from now.

"What's the difference between the Wall Newspaper Club and the Newspaper Club?"

Chitanda asked a totally irrelevant question, which Toogaito answered courteously.

"There are three periodicals published in Kami High. There's the 'Seiryuu' distributed to the classrooms every other month; the 'Kami High Student Council News', posted outside the Student Council office in irregular intervals; and the 'Kami High Monthly', which publishes every month except August and December, and is posted on the notice board by the school entrance. We're in charge of the 'Kami High Monthly'."

"Who publishes the other two?"

"The 'Seiryuu' is by the Newspaper Club, while the 'Kami High Student Council News' is of course by the Student Council. Though we have the longest history of the three periodicals. The 'Kami High Monthly' will be reaching its four hundredth issue soon, the other two haven't even reached their one hundredth."

Four hundred issues, huh? Besides us, the Wall Newspaper Club too has a long-standing tradition of its own. Come to think of it, if Chitanda's uncle was with the Classics Club 33 years ago, then the Classics Club has been around for at least 33 years. No matter how tumultuous my life might become, it surely cannot compare to the history of the Classics Club. Then again, it's not like my life has been tumultuous so far.

"Doesn't seem to be in this room."

Ibara concluded after looking around the room. As the Biology Room was rather empty, it was hard for her to miss anything. That leaves the Preparation Room. I asked about entering that room, "May we please check the Preparation Room as well?"

"... Yeah, go ahead."

Upon hearing Toogaito reply behind me, I entered the room, and could hear the sound of paper fluttering as well as the sound of some motor. I wonder what that was.

As expected, the Preparation Room was a small room, about one third the size of the Biology Room.

This room was originally made to store teaching equipment for Biology lessons, though right now only microscopes could be found on the shelves. As Kami High is more focused on theory learning more than practical experiments, it would seem most of the other experiment tools and equipment were stored away in another separate room. As a result, this became a tool room for the Wall Newspaper Club.

There was an amateur looking camera, a collection of pens of various thicknesses and colours, cardboard boxes cluttered beside a photocopier, and a small speaker. As for the item that most caught our eyes, it was the makeshift table in the centre of the narrow room. Rather than a table, it was merely a thick plywood board placed on top of a cardboard box. On top of it were spread a bunch of B1 papers with scribbles that can only be read by their author, with a heavy-looking metallic pen case placed on top of them. The fluttering noise came from these papers being blown by the wind.

Wind?

There was wind inside the room. Though the window was open, the wind came from indoors. That must be where the motor sound came from. It was hard to spot as it was placed beside the stack of cardboard boxes, but there was a small electric fan in front of the makeshift table and opposite the window, and its wind speed was turned to the maximum.

There was something else that the wind was blowing on. Hanging by the window was a Kami High male summer uniform shirt. It was simply hung there casually.

"...?"

"Oreki, what do you think?"

I turned around and found Chitanda and Ibara standing by the Preparation Room entrance.

Ah yes, we had to look for the chemical safe.

Still, with things being placed everywhere in such a narrow room, there was no way to search like that. Simply by observation alone, there didn't seem to be anything resembling a chemical safe. It should be an old-styled box with the lock damaged. Perhaps I did see it but didn't notice it properly.

Hmm...

I crossed my arms and stepped away from the room and asked Toogaito, who had been watching us, "Do you know why the club rooms were moved around last year?"

"Nope. Maybe they were trying to fill out the rooms emptied by clubs that no longer existed?"

"How many boxes did you bring in when you moved in here?"

Toogaito thought for a while before replying, "... Now that you mention it, how many boxes did we move?"

"The cardboard boxes?"

"Yeah."

I see. Then it should be there. I'd nearly forgotten that the Toogaito clan was also quite a prestigious clan; it would make sense once I considered the circumstances concerning his clan.

I'd more or less figured out where the anthologies were, though obtaining them would be a problem... Let's try setting up a trap. I turned to face Toogaito.

"Sempai, since there are so many things lying around, it would be quite tedious to search like that. This might trouble you a bit, but do you mind if we ask Ooide-sensei to come help us search as well?"

Though he'd put on a sober expression until now, Toogaito's brows were raised.

"... No. I told you not to mess with anything inside."

"We'll place the objects back where we found them when we're done, please let us search."

"I said no!"

He suddenly raised his voice.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Toogaito-sempai. It's fine, I guess that's too bad."

Chitanda replied frantically while Toogaito continued speaking loudly.

"I'm already quite busy today as I have to submit my ideas to the editorial team by tomorrow. Just what is this entering into our place to search all over for stuff? Your anthologies ain't here, so leave already!"

While Toogaito was getting increasingly agitated, I merely looked at him coldly. It seems he's sprung the trap as I had expected him to.

I gazed at Toogaito while holding a friendly smile.

"Sempai, we're interested in the contents of a chemical safe."

"... What?"

"The anthologies are supposed to be inside the chemical safe. If you said they're not here, then they surely must not be here. Since we don't want to trouble you any further."

I then stopped smiling and added, "By the way, we'll be heading to the library now. If after we leave you manage to find the anthologies, would you please be so kind as to bring them over to the Geology Room? We'll leave the door unlocked."

It seemed Toogaito was really furious at my proposal, as he twisted his previously rational face and stared at me. In contrast, I treated it as though it was nothing special. After all, I've never heard of anyone in the history of this world getting injured just by being stared at.

"W, why you, how did you..."

"Yes, Sempai?"

After restraining himself, Toogaito swallowed what he was about to say.

He then sighed deeply and reverted back to his courteous self.

"Fine, I'll do it when I find them."

"I am most grateful... Well, shall we go, Chitanda, Ibara?"

Probably not understanding the meaning behind my exchange with Toogaito, the startled girls merely agreed with me and followed me out, as there was no point in staying any longer.

"Oreki-san, what just happened?"

"I'll explain later."

After telling them so, I led them out of the Biology Room.

A voice called out to me from behind, "You, first year. I still haven't heard what your name is."

I turned and replied indifferently, "Oreki Houtarou... Sorry about that just now."

Along the corridor linking the Special Block and the General Block, I leaned against one of the walls. As we were killing time here, the two girls took this chance to ask me, "Oreki, I don't know what's going on, but aren't we heading to the library?"

I waved my hand.

"Nope, since there's no need to."

"I don't get it. If there's no need to, why aren't we going back to the club room?"

"We can't. We'll need to wait a bit longer."

Ibara muttered, "Just what is he up to" while still looking unconvinced.

Chitanda, while sniffing her nose, took over for Ibara and asked, "Oreki-san, Toogaito-sempai looked furious."

"It seems so."

"Of course it's good if the back issues are indeed found, but to make such a forceful request out of him..."

"Forceful? I merely requested him reasonably."

Chitanda opened and closed her mouth as she was at a loss for words. That is to be expected. Since all I asked was "to help look for our stuff" and "bring them over once they're found".

"But, Toogaito-sempai was furious."

"Was he that furious?"

Standing beside Chitanda, Ibara raised her brow and asked, "After Oreki made that request of him, his anger looked more like he was acting."

Oh, so she noticed.

"Is that so?"

Though apparently Chitanda still hasn't.

I took a look at my watch. Three minutes had passed... Should be about time. I stood away from the wall I was leaning on and asked, "Chitanda, how well-known are the Toogaitos?"

Chitanda tilted her head, wondering why I would ask for something like this and answered, "The Toogaitos? They're quite influential in the high school educational circles. They've got one member in the Prefectural School Board and one in the City School Board, as well as one school principal and two teachers."

Now I see.

"Oreki, what about the anthologies already?"

I replied, "I think it's time we return."

Chitanda and Ibara looked at each other upon hearing my answer. I merely smiled.

And so we arrived at the Geology Room.

"Ah, here they are."

It was as I said. On top of the teacher's desk were stacked dozens of thin notebooks. I couldn't help but pump my fist. It feels good to have something go completely according to plan.

"They came? How can that be possible?" Ibara said while walking towards the teacher's desk. As she picked up one of the notebooks, she muttered, "... It's really the anthologies..."

"Eh, eh?? Eru, let me have a look as well!"

"How did you do that, Oreki? Did you know something we didn't?"

Ibara's stern questioning made it sound as though I did something wrong. I was never good at evading questions, so I leaned on one of the tables nearby and answered, "I just did a bit of blackmailing, that's all."

"Blackmailing? Against the President of the Wall Newspaper Club?"

"Yup. But, Ibara, can you be more discreet?"

Ibara made a sullen face upon me saying that.

"It's not like I would go tell anyone."

"Yeah, but you don't sound too reliable. It's supposed to be a secret that Toogaito is doing errands for a first year student, it'll be too pitiful for him if that secret is not kept."

"I won't tell anyone... If you don't trust me, then I'm fine if you don't give me the explanation." she said brusquely. She's probably not lying. Chitanda was a completely different matter; satiating her curiosity wasn't exactly a priority for her. So if she realizes that trouble may arise from me explaining, then she'd rather not hear it. She's the sort that would come up with such solutions.

Anyway, now that I've tested them, it seemed safe to assume that the girls won't go telling anyone else.

"Sorry about that. Anyway, Ibara, didn't you find it strange as to why Toogaito would have the door locked?"

Ibara replied bluntly, "He probably didn't want anybody to disturb him, as he did say he was preparing articles to publish, didn't he?"

"Then, what about the Preparation Room? Why was the fan on when the window was already open?"

"Maybe he's feeling hot?"

"Then he could have just placed the fan next to the window. Yet the fan was placed opposite it. With the fan in that position, if the pen case was moved slightly, all the B1 paper underneath would have been blown away."

Ibara rubbed her hair in irritation.

"So what about it?"

"Don't you get it? What Toogaito was intending to do?"

"If you put it that way, then I kind of get it. Was he trying to ventilate the room?"

I gently lifted my thumb and praised her. Of course, Ibara wasn't going to find that interesting and so turned her gaze away.

"Now then, the next question would be, why would he want to ventilate the room? To further elaborate, what was Toogaito, from a family of respected educators, doing alone in the club room with the door locked with infrared sensors set outside?"

"W, wait a minute! What infrared sensors? Are we in a spy novel or something?"

Ah, I forgot to explain, "Don't you ever see those gadget store commercials? They were selling those infrared sensors that would trigger the security alarm a while ago. I think you might get them for 5000 yen now."

"Where did you find them?"

"By the side of the third floor corridor just outside the Wall Newspaper Club room. They were camouflaged in white. It's hard to conclude that they're sensors just by observation alone, but the fact that there was a speaker inside the Preparation Room more or less confirmed my suspicions."

Ibara raised her brow and said, "You really are weird."

"Stop treating me as some outcast... Anyway, where were we? Ah yes, upon being informed by the sensors in advance that someone was approaching, why would he risk getting the B1 papers blown away just to ventilate the room? Any thoughts?"

Ibara began thinking at my question, and so I waited.

She then replied with an incredulous look befitting her sharp tongue, "... Could it be some odour...?"

I gently clapped my hands two to three times,

"You got it. He was trying to get rid of an odour. If we think along this line, then him using anti-odour sprays had nothing to do with any obsession with cleanliness. Now, what was the odour he was trying to get rid of? By the way, it's not any sort of narcotics."

"Then, could it be...?"

"That's right, he's probably smoking... It was a device used so that he may do so in peace. Considering that he comes from a prestigious clan, you can imagine what a scandal it would be if a son of a noble upbringing were caught doing something illegal. Since the Toogaitos are supposed to be

respected high school educators. In this day and age, if you're a doctor, teacher or police officer, even just yawning in public could get you in a lot of trouble."

"... I see. If that's true, then he sure has gone to a lot of trouble doing all that."

Indeed. That's what I thought as well. Had the circumstances been different, the problem he faced would have been different as well. Thinking back, he seemed visibly shaken when he learned that Chitanda was from the Chitanda clan. He must have been thinking that if his deeds were exposed by someone from another prestigious clan, the relationship between his and other clans would have been greatly affected. After all, we all know how sensitive Chitanda's senses are. Had Chitanda not caught a cold, no amount of ventilation or removing of his shirt would have fooled her.

"Well, I don't exactly understand his desire to smoke on the school grounds, though. Happy with the explanation now?"

Upon saying that, Ibara's gaze changed. Whoa, she's showing her true worth with such a cold stare.

"You know, I was merely trying to ask how Toogaito-sempai had brought the anthologies over. While I get how you blackmailed him with his dirty secret in order to get him to bring them over, you still haven't explained where they were in the first place."

I see, I must have missed that part. So I explained, "They must be in the chemical safe."

"O-re-ki!"

"I, I'm not trying to ridicule you! The problem here is where the chemical safe was... Remember Toogaito mentioned something about moving cardboard boxes in when the rooms changed? He had no reason to lie about this, so I figured that the chemical safe was somewhere in the club room."

"... But I didn't see it."

"It doesn't mean it's not there. You couldn't see it because it was hidden... I'm talking about the safe itself, not just the anthologies."

I let Ibara digest what I meant by that as I continued, "As a result, the anthologies were also hidden along with it. As for why he hid the safe away, that's because he was using it to store his cigarettes. Notice we didn't see any cigarettes, lighters or ash trays? That's because he hid them all inside the safe. Did you notice his expression when I suggested to ask Ooide-sensei to search the room with us? Anyway, as for where the safe was hidden, I'd guess that it was probably under that makeshift cardboard box table."

I took a deep sigh upon finishing my explanation.

I did something bad to Toogaito by putting him in a position where he had to comply with my request. Though I had no intention of exposing his secret, as we all have secrets to keep, and I wouldn't like it if mine were exposed either. Let's just say he was unlucky.

Ibara, whom I've been speaking to all this time, took a sidelong glance. Following it, I noticed the presence of a person who ought to have been more talkative about this. I turned to face her.

"Chitanda?"

Chitanda was looking at the anthologies on the teacher's desk. Though she was only looking and had not opened any of them. Her serious gaze was the same as those I saw in the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich. It was as though she didn't even hear me call out to her.

"What's wrong, Chitanda?"

As she didn't hear me, I got up from the table I was leaning on and walked up to tap her shoulder.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, Oreki-san... Have a look at this."

She handed one of the anthologies over to me.

It was a thin notebook, with the same dimensions as those Campus Notebooks seen in stationary stores<sup>[2]</sup>. The books were stitched together elegantly. They must have relied on someone professional to help them publish these. The cover was made of brown leather; on top was an ink painting of a dog and a hare drawn in a deformed cartoonish style.

A number of hares formed an outer ring, and within the centre were a dog and a hare biting each other. The dog's canine teeth were sunken into the hare's torso as though ripping it apart, while the hare's incisor teeth were nibbling deeply at the dog's neck. As it was drawn in a deformed way, it looked hilarious instead of grotesque. Though it also felt ominous. There was an old saying in the past about the hunting dogs getting cooked alongside the hares that they just hunted<sup>[3]</sup>. But now the dog and hare were instead hunting each other. Two of the hares in the ring looked on at such a seemingly cute scene.

On top of the illustration were some words, printed in proper fonts that read "Hyouka<sup>[4]</sup> Volume 2". The publication date was 1968... That's quite old, and the name...

"Hyouka...?"

Is that the title?

"Such a strange title."

Ibara peeked across my shoulder, and agreed with me, "Yeah, and a hard to understand one as well."

We felt the same way as I felt hearing the name Kanya Festival for the first time, although guessing the origin for the name Kanya Festival was more straightforward. If the writers of this anthology had to decide upon a name,

they would most likely choose one that's strongly connected to its contents. But I can see no connection between "Classics Club Essay Anthology" and the name "Hyouka".

Pointing at the illustration at the cover, I asked Ibara, "As someone from the Manga Studies Club, what do you think of this cover?"

"I think it's drawn superbly. The illustration design has brilliantly discarded all sense of perspective regarding distance... Hmm, this is good. I like this."

I was a bit surprised, as it's not normally possible for Ibara to clearly say whether she likes or dislikes something. Besides, this illustration has managed to leave an impression on her. As though regretting she just said she liked this, Ibara returned the book to me and began her justification,

"Er, 'like' is not exactly right. Since the art is not that beautiful... it looks threatening as well, after all. And I wasn't talking from an artistic point of view, but from a media perspective..."

Meanwhile, Chitanda didn't seem like she would tremble from joy at finally obtaining the long sought after back issues. Rather, it looked as though her expression had been sucked out by a vampire.

I asked her once again, "Chitanda, is something the matter?"

Upon hearing me, she dragged me to the corner of the classroom and said, "This."

"What?"

Rather than her eyes glittering in curiosity, the neat expression of our elegant lady that was drenched in the orange sunset looked more like she was discovering a secret as she whispered, "I found this. This is what my uncle wanted to show me. If I have this, then I should be able to find out what it was that my uncle said to me."

I see.

"So do you remember anything?"

In place of an answer, she pointed to the "Hyouka Volume 2" I was holding.

"This mentioned something about my uncle. Something seemed to have happened with the Classics Club 33 years ago... Have a look inside."

I did as she told me and opened the cover, and before me was written a foreword.

## Foreword

And so we have a Cultural Festival again this year.

It has been one year since Sekitani-sempai left us.

During this year, Sempai has fallen into legend and become a hero. As a result, the five day Cultural Festival will commence as usual.

However, as the legend spread, I went into deep thought. Would people ten years from now still remember the silent warrior and the kind hero? All Sempai has left behind is this anthology "Hyouka", for which he has provided the title.

As a sacrifice of the conflict, even Sempai's smile would end up along the flow of time into eternity.

No, perhaps it is better that we do not remember it. As it was not intended to be a heroic tale.

Once the subjectivity is taken away, this story will become a classic as it transcends all historical perspectives.

Will the day come when our stories become a classic for someone in the

future?

October 13th, 1968 Kooriyama Youko

"This is..."

"The 'last year' referred to here meant 33 years ago today. In that case, the 'Sekitani-sempai' of the Classics Club must be my uncle. What happened to my uncle back then? The answer that my uncle told me had something to do with the Classics Club then..."

I smiled, and I did not wonder why Chitanda wasn't smiling as well as I said, "Isn't this fine? You should be able to remember now."

Yet Chitanda's expressionless face gave way to one of gloominess as she struggled to get the words out softly,

"But, I just can't. Even though I was this close! I, am I really that bad at remembering things? What was it my uncle said to me? What happened to him 33 years ago?"

I could not tell whether her muffled voice came from her cold or her tears.

Chitanda...

I decided to speak, "Let's investigate it."

I didn't think I spoke coldly.

The anthology "Hyouka Volume 2" that I took back from Chitanda was written 32 years ago. On it was the strange name "Hyouka" which was given by Sekitani Jun, as well as the mentioning of a forgotten incident.

This was a great chance. For these clues were like lights that shone for us who were groping in the dark. In order for Chitanda to regain her past, I firmly believe we must not discard such clues.

That's why I said again, "Then we'll just need to investigate what happened 33 years ago."

"But,"

Chitanda drooped her shoulders.

"But it said they'd rather not remember it."

I was surprised at her timidity for such things.

"But you want to remember it, right?"

"Of course, but if we investigate further,"

She paused before continuing, "... If we investigate further, we might end up finding something unpleasant. There are things that are better forgotten, aren't there?"

"..."

That's because you're too kind, Chitanda.

"Even if it's happened 33 years ago?"

"Is that wrong?"

I shook my head.

"Yeah. After all, didn't it say here as well? 'Once the subjectiveness is taken away, this story will become a classic as it transcends all historical perspectives.'"

"..."

"In other words, there's an expiration date for that."

I made a smile. Though Chitanda didn't smile as well, she nodded gently.

"... OK."

And so.

Yes, and so, I chuckled within my heart as I remained smiling. Investigating shouldn't take up much effort. If the second volume mentions something about "last year", all we had to do was look in the first volume to find out what happened to Sekitani Jun. It should be finished in no time. Though I wouldn't say which was the easier option: the avoidance of the problem or the solving of the problem.

... I was naive to think like that. As Ibara was quietly fishing through the remaining volumes, she said indignantly,

"What the? There's no volume 1!"

In order to digest what I had just heard, it seemed I needed some time.

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ [Wikipedia](#)
2. ↑ A poular brand of notebooks in Japan - [Image](#), [Official Site](#)
3. ↑ TL Note - 狡兎死して走狗烹らる (Koutoshishi soukuniraru)  
Japanese idiom introduced straight from the same Chinese idiom, referring to victorious emperors ruthlessly eradicating their generals once they had served their purpose of vanquishing the enemy
4. ↑ Hyouka (氷菓) means "frozen treats" such as ice cream, popsicles, etc.

# 6 - The Old Days of the Glorious Classics Club

It was the end of July and Summer Vacation had begun. Today I was riding my bike along the road towards Kami High as usual. It would take 20 minutes to get there from my place by foot, though I have no idea how long it'll take by bike. I stopped to buy a can of black coffee from a vending machine while resting. I then followed the riverside and turned at the hospital before arriving in front of Kami High. And there I stood with an amazed look.

*Summer Vacation was supposed to have started already.*

Yet the sports ground was filled with prop equipment and students in their summer uniforms. I could hear music played by various wind instruments, electric guitars and bamboo flutes. Even though the Special Block was some distance from here, I could tell there were many students there as well. They were of course all here to prepare for the Kanya Festival. The energetic side of Kami High has only gotten more active now that Summer Vacation has started. Crowds of people were crawling around like a group of ants as though saying "Alright guys, the festival is coming up soon! Now that annoying classes are out of the way, let's give it our best!"

I gazed at these people overflowing with energy while noticing a person trotting towards me. It was Fukube Satoshi, dressed casually in short sleeved shirt and shorts, while carrying a sporty-looking mini-rucksack over his back.

"Hey,"

"Sorry, man. Kept you waiting?"

I was happily listening to the A Capella Club practicing their singing in the central courtyard, and Satoshi had to make me turn around with such a creepy voice. I contemplated turning my bike around and going home, but then I changed my mind and proceeded to walk towards him and acted as if I was about to kick him.

"Whoa, Houtarou! What's with the sudden ferocity?"

"You sure are one to talk! Have you no shame in not knowing when not to disturb the peace?"

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders.

It doesn't seem like he has any.

"Sorry man, the Handicraft Club meeting went into overtime."

"Just what on earth were you discussing anyway?"

"We're going to knit a Buddhist-like Mandala carpet for the Kanya Festival. But we've run into a few problems, so we had a contingency meeting just now."

Well, tough work you had there. Not just you, but Toogaito, or even the whole school for that matter.

"So, you got your notes ready?"

As I ask dryly, Satoshi merely bounced back the question to me.

"What about you? It's not something you're used to doing. You thought of something yet?"

I felt a bit embarrassed at having to answer that, so I said, "Well, sort of."

"Oh? Now that's rare. Normally you would try to find an excuse and deny such questions... Anyway, I'll go get my bike, so hang on a bit longer."

And so Satoshi insolently left me waiting while he trotted towards the bicycle parking lot.

As to why I was waiting for Satoshi out here when I ought to be sleeping like there's no tomorrow during such a precious Summer Vacation, we'll need to go back to a week ago, the day when we were so close to finding out the truth about Sekitani Jun, which should be written in the first volume of the club anthology "Hyouka", only to find out that that specific volume was missing. As we couldn't get anywhere without that first volume, I thought to myself that I was not going to go all out to pursue the answer. But it was already too late, for I had crossed the Rubicon without even realizing.

I knew it was pointless to dissuade Chitanda from this, so I proposed a compromise solution. If we're going to investigate the past, just the two of us was not going to be enough. After all, "Three's a crowd" as the saying goes. It may be a bit hard for her, but I told her that we had a better chance of solving this with Satoshi and Ibara's help.

Thereupon Chitanda nodded in agreement.

"I guess we have no choice then."

Even though she requested to keep it between ourselves during our discussion in the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich, I ended up letting her down. I could not tell if it was because Chitanda realized deeply that she would need all the support she could get, or because she no longer regarded the clue that appeared before as important anymore, or it could be possible that our lady here was simply whimsical; at any rate, she had called for an emergency meeting with the Classics Club the following day.

There, Chitanda repeated what she told me before and concluded, "I'm *very* curious as to what happened to my uncle 33 years ago."

Ibara accepted the challenge right away.

"The cover illustration interests me. If we can solve this and find out the story behind that, I could even use it as publishing material for the Manga Studies Club."

Satoshi followed, "The Fictional Heroic Tale to be solved by their juniors 33 years later, huh? I just happened to be researching into stuff from that period."

And approved with both hands raised. While I had no intention of speaking since I had no power of veto, I decided to say something anyway since we were at it.

"Since we're still deciding on what to write for our essay anthology, why don't we use Chitanda's story to help fill up the pages... um, I mean, killing two birds with one stone... sorry, I mean, write something meaningful for it?"

My energy-saving proposal, though quite forward-looking, was accepted unanimously. And so investigating the incident of the Kamiyama High School Classics Club 33 years ago became the Classics Club's priority.

Satoshi rode a mountain bike. As he was wearing shorts, sturdy muscles could be seen on his legs that didn't match his short stature. For a polyglot like him, the only sport that I knew he was interested in was cycling.

By the way, my bike was what you'd call a family wagon<sup>[1]</sup>, so there's not much to elaborate upon.

We rode along the river and away from the main street. Slowly the distance between houses was replaced by huge rice paddies. Stopping under the shade of some tobacco store to hide from the sun, I took a towel out of my bag to wipe off the sweat that's been constantly dripping out.

*Ahh, such a good sweat.*

Was not something I would ever say. Rather, I wonder why people have to move in order to get to their destination. "The information revolution has not yet succeeded. Comrades, you must carry on!" [2]

"Satoshi, are we there yet?"

Satoshi placed his handkerchief back in his pocket and replied, "Yup. We're pretty much there. According to your speed, of course."

He then smiled.

"You'll be surprised when you see their mansion. The Chitandas are one of the biggest farm owners in Kamiyama City."

Guess I'll be looking forward to it. I'd sure like to hear how they do their spring cleaning in such a big place. After wiping more sweat with my towel, I put my foot on the saddle and rode on.

Once we restarted, Satoshi took the lead and guided us. After crossing numerous traffic signals, we then came to a long straight road, where we rode parallel to each other. For some distance now there was nothing but farmland on both sides of the road.

As Satoshi spun his pedal, he began to hum joyfully. Smiling was his default expression, though he seemed particularly delighted today. I decided to ask him, "Satoshi,"

"Yeah?"

"Are you happy?"

Satoshi turned towards me and replied cheerfully, "Sure I am. Since I like cycling. Look at the blue skies! And the white clouds! No matter how dull they look, the joy of looking at them while riding at full speed is like..."

I quickly interrupted Satoshi's attempt at joking.

"I thought your high school life was average at best."

Suddenly looking sullen, Satoshi replied, "Oh... you mean the rose-coloured thing."

Great memory you have there, especially when we last spoke about it nearly three months ago. Satoshi slowed down somewhat and faced forward while saying, "You know, basically I think my high school life is pretty rose-coloured."

"No, it's more like shocking pink."

"Haha, that's good as well. If that's the case, then yours is grey."

"You already told me that."

As my voice was hardly raised, Satoshi didn't go whistling in glee.

"Did I? Don't take it the wrong way, I didn't mean it as an insult when I said the colour of your high school life is grey."

"..."

"For example, if my life is shocking pink, then no one can paint it rose. I won't let them."

I ridiculed his smiling face at once.

"Really? I thought it's already been painted."

"Of course it hasn't!"

Satoshi said with a surprisingly firm response and continued, "It hasn't, Houtarou. I'm already busy with the Student Council General Committee as well as the Handicraft Club, you think I'd say that? You gotta be kidding me. Whether it's helping to organize the timetable for the Kanya Festival, or knitting the Mandala carpet, I have enjoyed every moment of it. Otherwise, who would want to sacrifice a joyous bicycle ride during Sundays or Summer Vacation just to go to school anyway?"

"They won't?"

"There exist occasions where one has to lend their skill and presence for the sake of the greater society. But even so, you're not the sort who would budge an inch, right? For a grey-coloured person like you, if a flag-bearer declares that 'everyone is rose-coloured', you would wave your hand and say 'count me out.'"

After saying all that in one breath, he calmed down a bit and went on, "If I really wanted to offend you, I would have called you colourless."

Satoshi went silent after saying that. I ruminated at his response while getting my skin burned by the sun.

"..."

And made a sullen face.

"I'm not going to say I wanna like you or something like that, you know."

"Nah, that's not what I meant."

Satoshi raised his voice and laughed. He then said, "Look, Houtarou, we've reached the Chitanda residence!"

As befitting of its description, the Chitanda "mansion" was built in the middle of a vast paddy field. It was built in a Japanese-styled bungalow surrounded by hedges. The sound of water flowing suggested the presence of a pond in the garden, which was surrounded by well-trimmed pine trees. And in front of the large opened gate, there were people sprinkling water ritually.<sup>[3]</sup>

"How about that? Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

Satoshi said while puffing out his chest, even though I was no expert in Japanese architecture or Japanese gardening. While I had no idea how impressive this estate was, I did feel that it had an elegant and dignified feel to it.

As we were marveling at the estate, I had a look at my watch. We were just about on time... No, seems like we're a little bit late.

"Let's go, the girls are waiting for us."

"Ah, yes... By the way, Houtarou,"

"What now?"

"Aren't we supposed to wait for some servants to come out and greet us?"

I decided to ignore him. I stepped up to the front porch and rang the doorbell.

"... Coming~"

After waiting for a while, the door was opened by none other than Chitanda herself. Her summer cold seemed to have healed as she was now speaking in her usual voice once again. She let her long hair flow down her shoulders without tying it, and was dressed in a fitting bright green one-piece dress.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

I could hear Satoshi click his tongue, as though disappointed that there was no servant out to greet us.

After taking off our shoes at the concrete entrance, Chitanda led us through a wooden corridor.

"Where did you park your bicycles?"

"Where can we park them?"

"Anywhere is fine."

Then why did you ask?

Before long, we were led to a pair of paper sliding doors, and a cool breeze escaped upon opening them. As the ceiling was high, the room felt refreshingly cool. The room size was about... 15 square metres. That's huge.

"You're late."

Ibara had already arrived. It seemed like she had some business at school beforehand, as she was dressed in her school uniform. There was a dark brown table which gave a dull light reflection, and on top of it were many pieces of paper. Must be Ibara's notes. She's quite fired up for this.

"Please sit anywhere you like."

I sat opposite Ibara upon being prompted. As Chitanda took the host seat, the remaining seat was taken by Satoshi. It was rare to have someone carrying a rucksack sitting in a traditional Japanese-styled reception alcove. [4] Opening the rucksack, Satoshi took out numerous pieces of paper from it. I too opened my shoulder bag and took out my own notes. Ibara looked very ready as she toyed with her pen, while Chitanda stacked a pile of paper on the table.

"Now then..."

Chitanda spoke,

"Let us begin our investigative meeting."

We all bowed and took our greetings.

Naturally, the meeting was chaired by Chitanda, as she was the club president, after all.

"Let us confirm the agenda for today's meeting. It all started with a reminiscence of mine. Then, when we discovered the essay anthology 'Hyouka', I realized whatever happened with the Classics Club 33 years ago had something to do with this reminiscence. The purpose of this meeting is to speculate as to what happened 33 years ago. Furthermore, any facts that have been confirmed will be used as essay materials for this year's Classics Club essay anthology."

Though Ibara was mainly interested in the design of the cover illustration, she did not seem too dissatisfied with Chitanda's proclamation. Perhaps she realized it had something to do with the incident itself, or Chitanda had briefed her about it?

"During this past week, we have gone about collecting all kinds of material for research, and subsequently we shall report on our findings and speculate on the incident 33 years ago. We will then assemble our findings and deduce the most likely conclusion possible."

Huh? Was that what this meeting was about? Last I heard, Chitanda only told us to bring any material we could find. I didn't remember anything about deducing a conclusion... But since Satoshi and Ibara did not look the least bit surprised, then this must mean I wasn't paying attention. Damn, guess I'll have to get it over with somehow, but my stomach still felt queasy.

Without carrying any sort of agenda sheet with her, Chitanda looked at every one of us and smoothly explained, "We shall take turns reporting our findings, followed by questions from other members, establishing a hypothesis, and reviewing said hypothesis. Asking questions during reporting is forbidden... This is to prevent our words from getting jumbled, you see. Now then, let's hear the first report."

Hey, she's actually quite a good chairperson. Who knows, she may have the talent for these kinds of things.

No, she did tell me that she's the sort that would seek to understand the entire system, so it's not surprising to see her so well-versed in the rules of chairing meetings.

"Can we have the first report... huh?"

"Chi-chan, who's doing the first report anyway?"

"Umm, who should it be?"

... And then she says something strange like that. I do wonder whether she's easy to read or whether her organization is limited to her actions only. I spoke out to a flustered Chitanda.

"Anyone's fine. Why don't you start?"

Since it's usually the chairperson that starts doing the talking, no? It's not like Chitanda wasn't going to report anything. And since she did lay out the format for this reporting style, she may as well start first and get things rolling smoothly. She nodded and said, "Oh, you're right. Alright then, now... we shall report one by one in clockwise direction starting with me."

She began distributing her notes in the tray upon saying that.

A simple glance told me that this was the source of this investigation, the foreword of "Hyouka Volume 2". I see, so she's starting from the beginning, huh? Though I won't say this was her usual style. I once again read the paragraph that I saw before.

## Foreword

And so we have a Cultural Festival again this year.

It has been one year since Sekitani-sempai left us.

During this year, Sempai has fallen into legend and become a hero. As a result, the five day Cultural Festival will commence as usual.

However, as the legend spread, I went into deep thought. Would people ten years from now still remember the silent warrior and the kind hero? All Sempai has left behind is this anthology "Hyouka", for which he has provided the title.

As a sacrifice of the conflict, even Sempai's smile would end up along the flow of time into eternity.

No, perhaps it is better that we do not remember it. As it was not intended to be a heroic tale.

Once the subjectivity is taken away, this story will become a classic as it transcends all historical perspectives.

Will the day come when our stories become a classic for someone in the future?

October 13th, 1968 Kooriyama Youko

After clearing her throat, Chitanda began explaining, "This is taken from the essay anthology 'Hyouka'. In order to determine what sort of articles 'Hyouka' publishes yearly, one would have to read its foreword and find out what sort of topics it covered. Unfortunately, having said that, this paragraph was the only text that makes any mention of the incident 33 years ago. It may be that it's written in other places, but we do not have the first volume... Anyway, I have summarized the main points of this foreword in these notes here,"

She then distributed copies for the second page.

1. "Sempai" had departed. (From where?)
2. "Sempai" became a hero 33 years ago, and had become a legend by the following year
3. "Sempai" was a "silent warrior" and "kind hero"
4. "Sempai" named this anthology "Hyouka"
5. A conflict happened and sacrifices were made ("Sempai" = sacrifice?)

"Wow."

Now that sure was brief and straight to the point. I couldn't help but sigh in wonder, but thinking about it, while Chitanda was the manifestation of Curiosity itself, she was also an honours student. If she did not know how to summarize things, she would not be able to get such high grades.

After making sure everyone had read through the note, Chitanda continued with her explanation.

"First of all, this 'Sempai', in other words my uncle, had dropped out of Kamiyama High School. His final academic level was Junior High. I hope you're all following me."

While this was the first time I heard Chitanda mention Sekitani Jun had dropped out of Kamiyama High School, I wasn't particularly surprised. After all, it was not hard to guess from the opening sentence of the foreword: "since Sekitani-sempai left us".

But then, Chitanda probably doesn't know the reason why her uncle dropped out... No, she definitely doesn't know. If she did, she would have mentioned it already. Come to think of it, back at the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich, she did mention that the Sekitanis and Chitandas have become estranged.

"Second, the foreword makes a big issue out of how time has passed. The third point is interesting; besides mentioning 'Sempai' as kind and silent,

he's also described as a 'warrior' and 'hero'. What was he fighting for? The fifth point merely affirms that 'Sempai' fought in some conflict and became a hero, and was sacrificed as a result. As for the fourth point... while I'm curious about it, it's irrelevant to the current problem for now. This concludes my report, are there any questions?"

As it wasn't particularly offbeat, I didn't have much to ask.

While it would have been usual for our eccentric (i.e. Satoshi) to raise his hand during classes, in gatherings like these where there are few people and everyone knows each other, he saw no reason to do so. So instead, it was Ibara who started asking right away, "Umm, why was this line 'As it was not intended to be a heroic tale' not considered at all?"

Satoshi knew the answer of course. Though he wanted to speak, he held back his words and looked at me. He can be quite polite when the situation calls for it, not wanting to interrupt Chitanda as she answers.

On the other hand, as Chitanda was the one being asked, she replied right away, "That phrase was just a mental image, as different people may have different views as to what a heroic tale means."

"Besides,"

Upon waiting for Chitanda finished her explanation, Satoshi added right away, "It probably means that it was nothing as romantic as a heroic tale, but more of a dirty battle. So I think it's not just a mental image."

Somehow Ibara was convinced.

There were no other questions asked.

"Now, I will begin my hypothesis."

Chitanda sounded neither confident nor uncertain, but was just being her usual self. She did not hold any memos of the sort as she began, "My uncle seemed to have been involved in some conflict, and after that, he dropped out of school. I'm not entirely sure, but I think the conflict was what led to

him dropping out. There is one more point to consider besides the five points I mentioned: the opening sentence 'It has been one year since'.

"In other words, my uncle dropped out one year before the Kanya Festival, meaning during the previous Kanya Festival. By the way, I heard from a friend of mine who goes to Kamiyama Commercial High School that there was an incident in their Cultural Festival last year."

Satoshi said cheerfully, "The Rampage of the Cultural Festival, I think it was called. Stalls were threatened while sale proceedings disappeared."

Chitanda nodded.

"There's a saying that as long as there's a system, there would exist entities that would go against it. Whether it's the Cultural Festival, Sports Festival or the Graduation Ceremony, there would occasionally be people opposed to these so-called annual events. One more thing, please have a look at page 24 of the Kami High Student Handbook."

Despite her saying that, no one could take out their Student Handbook. This was a matter of fact, as who would actually bring such a thing with them all the time?

"... Is something wrong?"

"Unfortunately we left our handbooks at home. So what was written in there?"

"... Could it be that you don't carry the handbook with you at all times? Oh, never mind. Umm, here's what it says, 'Violent behaviour is strictly forbidden'. So here is my theory,"

Without changing the tone of her voice, Chitanda went on, "There was an unfortunate disturbance during the Kanya Festival that year, and it could be that my uncle responded to it with physical force. While he may have become a hero, he had to carry the responsibility of resorting to violence. The subsequent tragic outcome resulted in his underclassmen writing a eulogy for his departure."

... Hmm...

Satoshi and I both spoke simultaneously.

"Nope, rejected."

"Sorry, Chitanda."

Ibara then turned, not to Chitanda but to us, wondering just what on earth we were thinking.

"Is the theory wrong? Can you please tell me your reason why?"

Chitanda spoke quietly and looked at me with a serious expression. I merely shrugged my shoulders and replied, "You said there exist people who go against the system and cause a rampage in the Cultural Festival. But this would have required the stalls to have quite high sales proceeds in order to attract anyone to even steal from them. Besides, do you remember what I said when you suggested we publish an essay anthology?"

Chitanda spun her eyes around slowly.

"You said it's too labour intensive."

"No, not that. Something else."

"Something else? Umm... You also said three authors is a bit too much, but we now have four."

... Should I be complimenting her on her amazing memory? As if I would. I recognize her ability to remember this stuff, but Chitanda, technically speaking, when I said that there were still only three members.

"What else?"

"... You mentioned alternatives to publishing things, like,"

At last she's getting to the point. She placed her palms together before her chest and recalled, "Setting up an exhibition booth, and then I said,"

"You said exhibition booths are traditionally forbidden. I remember that as well. If that's the case, then there'd be no place for any money to be made in the Kanya Festival. You think people could find something valuable to steal at such an event?"

As though not convinced with such an argument, Chitanda tilted her head intimately and said, "But there is a possibility."

"What is it?"

"While it may have no monetary value, I believe such there is value in other areas."

Ugh.

... Well, she does have a point. If she puts it that way, there's nothing I can say.

Satoshi laughed.

"You're so hopeless, Houtarou. You can't convince Chitanda-san like that."

"Really? Then what have you come up with?"

"Something I know won't get rebutted at least."

Satoshi then pretended to clear his throat and began, "For every system there exists a group of people who opposes it'; that's an interesting way of putting it, Chitanda-san. It is most probably true. Yet the form of resistance is dependent on the fashion of the times as well.

"While it's true that there are occasions where incidents have occurred during Cultural Festivals, most of the time the perpetrators were acting for the purpose of materialistic gain. But that is not to say that there are no

disturbances in which the motive is not materialistic. You have to remember this was 33 years ago, so to suggest material gain as a motive for the disturbance was well-nigh impossible."

Fashion of the times? As in style of resistance?

What's he trying to say? I could sense something up his sleeve. So too did Ibara and Chitanda, who looked at Satoshi in puzzlement.

"... Why's that?"

Ibara prompted Satoshi to continue as he was assuming an air of importance while saying nothing. He nodded satisfactorily and said, "You probably won't get it if I say 33 years ago, but what if I use the term '1960s'?"

Satoshi looked pretty triumphant. Normally I wouldn't go about wasting so much energy just to compete with him in acquiring such knowledge, but it just feels depressing to see him in such a good mood as he boasts about it. Unfortunately, I was not familiar with history.

"How about it, Mayaka? You have any idea now?"

Ibara probably doesn't have a clue either. She made a pose of giving up while gripping her fists together.

"Sorry Fuku-chan, I can't think of anything."

"Really? How about the National Diet Building in Tokyo? ... Still want more hints? Does placards and demonstration strike any keys? ... I'm talking about the student movement here."

"Huh?"

We looked on in bewilderment.

While I was thinking what kind of joke was he pulling, Satoshi didn't seem the least bit depressed. So I quipped in, "Satoshi, why are we suddenly having a lecture on Modern Japanese History? If you want to have a quiz show with us we can do it after we deal with this problem."

Yet Satoshi maintained a serious expression and said, "Well, I *am* dealing with the problem. Listen up, according to Chitanda-san's theory, the sort of campus violence she mentioned was quite commonplace during the 1960s. It was a time where conflicts were in abundance for pro-establishment or anti-establishment movements, so someone may have used that as an outlet and mimicked their actions. This was not a mere boom."

"... Don't say it as though you've seen it yourself."

"Like I said, I've been researching this period for some time now."

Satoshi gave me his usual invincible-looking smile.

Hmm, even without Satoshi's brief Modern History lesson, I more or less figured it out. It was not out of place for some sort of incident to occur during the Cultural Festival 33 years ago. Though I have no way of finding out whether it's true without some sort of investigative ability (not that I care), but leaving Satoshi's jokes aside, such a theory was not impossible.

"Hmm, I see... It's true that I haven't taken into consideration contemporary events..."

Chitanda seemed to have been shaken by Satoshi's attacks on her weak points. Her theory now stood like a candle in the wind as a result.

That said, Ibara spoke up enthusiastically in support of Chitanda, "Excuse me, Chi-chan,"

"... What seems to be the matter?"

"I'm afraid Chi-chan's theory won't stand once I report what I find. I'm next, so if possible I'll continue where you left off..."

To be honest, I was a bit pissed. Why you Ibara, why'd you have to speak up unnecessarily? Yet Chitanda smiled sweetly and said, "No, my theory was found to be unsuitable after review, after all."

A respectable attitude.

"Anyway, I shall withdraw my hypothesis for now. Let us now hear from Ibara-san, is that fine with everyone here?"

No one spoke against that. It was wise to have Chitanda as our top batter. As Chitanda discarded her own theory, it was now Ibara's turn to insist that such a theory was correct. Being a prudent person, Ibara would probably speak in an easy to understand manner.

"Well then, please start, Ibara-san."

The copies that Ibara handed out to us, how should I say this, they were written in a completely different style that was easy to comprehend. The fonts and typography looked smug, while the words were hard to read with their lack of curves. On the B5 paper were written the following lines:

In other words, we, the Masses, are able to carry on with our independent and Anti-Bureaucratic activities without obstruction. Though this was by no means a succumb to violence.

Despite the Great Strife that occurred last June, thanks to the Classics Club president Sekitani Jun's heroic support of our bold pragmatism, the sight of Powers That Be making a fool out of themselves as their calculations backfired remained fresh in our memories.

"This was one of the Manga Studies Club's old anthologies. It's titled 'Unity and Salutations Volume 1', though they've only published 2 volumes in total. Like Chi-chan's book, this was also published 32 years ago. I was thinking that if 'Hyouka' made a mention of this incident, then I could find

something by doing a search in the library. As expected, there aren't many clubs that lasted for more than 30-40 years. At first I thought the Manga Studies Club couldn't possibly have existed back then, yet I just happened to stumble upon this... Amazing, isn't it?"

I had no idea whether she meant the discovery of this anthology was amazing or that the anthology itself was amazing. Unity and Salutations... was that the kind of titles they used back then? It somehow sounded suspicious. And the style of prose that they used back then! This sounded more like what the Classics Club would be using instead.

On the other hand, it was clear why Chitanda's theory was overturned. Simply put, the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival is held every October, yet this passage mentions the incident happening in June. I see, so that's why the theory's rejected.

Ibara took out a college-style memo notebook from her uniform pocket and continued, "Sorry, I haven't written any summaries the way Chi-chan did, so I'll just say them out loud. Firstly, 'we, the Masses' has been accused of being anti-establishment. There was a 'streef' that happened in June the previous year. They were assisted by Sekitani Jun, and resorted to some sort of pragmatism thanks to that. This caused troubles for the Powers That Be. The rest of the passage may be interesting, but they don't seem to have anything else relevant about the incident."

I had no objection to her speech, but what on earth is a 'streef' anyway? I browsed through my own vocabulary in my head and could find nothing. Not that my vocabulary was particularly huge to begin with.

As I was busy wondering what 'streef' meant, Chitanda continued with the meeting, "Is that all for your report?"

"Yes."

"Now then, any questions?"

I instantly asked right away, "What does 'streef' mean?"

Satoshi then asked me soon after that, "What's a 'streef anyway?'"

Why you, I thought you were supposed to know. He then took the copy of my "Unity and Salutations" and pointed the word out to me.

"She meant this, 'strife'."

So he does know what it means. Without looking at the copy I held, he continued without delay, "That should be read as 'sTRYfe', as in armed strife, a bitter conflict."

Yet Satoshi didn't seem to have taught me anything. While he was looking at me, he sounded more like he was harshly criticizing me for mispronouncing that word, yet I realized he was using me as a foil to correct Ibara as well. Whether he was skillful or not in doing it, Satoshi can be quite considerate. Though I had no intention to help out, I still persisted, "Well, though I only have 15 years worth of vocabulary, I haven't seen such a word used before."

"Of course. Normally the words 'conflict' and 'argument' would have been used, yet 'strife' seemed to be a popular word back then. We still see such words being used nowadays, but mostly by Yakuzas."

I see, now that he mentions it... words like "going" to represent "getting someone whacked". Its use sounds old and elegant, yet not quite. [5]

Satoshi then cleared his throat loudly and added, "... But this anthology, it feels more like an imitation."

Ibara reacted at once with riled voice, "What do you mean, 'imitation'?"

Upon being questioned like that, Satoshi moaned quietly. He was normally confident with his bluffs, yet it was rare to see him look so troubled like that as he replied meekly, "No, I'm not saying your material is fake,"

"Of course it isn't! Umm, how should I put this? Basically speaking, the author of this passage didn't take part in any action whatsoever. He's the sort that would see some spectacular college sports game and would write about

how impressed he was about it, and that was how this was written. But it's not a fake, it's..."

I asked, "So, what was that about?"

"Ah, nothing, just my imagination. Sorry about that Chitanda-san, may we continue?"

The chairperson nodded and everyone agreed.

"Now then, are there any other questions?"

It seemed no one had anything else to ask. As she was about to announce her theory, Ibara looked slightly nervous as she frantically searched through her notes.

"Umm, right, here's my hypothesis. Though this would reject Chi-chan's theory, you will all understand when you first hear this."

We all remained silent in agreement. Since June and October were just way too far apart.

"Anyway, the author mentioned how the Pragmatists caused the plans of the Powers That Be to backfire. The result was the Classics Club President dropping out as mentioned in 'Hyouka'.

"Now, what was this pragmatic action that was done that warranted his dropping out? ... My view is the same as Chi-chan here, in other words, violence. If this was recent, then it might have involved something like the breaking of glass, but Fuku-chan would probably have something to say about that. The victims would be... the Powers That Be. As for the anti-establishment, well that's something that I hear often that's opposed to the government, so something like that. The rest is simple, the Classics Club president led them and confronted the teachers, and then..."

She held her fists tightly and mimicked a punch.

"*Pow* Whacked them hard. Though we don't know whether they were assaulted or not, they probably did something similar. Of course, it's not

like they wanted to do this. The first paragraph which I highlighted is important, basically what it wants to emphasize is their independence. For some reason 33 years ago, that independence was threatened, and in order to defend it, the Classics Club president had no choice but to counter with resistance."

Ibara finished by closing her notebook and looked at everyone present.

"Hmm... This sounds frustrating."

The chairperson, who was supposed to digest what she just heard, spoke her thoughts out loud. I nodded and agreed.

"Frustrating? What is?"

Chitanda answered, "Ibara-san, your main point revolves around how the teachers had threatened the students' way of life, and led them to resort to violence to resist such a threat, right?"

Ibara thought for a while before replying, "Yeah, that's right."

"However, how should I put it, while I understand some parts, overall I don't quite understand."

While I understand some of what you say, overall I don't quite understand what you've just said either. Still, it was not entirely incomprehensible. She basically meant Ibara's theory wasn't very persuasive. I added to Chitanda's response, "Your theory is way too abstract. Besides, any further and you would simply be scanning the passage."

"You're right. It is indeed like that, but..."

Though she admitted as much, Ibara didn't completely retreat.

"Wait, you mean there's a contradiction?"

It seemed she wanted to defend her theory more than Chitanda did.

Unfortunately, I did notice a contradiction.

"Yup."

I said with an upright sitting posture. It had nothing to do with the tense atmosphere of rebutting other people, it's just that my feet were getting numb, that's all.

"To put it simply, you yourself have rejected Chitanda's theory that instead of the Cultural Festival in October, the incident happened in June. However, if we're to believe both 'Hyouka' and the 'Unity and Salutations', then the incident would have happened in June, while the dropping out would have occurred during the Cultural Festival in October. But Chitanda's theory makes no mention of that. And don't you find it strange that one would wait four months after getting involved in violent behaviour to drop out?"

It would be a different story if his case was pending appeal during this time, I added in my mind.

"But, that is," Ibara rebutted, even though she seemed to have understood.

"It could be that 'Hyouka' got it wrong. The 'Unity and Salutations' clearly mentions the month of June, whereas 'Hyouka' merely says 'It has been one year since'. The incident happened in June, followed by the dropping out in the same month, while the Cultural Festival is in October. It doesn't sound too unreasonable, does it?"

A four month gap, huh? This does sound like one of Ibara's far-fetched arguments...

As I was hesitating, Chitanda and Satoshi gave their judgment on the theory respectively.

"I believe we cannot ignore such a long time interval."

"Me too. 'Cultural Festival' was mentioned just before the 'one year since' sentence, after all, so I think the dropping out happened in October."

Upon my silent nodding, the other two expressed their agreement.

Three against one. Ibara gave a displeased look.

"Ugh-, you guys are so picky with your details."

Though that cute reaction didn't exactly fit her style, it did help relieve the tense atmosphere a bit. Satoshi tried to smooth things over by saying in a casual manner, "But at least the way you approached it was good, I think."

Chitanda also broke her extremely serious look and smiled in agreement.

"Indeed. Reviews need not be too radical."

I think so as well. How do I say this, it felt like looking at a map in the middle of a foggy maze, or being frustrated because something did not go as planned. If only 'Hyouka' and 'Unity and Salutations' were considered, then Ibara's theory probably wouldn't feel so limited. All that was left now was Satoshi's data and me wrapping things up. And if any fatal contradictions occurred, all I had to do was think of a solution before my turn was up.

Come to think of it, what were my notes about anyway? All I knew was that we were supposed to pool the notes together, but I haven't gone around to actually reading mine in earnest.

"Well, this ends my turn, right?"

Chitanda nodded at Ibara's question.

Following the clockwise order, next would be Satoshi. At Chitanda's prompting, Satoshi began distributing his notes. He then stopped suddenly and said cheerfully, "Ah yes, I forgot to mention. Some of my notes disprove Mayaka's hypothesis."

The copies we received were a copy of the "Kami High Monthly". That reminds me, Toogaito said that they're approaching their 400th issue already. If they publish ten issues per year on average, then that means they've been around for nearly 40 years. I should have realized they would of course have a back issue from 33 years ago... One of the articles was highlighted with a circle around it.

Only a small section of the copy was relevant to what we were discussing, but that was clearly enough to disprove Ibara's theory. Such was the basis of Satoshi's confidence when he said that. Perhaps he was trying to maintain consistency with the other speakers... Taking a quick glance at Ibara, she revealed a rather complicated expression that was neither happy nor unhappy. That was to be expected, as Satoshi started his speech by commenting on her theory and not on Chitanda's. Though Satoshi was probably just imitating Ibara when he said his notes disproved the previous speaker's hypothesis. Naturally, it was one of his usual jokes.

▼ Following the disturbances in the Special Purposes Block last week, which left a stain on the honour and pride of the arts-related clubs of Kamiyama High School, two of the perpetrators have been suspended, with five others given serious warnings. ▼ Of course, there is honour even amongst thieves. For the Film Studies Club said they were not going to just sit around and accept this harsh punishment, while the Photography Club insisted that they were 100% right all along. Though this paper would not go so far as to proclaim that. ▼ For the problem remains that this conflict was resolved with fists. Ignoring the efforts taken to resolve this through dialogue, certain people of extremist thought have decided to take the easy yet pathetic option of violence. ▼ We urge the third-year members of the Film Studies Club to repent for their senseless beating of Sachimura Yukiko-san (New Theatre Club, Class 1-D), who was acting as mediator during the negotiations. Currently Sachimura-san is being hospitalized as we publish this. ▼ The legendary movements of two years ago would not have resorted to such violence. Even though we are all infuriated by what has happened lately, we must not allow this to shatter our solidarity, and we

must persevere with our civil disobedience. ▼ Only then can we live on knowing that we have lived up to our tradition and honour.

Satoshi began to explain with a calm face,

"My findings come from this back issue of the 'Kami High Monthly'. I stumbled upon this hibernating in the library archives, so I decided to read it in order to kill some time after school. However, it makes no direct mention of the incident 33 years ago, and this is all that it said concerning that event. To be honest, I think we're going in circles with this piece here. Though this is called a back issue, only half is readable as it's poorly preserved. It's got all sorts of notes written all over it in felt tip marker, guess it can't be helped. Anyway, here are the main points:"

- The incident was not resolved by violence
- The incident affected the entire school
- In the midst of the incident, "we" became united
- Civil disobedience was observed throughout the incident

"The first and last points may be contradictory, but they're related to the same thing. Since the incident wasn't resolved by violence, this is where Mayaka's theory needs amending. The middle two points are nearly identical. While it's not entirely certain whether the 'we' here represents the entire school, it's safe to assume that this doesn't really matter too much."

Really...?

I wasn't fully satisfied with that explanation. As though sensing that, Satoshi added, "Put it this way. If 'we' means the entire school, then naturally the entire student body is involved. If it doesn't, it still means 'we' decided to back up whoever is concerned. Am I right?"

I see.

"That wraps up my report. Any questions?"

Silence followed. Chitanda asked again just to be safe, "... Are there any questions?"

Oh yeah. As though just thinking of something, I raised my hand.

"Satoshi, this 'legendary movement' mentioned here, is it entirely different to the incident we're investigating? It feels suspicious just reading this copy alone."

I was merely asking in order to confirm something. As I had anticipated, Satoshi shook his head.

"Dunno. There's no evidence that says whether that's the incident we're looking for."

"Dunno, you say..."

Though he sounded calm, his response was reckless. Though his knowledge was deep and plentiful, he can be rather indifferent as to how he used it...

"Then your information is pretty much useless."

"Really, thought so."

"What do you mean thought so!?"

Ibara interrupted, "There's evidence to support that, after all."

"Really?"

"The incident that we're looking into caused quite an uproar, right? We knew that from the anthologies of two clubs. This incident and the 'legendary movement' are different events, since even if they are similar, one of them is clearly labelled 'legendary' here, right?"

Satoshi clapped his palms together.

"Ah, that's right. So that's why it says that. You're amazing, Mayaka."

Nope, I don't think you even gave thought to that before. I see, what Ibara said does make sense. If we cannot ascertain whether two objects are the same, then we'll just assume that they're different to begin with, provided the assumption is logical as Ibara has done. Besides, I wouldn't waste my energy going through so much trouble just to look for evidence. I waved my hand to gesture that I accepted the explanation.

There were no other questions asked.

"Now then, let's hear your hypothesis,"

However, Satoshi smiled bitterly upon being asked.

"Umm, hypothesis, huh?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Chitanda-san, I don't mean to disrupt the order of the meeting, but I can't seem to make any theory whatsoever. Though I did say we'll do our own research, all I've found is this anthology... The best I could do is to amend Ibara's theory. After all,"

I knew Satoshi was now going to bring out one of his mottos: *Conclusions cannot...*

"Conclusions cannot be made from databases alone."

In the end, Satoshi didn't come up with any theories. Guess it can't be helped, not that I had much expectations from him anyway.

Though the problem now lied with me. Darn, I now regret not having read my research materials. I did have a theory in mind already, so I ignored the wavering in my heart and proceeded with the meeting.

"Now then, Oreki-san, you may start anytime."

I nodded and handed out the copies, while taking a quick glance at my own copy as I did so. Like Satoshi's material, my copy itself did not contain much that was of much relevance to the incident. It was nothing but a listing of dry facts; that was the information that I researched.

## 1967

### Events in Japan and the World

- Japan's Gross National Product exceeds 45 trillion yen to become the 3rd largest economy in the capitalist world. By 1968, it is expected to leapfrog West Germany to 2nd place.
- Lightning strikes on a group of Fukashi High School students from Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture, while they were hiking at Mt Nishiho, leaving 11 dead.<sup>[6]</sup>
- Student activism in Waseda University escalates with students participating in massive strikes<sup>[7]</sup>

### Events in Kamiyama High School

- April: In a speech by Principal Eida Tasuku: "We must not allow ourselves to be complacent and become a mere backwater school. The

nurture of talent should be what education is all about. Secondary education should be about nurturing talents to prepare for tertiary education." A change in how the school is governed is alluded.

- June 13th: "Cultural Festival Consideration Committee" held after lessons.
- July: Observation tour in America. (Led by Manninbashi-sensei)
- October 13th-17th: Cultural Festival.
- October 31st: Sports Festival.
- November 15th-18th: 2nd Year Field Trip - Takamatsu, Miyajima and Akiyoshidai.
- December 2nd: In light of recent consecutive traffic accidents, students are assembled in order to raise awareness of traffic safety.
- January 12th: Sports Equipment Storage Room partially damaged due to heavy snow.
- January 23rd-24th: 1st Year Skiing Course.

"Houtarou, could this be..."

I replied with a sour expression, "Yup, recorded from 'Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years'. It is as you have seen..."

Having seen how the other three have presented their materials, if I were to imitate them, I would have to summarize my findings.

.....

... But there's hardly anything for me to summarize.

It's not like I brought this material with much thought anyway. Looking at it another way, this material simply didn't have much meaning to it.

The next few moments were spent with me at a loss for what to do next. Since this was only a request from a female student, as well as a club

assignment, I wasn't going to get stiff because of it. It's more my style to say "Sorry guys, I can't think of anything," and let Chitanda and Ibara take care of the rest.

But even this option was a bit too grey-coloured for me.

"Excuse me. Before I go on, I need to go to the bathroom first."

Chitanda couldn't help but giggle.

"Yes, of course."

"You nervous?" Satoshi said as though trying to calm me, but I had no intention of letting him do so. Chitanda stood up and showed me the way. As I followed her, I casually placed my copy into my pocket.

I began to think as I was led to the wide bathroom.

Four copies of paper. Four pieces of material.

And then, the debating that would follow.

What is the answer that links them all? What happened 33 years ago?

I went into thinking...

And finally came to a conclusion.

"Sorry guys, as I was thinking in a different direction, I didn't bother coming up with a hypothesis. So can I just jump straight to the conclusion since I'm the last one to speak?"

Upon hearing my suggestion, Satoshi smiled mischievously.

"Houtarou, you have something in mind?"

"Stop reading my mind... Anyway, I'll explain briefly."

"I,"

Chitanda took a breath before continuing, "I think that won't be enough. If there's anyone that can come up with a hypothesis without any contradictions, it is you, Oreki-san,"

.....

W, well, I dunno about that.

"Let us hear your theory, Oreki-san."

"Yeah, c'mon. Tell us already."

"I'm quite looking forward to it, after all we've discussed."

They're already deciding on their own... While I'm not exactly under pressure, it's quite difficult to speak with so many people staring at me. Now then, where do I start? I thought for a while and said, "Alright, I'll go with the good old 5W1H method. When, where, who, why, how and what... I've got them all listed, right?"

Chitanda nodded.

"Good. Anyway, first, 'when'. We know it happened 33 years ago, but we don't know whether it's June or October. If the 'Unity and Salutations' is right, then it's June, while based on the description on 'Hyouka', it feels more like October. However, as both sources are quite reliable, I would say the incident occurred in June while 'Sempai's' dropping out happened in October."

Looking disgruntled, Ibara raised her brows, as it was just a while ago that I pointed out the contradictions in her theory. I ignored her and continued,

"Next, 'where'. There's no problem answering that: At Kamiyama High School. 'Who', according to the 'Unity and Salutations', we know the main character is Sekitani Jun, the Classics Club president. Allow me to extend this a bit here, the main character is actually the entire student body, Sekitani is just one of the many protagonists."

While I was quite sure there were no mistakes so far, my eyes would occasionally glance down at my notes as I spoke. So far so good, now for the main course.

"'Why'. If the entire student body were up in arms, then their adversary would naturally be the teaching staff. To quote from Ibara, their 'independence was threatened'.

"And the cause for the incident was the Cultural Festival itself."

As I laid down my conclusion, I could feel everyone looking at me with questioning eyes. I felt like I might have a heart attack at any moment.

"... Was that mentioned somewhere?"

"Though it did mention about a dropping out during the Cultural Festival, it doesn't say how the festival itself has anything to do with it."

I shook my head.

"No, it has everything to do with it. My conclusion comes from a conversation the students had with the teaching staff, which resulted in the Cultural Festival being carried out in October as usual."

Satoshi stared at the 'Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years' and commented, "You mean this 'Cultural Festival Consideration Committee' thing, right? But why do you think this was the cause of the incident? Even without that thing, wouldn't they still have gone on with the annual Cultural Festival?"

"No, you're mistaken. Since I took the trouble of copying from this 'Walking Together for 50 Years', have a closer look."

Besides Satoshi, Chitanda and Ibara too took a glance, and then, "Each event is marked by either a circle or square!"

"... I get it! The squares indicate regular events, while the circles mark specific events for that year!"

"You're not too far off. You'd probably find such events that don't grind well with the regular events for other years as well."

I then switched the copy of 'Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years' to that of 'Hyouka' and went on, "Why was there a committee for the consideration of the Cultural Festival 33 years ago? This was in response to the students' strong demands concerning the event itself. Why would the students demand that such a committee be set up? The hint can be found in 'Hyouka',"

I took a ball pen and underlined a few lines.

"Here, 'During this year, Sempai has fallen into legend and become a hero. As a result, the five day Cultural Festival will commence as usual.' Don't you find something strange with this line?"

As nobody said anything, I continued, "We knew the Cultural Festival would commence as usual, yet why would the author add something so trivial? This means our attention should not be on 'commence as usual', but on the words 'five days'."

"... What are you talking about? I don't get it. I don't quite follow what you're trying to say, Oreki. What about those words anyway?"

"I'm saying the Hero's achievement is that the Cultural Festival gets to be held for five days. Let us return to the 'Walking Together for 50 Years' and observe the Principal's speech in April. If you just read it literally, its simply a message encouraging students to focus on their academic studies. However, I'd like you to read between the lines.

"Our school's cultural festival is held during weekdays. For five full days. This is particularly long compared to other schools. Hence the Cultural

Festival became a symbol of our school's club activities. What if the Principal was hinting at the students to focus more on their studies over their club activities... This would mean that the Cultural Festival would be shortened. But the students were having none of it, hence they were 'infuriated' by it. That is the cause of the incident - the 'why'."

I sighed and noticed I was getting thirsty. I felt like getting a cup of barley tea... But before I finish my speech, I'll just have to make do with my saliva and continue.

"Now, 'how'. 'Thanks to the Classics Club president Sekitani Jun's heroic support', the students carried out some 'bold pragmatism'. Finally, 'what'. Being incensed by the school's decision, the students decided on a policy of 'civil disobedience' while refraining from violence. The result was that the Cultural Festival Consideration Committee was held and the Cultural Festival retains its five day duration. In a strict sense, there was no violence involved that led to such an outcome. The same cannot be said for the wider context though. I'm not entirely sure, but massive non-violent protests would involve something like... hunger strikes, demonstrations and skipping classes. I'm sure Satoshi's more familiar with this subject. In the end, due to mounting student pressure, the school was forced to relent on their decision to shorten the Cultural Festival. Yet the price was for the 'Hero' Sekitani Jun to leave school."

I added one more thing.

"As for why there's a time gap between the incident and the dropping out, I would guess that as Sekitani Jun was a central figure in the student movement in June, if he dropped out then, it would just have created a bigger uproar. So his dropping out was delayed until everyone's passion had cooled down after the Cultural Festival."

I took a small breath as I finished my explanation. *Phew*. I could sense the summer heat returning.

This pretty much ends my explanation.

Someone clapped his hands indifferently. It was Satoshi.

"Wow, that sure was amazing, Houtarou. Now I see."

Ibara began to silently collect her notes. While she looked rather displeased, that was just her usual self.

And as for Chitanda.

Like an excited kid that had just seen a circus performance, our lady opened her mouth and said, "That was wonderful, Oreki-san! You have managed to come up with such a conclusion with just the materials we have here... I was right to have requested your help!"

Even I would feel good being praised. I could sense myself getting embarrassed.

Looks like we've solved Chitanda's problem and created some materials to write for our own anthology now. Ever since meeting Chitanda at the end of April, all this bothersome stuff would finally come to an end.

As chairperson, Chitanda had to continue her role and asked, "Are there any further questions?"

As there were none, Chitanda gave a big nod and concluded, "Then we shall publish our essay anthology this year based on Oreki-san's conclusions. The details will be discussed on another day. For now this meeting is adjourned... Thanks for all the hard work."

We all said our farewells.

Chitanda led me to the entrance as I left. From her smile, I could tell how satisfied she was with how things went today.

"I am deeply grateful."

She said and bowed deeply.

"It's not me alone,"

I said and put on my shoes. Satoshi, who had gone outside before me, gestured to me to hurry up. As I'm not familiar with the way here, I had no choice but to let Satoshi lead me out.

"Well then, we shall meet again at school,"

"Yeah, I'm off..."

I waved my hand to bid farewell to the Chitanda residence.

As I'd already left, naturally I had no idea what Chitanda was doing after that.

After I departed, she stood by her entrance with an expression as though she had just realized something, and so I did not know what she had whispered to herself then.

She probably said something along the lines of,

"But... why did I end up crying that day?"

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ Original term is "mamachari" (ママチャリ), a Japanese-term to refer to bikes mounted with a huge basket in front. The name comes from them generally being used by mothers (mama) to carry their babies around in the basket (chari - a slang for bike). [Link](#)
2. ↑ Probably referring to a quote by Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen
3. ↑ [Uchimizu](#)
4. ↑ [Japanese alcove](#)
5. ↑ TL Note: The pronunciation mistake is obviously all in Japanese and so terms are translated accordingly
6. ↑ TL: Mt Nishiho is part of the [Hida Mountains](#) in Nagano Prefecture. Though only the [Japanese Wikipedia entry](#) is available for Mt Nishiho itself. As well as the said [lightning disaster](#)
7. ↑ TL: All Wikipedia entries concerning Japanese student movement in the 1960s are in Japanese. Googling "Japan student movement" may yield more English results.

## 7 - The Truth of the Historic Classics Club

In the evening after a lengthy debate, I leisurely pedaled my bike in the farmlands drenched by the orange sunset, and struggled to listen to Satoshi's soft voice.

"To be honest I'm quite surprised, Houtarou. Indeed I'm surprised by what you said there. If you're right, then our Kanya Festival owes its existence to the expense of one person's high school life. However, I'm even more surprised that you're able to deduce all that."

"You're doubting my ability?"

I replied jokingly, yet for once Satoshi didn't smile when he answered, "You've been solving riddles ever since enrolling at Kami High. During our first meeting with Chitanda-san, or the case of the popular book that nobody reads, as well as the one with the Wall Newspaper Club president."

"They just happened by chance."

"Yet the results mean that didn't matter. Yet the problem is why would someone like you who finds solving riddles to be bothersome end up solving them? The answer is simple when you think about it. You're doing it for Chitanda-san."

I turned my head, and wondered whether that was true.

"Doing it for Chitanda" wasn't exactly right, I think I would accept it if the reason was worded as "it's all Chitanda's fault". I remember Satoshi saying something this aptly as well before, that I wouldn't take action unless

someone asks me to do so. While she didn't ask me directly, it's true that I ended up doing something bothersome for her, but...

"Today's different."

Yeah, today's different.

"You can be good at drawing attention to yourself as well, you know? Today, the job of solving the riddle was supposed to be done equally between the four of us. You could have chosen to run away saying you didn't get any of it, and none of us would have said anything. Yet why did you still seek out the answer yourself under the pretext of going to the bathroom?"

The sun continued to set, and I could feel the breeze of the wind. I moved my eyes away from Satoshi's gaze and looked forward.

"Wasn't it because you were doing it for Chitanda-san?"

Satoshi's question was quite right. Normally, I wouldn't have bothered to solve such a puzzle. I guess I was extremely active today.

Yes... that has to be it.

Why did I act as I did today? I think I more or less understood the reason, and it had almost nothing to do with Chitanda. However, understanding something myself was different from getting someone else to understand it as well. Without refining my knowledge and vocabulary base, I was not able to convey my thoughts to others, not even to a telepath like Satoshi.

No, rather than that, I think it's because I've known Satoshi for so long that explaining becomes difficult. Since my actions and motives today were a departure from my usual modus operandi.

Still, I had no obligation to explain myself to him. I could have said it had nothing to do with him. Yet I felt like answering Satoshi, as well as organizing my thoughts for my own sake. So after a long silence, I gave my answer after choosing my words.

"... I guess, I'm just tired of having a grey-coloured life."

"?"

"Ever since meeting Chitanda, my energy efficiency levels have fallen to their lowest levels. She would prepare making essay anthologies as a club president, take exams as a student, and seek out her past as a human being. That's quite tiring for me. You and Ibara are the same, spending time on all sorts of worthless endeavors."

"Well... I guess."

"But you know, sometimes I do think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence."

I stopped speaking right there, as I realized I could have phrased that in a better way. Yet I couldn't think of anything better than that, and so I continued, "Whenever I look at you guys, I can't bring myself to calm down. I want to stay calm, yet I don't find anything interesting in that."

"....."

"So at the very least, I wanted to, how'd you put it, solve the riddle. I wanted to have a taste of your way of life."

I shut my mouth after that. Amidst the sound of the pedals and the breeze, Satoshi said nothing. Satoshi was normally talkative, yet there were times when he couldn't say anything, and I was quite mindful of that, as I wanted him to say something. I'll just think of an excuse later, for now, I couldn't stand this silence any longer.

"Well, say something,"

I could sense Satoshi smiling even though I couldn't see it as he spoke at last.

"I think..."

"Hmm?"

"I think you're actually envious of those with a rose-coloured life."

I replied without thinking, "Maybe."

Staring at the ceiling in my own room, it was white as usual.

I ruminated on what Satoshi said earlier.

Even I liked hearing fun stuff, which includes silly jokes and popular music. Even though I got spun around by Chitanda, it was still a good way to kill time.

However, with all due respect to all comedic acts out there, what if I become obsessed with these things regardless of time and effort... Would it have been much more entertaining for me? Would it have been worthwhile despite being detrimental to my energy efficiency?

For example, Chitanda's pursuit of her past.

And more importantly, how the "Hero" Sekitani Jun ended up protecting the Kanya Festival 33 years ago, according to my deductions.

My vision just couldn't focus on a single spot. It's as I thought, whenever I think about this, I just couldn't remain calm. I turned my eyes from the ceiling to the floor I'm lying on and saw the letter that my sis sent me lying there.

My gaze was drawn to one of the lines written in it.

*I'm sure I'll look back ten years from now and view every day I'm out here without regret.*

Ten years later, for a mere human like me, is just a hazy future after all. I would be 25 by then. Looking back at myself ten years before, I wonder if I'll look back and ponder about the things I did and could have done.

Perhaps Sekitani Jun, as a 25 year old, would also be looking back on when he was 15 with some regret as well.

I...

Suddenly the phone rang.

No, it's not like I've never heard a phone ring before. It's just that I was so immersed in my thoughts that it felt sudden. I left my anxiety behind as my mind returned to reality, and got up and headed downstairs to answer the phone.

"... Hello, this is Oreki."

"Huh? Houtarou?"

I felt my spine tingling in nervousness. It was a familiar voice, one that could mess up my lifestyle, and get me involved in all sorts of meta-level trouble. It was a call from Oreki Tomoe, wandering somewhere in Western Asia and hiding in the Japanese Consulate from the pursuit of Mossad agents. As it was an international call, it was hard to listen to, but there was no mistake that it was her.

Without fail, I gave my honest response upon hearing the voice that I hadn't heard for so long.

"So you're still alive?"

"How rude, you think I'd get killed by one or two bandits?"

So she actually did go through that? Can't say I'm surprised.

Probably mindful of how expensive the call would get, my sis spoke quickly.

"I arrived at Pristina yesterday. That's in Yugoslavia<sup>[1]</sup>, by the way. Finances and health are both in good condition and my plans are going along fine. I'll write to you once I get to Sarajevo. If I travel leisurely, I'll get there within two weeks. This ends my report. So how goes things over there?"

My sis sounded happy as usual. Though she's emotionally unstable in that she can get very angry, or cry like there's no tomorrow, or be extremely joyful, generally she's usually just happy.

I flicked the telephone cord with my finger and replied, "Nothing unusual in the Far East Command."

"I see, then..."

My sis was about to hang up. Though I wouldn't have minded if she just hung up, I still spoke.

"We're publishing an anthology, 'Hyouka'..."

"... Huh? What?"

"We looked up Sekitani Jun."

My sis still spoke in a swift manner, "Sekitani Jun? What a nostalgic name. Hmm, never thought that story would still be passed down. Is 'Kanya Festival' still a taboo term?"

I did not get what she meant by that.

"What do you mean?"

"That's a tragedy. I don't like that."

Taboo? Tragedy? Don't like that?

What's she talking about? What's she trying to say?

"Hang on a moment, we're talking about Sekitani Jun, right?"

"Of course. The 'kind hero'. You get it, don't you?"

It was a pointless conversation. Even though we're talking about the same subject, we can't seem to connect.

As for why, I instinctively realized that I could have been mistaken. Perhaps the deduction that I made at the Chitanda residence was mistaken or lacking in some details. Yet I was not feeling impatient, since my sis would know what happened at Kamiyama High School 33 years ago.

"Sis, what do you know about Sekitani Jun?"

I decided to ask her seriously.

All I got was a simple answer.

"I don't have time for that! Bye!"

*Click. Beep, beep.*

I took the receiver away from my ear and looked at it like an idiot.

"..."

... Why this...

"Stupid sister!"

I slammed the receiver on the phone, causing it to shake with a loud noise. My irritation was now doubled, thanks to my sis.

I no longer remembered what my sis said exactly, as the conversation happened so quickly there was no time for me to verify it. Still, the part where she replied negatively concerning the incident was fresh in my mind.

I went back to my bed and took out everything the Classics Club had collected concerning the incident from my bag. 'Hyouka', the 'Unity and Salutation', the 'Kami High Monthly' and the 'Kamiyama High School: Walking Together for 50 Years'... I also placed the letter my sis sent from Istanbul alongside those as I once again read that line that got my attention.

*I'm sure I'll look back ten years from now and view every day I'm out here without regret.*

Ten years from now, huh? As Sekitani Jun was president 33 years ago, if he's still alive he would be about 50 by now. Would he still look back at his high school life without regret?

I think he wouldn't. The "hero" that sacrificed himself for the passion of his comrades and forsook his choice to continue his high school education would have no regrets for making such a decision. Ever since my deduction at the Chitanda residence, that was what I thought.

But was that really true?

It was just a Cultural Festival, yet it led to the school coming after him and changed his life. If life in high school is rose-coloured, then would such an intensely rose-coloured life that gets interrupted still be called rosy?

The grey-coloured part in me told me this wasn't so. Sacrificing oneself so that his comrades would be forgiven, would a hero endure something like that? That thought surfaced in my mind. Though I still resisted such a thought, I could not ignore the fact that my sis had called the incident a tragedy.

I needed to revise this once again. I took out all the copies that mentioned that incident.

And so, I began to inquire whether Sekitani Jun's life was really rose-coloured 33 years ago.

The following day, I headed to school dressed in my casual wear. In order to confirm something, I called Chitanda, Ibara and Satoshi out as well. All I said to them was simply this, "There's something else I needed to add to yesterday's deduction before this can be fully concluded. I'll be waiting at the Geology Room."

And so the three of them came. Ibara was bound to treat my bringing up a supposedly resolved problem with sarcasm, and while Satoshi was smiling, the look of surprise at me deviating from my usual behaviour could still be seen. As for Chitanda, she spoke upon seeing me.

"Oreki-san, I feel like there's still something that I need to know."

I felt the same way as well. As I nodded, I placed my hand on her shoulder.

"It's fine. I think we should be able to sort this out by today. Just hang on a bit longer."

"What do you mean by adding to yesterday's deduction, Oreki?"

"Adding means taking the final step in order to complete something that is still incomplete."

"I don't get it, are you saying we've been looking into this the wrong way or heading into the wrong conclusion?"

"Just hear me out."

As I took out my notes, I glanced at it myself rather than showing it to the rest.

"... 'Hyouka' was meant to be written as something more important. It was not meant to chronicle the life of Sekitani Jun or made as a heroic tale, that's what the preface says anyway."

That was the part that Satoshi covered yesterday. As expected, he spoke up.

"Isn't that the part we discussed yesterday?"

"Yeah, but perhaps we may have been misled."

"What do you mean?"

"This passage here, 'As a sacrifice of the conflict, even Sempai's smile would end up along the flow of time into eternity.' The 'sacrifice' here does

not mean giving up voluntarily, rather, it means 'sacrifice' as an offering."

Ibara raised her eyebrow.

"But wouldn't they have used 'victim' instead of 'sacrifice' then?"

'Victim' huh? Though I didn't need to do much explaining, as Chitanda covered for me.

"No, 'sacrifice' can also be involuntarily. It used to mean just that in the past."<sup>[2]</sup>

As expected from an honours student, that was quick. And I was just about to get a dictionary.

Satoshi commented with a sigh, "... I get what you're trying to say about a different meaning to that word, but isn't that obvious? Besides, there's no way we could find out which meaning is true without asking the author first."

Of course, the difference in meaning was not purely a linguistic problem. As language was never as precise as math, it was natural that words would have more than one meaning. So it's not possible to conclude that a word means something else completely.

Yet there was a way to solve this. I nodded confidently to Satoshi and said, "Well, then we'll just have to ask the author."

"... Who is it?"

"The one who wrote this foreword, of course. Kooriyama Youko-san was a first year student 33 years ago. She should be around 48 or 49 now."

Chitanda's eyes widened.

"So did you find her?"

I brusquely shook my head.

"I don't have to. Since she's very close by anyway."

Ibara raised her head. As expected, she was the first to figure it out.

"Oh! I see!"

"That's right."

"What do you mean?"

"What have you figured out?"

Ibara looked at me, and I nodded softly to urge her to explain.

"... It's Itoikawa-sensei the Head Librarian, isn't it? Itoikawa Youko-sensei, her maiden name was Kooriyama. Am I right?"

As Ibara was a librarian herself, she naturally knew the full name of Itoikawa, that's why she was quick to realize.

"Exactly. If you merely heard the name 'Ibara Satoshi' without seeing how it's spelled, then you have no way of guessing whether Satoshi has adopted Ibara's name. But since we know Itoikawa's given name is spelled 'Youko', as well as the fact her age matches, then figuring out her maiden name becomes elementary."

Crossing her arms, Ibara began spouting her cynical sarcasm.

"You really are weird. Even I couldn't realize such a thing despite being in contact with Sensei all the time, yet you managed to do that. Maybe you should get Chi-chan to have a look inside your head."

As I said before, I got lucky with a flash of inspiration. I also do not want to be lobotomized by Chitanda.

Meanwhile, Chitanda's face was slowly getting redder.

"T, then, if we hear from Itoikawa-sensei..."

"Then we'll know what happened 33 years ago. Why that was not a heroic tale, why the cover was designed that way, why the anthology was titled 'Hyouka'... We'll get all the answers concerning your uncle."

"But, do you have any proof that it's really Itoikawa-sensei? Wouldn't it be awkward if it turns out to be someone else?"

We won't be mistaken. I took a look at my wristwatch and reckoned it was about time.

"Actually, I did make sure of that. I found out she was club president in her second year. I made an appointment to speak with her about it. It should be about time now, let's head to the library."

As I turned to leave, I could hear Ibara mutter, "You sure are enthusiastic."

I guess I am.

During summer vacation, the library would have its window blinds down to protect the books from exposure to intense sunlight. In this moderate air-conditioned indoor environment, the library was still packed with students preparing for the Kanya Festival or third years preparing for their university entrance exams. Itoikawa could be seen writing something while sitting behind the counter, wearing a pair of glasses which we did not see last time as she wrote. She had a rather small figure, and wrinkles were visible on her face, proof that it's been nearly 31 years since she graduated from high school.

"Itoikawa-sensei,"

She turned and noticed us as we called out to her. Lifting her face, she smiled.

"Ah, the Classics Club,"

She looked around the library and said, "It's a bit crowded here, shall we head to the Librarian Office?"

And led us to an office behind the counter.

The Librarian Office was a cozy office big enough for one person to work in, though the air-conditioner was considerably smaller in here. As the blinds weren't down, Itoikawa went ahead and lowered them as she gestured for us to take a seat on the guest sofa. A soft fragrance could be smelled, as it came from a flower pot placed on the only table in the room. It was a very ordinary and easy to miss flower, and was probably not meant for the guests but for herself to admire.

Though the sofa was large, it was still not big enough for the four of us. So Itoikawa had to take out a folding chair and place it beside the sofa. But why was it me that ended up on the folding chair while the other three got the sofa? Itoikawa sat on her own revolving chair. Placing her elbows on the table, she faced us and said, "Well, what is it that you wish to speak to me about?"

She asked gently. As she was asking everyone from the Classics Club, it was natural that I would have to speak on behalf of the club. I tried to shrug off this urge to cross my arms and legs in a situation which I was not used to, and courteously replied, "Yes, there's something we would like to inquire from you. But first, we'd like to confirm something. Is your maiden name Kooriyama?"

She nodded.

"Then that means this was written by you, right?"

I took out the copy from my pocket and handed to her. Itoikawa moved her eyes across the piece of paper and smiled gently,

"Yes, that's me. But I'm surprised that this managed to get preserved."

She then seemed to lower her gaze to me.

"I think I know what it is that you wanted to discuss with me. To have students from the Classics Club inquire about my maiden name, I had an idea what was going on... you wish to know about the movement 33 years ago, right?"

Bingo, so she does know.

However, in contrast to the expectation shown on our expressions, Itoikawa merely sighed.

"But, why would you ask about such a distant event now? It would have been better to forget about it."

"Well, this is mainly thanks to Chitanda here viewing all sorts of curious events like a beast, or I would not have noticed this event to begin with."

"A beast?"

"Sorry, I meant like a feast."<sup>[3]</sup>

Itoikawa and Satoshi both smiled, while Ibara gave an exasperated look. Chitanda protested softly, though I ignored her. Itoikawa smiled softly at Chitanda and asked, "And why were you interested in that movement back then?"

I noticed Chitanda gripping her fists on her knees. She was probably nervous as she answered briefly, "Sekitani Jun was my uncle."

Itoikawa let out a gasp.

"Oh, I see, Sekitani Jun... Such a nostalgic name. How is he?"

"I have no idea, as he was reported missing in India."

She gasped again, "Oh." Though she didn't seem to have wavered. Perhaps living for 50 years meant she'd seen it all?

"I see. And I had always wished to meet him once again."

"So do I. I just wanted to see him one more time."

Was Sekitani Jun a person that was worth meeting once again? I couldn't help but wonder perhaps I should meet him as well.

As though filled with emotions, Chitanda spoke slowly.

"Itoikawa-sensei, please tell me, what exactly happened 33 years ago? Why was the incident my uncle was involved in not a heroic tale? Why is the Classics Club anthology titled 'Hyouka'? ... Are Oreki-san's deductions correct?"

"Deductions?"

Itoikawa asked me, "What do you mean by that?"

Satoshi answered, "Sensei, Oreki has managed to deduce what could have happened 33 years ago using the limited information we have gathered. So perhaps you should hear it from him."

Seems like I have to repeat what I had said yesterday. No, though I had intended to do so anyway, I had not yet realized that it could just be speculation for someone who had gone through the incident herself. Though I was confident of my deductions, there was a small thought that I might have gotten it wrong. I licked my lips and began my explanation using the same 5W1H method as yesterday.

"First, the main character for this incident..."

"... And so, we concluded that the dropping out occurred in October."

Once I got it all out, I was surprised by how well I managed to organize my thoughts. As I spoke without referring to any notes, time seemed to pass by even faster.

All the time while I spoke, Itoikawa remained silent. She spoke to Ibara at once as I finished.

"Ibara-san, do you have the notes that you speak of?"

"No, I..."

"I got them."

Satoshi opened his drawstring bag and took out a stack of notes which was folded in quarters, and handed them over to Itoikawa. She took a quick glance at them and looked up.

"You managed to form a deduction just from all these?"

Chitanda nodded.

"Yes, Oreki-san did."

That's not exactly right.

"I merely pooled their theories together, that's all."

"Still,"

*Sigh.* Itoikawa breathed out a sigh and placed the notes on the table as she crossed her legs.

"I'm amazed."

"It wasn't wrong?"

Ibara asked, to which she shook her head.

"No, it is just as Oreki-kun said. Everything is true. It feels uncanny, as though you stood alongside me as I watched the whole thing unfold back then."

I let out a breath.

I was indeed relieved that I got it all right.

"Well, what else do you wish to ask from me? I might even give you a passing mark if my answers match your speculation."

"Well, I don't know about me, but Houtarou seemed to feel something else was missing."

Yeah, something was missing.

There was something that I wanted to ask: Did Sekitani Jun forsake his rose-coloured high school life on his own? I worded my question as follows, "I have only one question. Did Sekitani Jun wish to become a shield for the entire student body?"

Itoikawa's gentle expression suddenly froze at hearing that question. She merely looked at me.

"..."

And stared silently.

I waited for her to speak, so too did Chitanda, Ibara and Satoshi. They were probably wondering what that question was all about as they waited.

... The silence didn't last long. Itoikawa moved her mouth as though murmuring something, and said reproachfully, "You really saw through me... Then I shall tell you about it. I think it's best I start from the beginning all the way to the end. Though it was a long time ago, I still remember it clearly."

And so, the former Kooriyama Youko spoke about the "Struggle in June" 33 years ago.

"Though the Cultural Festival is just as active as it was then, it feels more quiet than it used to be. Back then everyone viewed the Kami High Cultural Festival as their ultimate objective in life. It was a time when people would actively discard the old and welcome the new, and some say it was from this overflowing energy that the Kami High Cultural Festival came into being.

"Just before I enrolled in this school, there was a feeling that a riot would break out. Nothing good would come out of having a commotion go out of control, right? Yet compared to the violent school incidents in recent years, the movements back then seemed rather orderly. Though for the teachers of that time, it was still considered unacceptable."

The recollection that I heard seemed to concern some Modern Japanese History. I think neither those people overflowing with energy in that time nor people born in the same period as me could ever fathom the existence of the other group.

"In April that year, the Principal suddenly had an outburst during a staff meeting. I believe it was recorded in one of your notes here, 'We must not allow ourselves to be complacent and become a mere backwater school.' Nowadays people would just view Principal Eida's words as merely laying expectation on the students to do well. Yet back then, it was perceived as a veiled message to crack down on the Cultural Festival.

"When the timetable for the Cultural Festival was announced, there was a great uproar. The usual five day schedule was drastically reduced to only two days, and they were moved from weekdays to just two days in the weekend, as though they were being discarded from the regular school calendar altogether. Everyone felt like a bucket of cold water was poured over them and found the decision hard to stomach.

"Since that announcement, I could feel the atmosphere at school becoming tense, as though something was about to happen.

"First, all sorts of dirty language was being posted on the school's notice boards. Then there were the public speeches, which is where everyone could come on stage to say whatever they want, where everyone was

getting increasingly passionate and received applause. Then the movement began in earnest when it was proposed to pool the resources of the arts-related clubs together.

"However, though the resistance was expected, nobody seemed to be prepared for the school's strong response to forcefully carry out the cutting down of the Cultural Festival. In order to carry out the movement, one must be prepared to accept the consequences. Though everyone was good at talking the talk, pathetically, no one volunteered to come out and become the leader of the club alliance."

Itoikawa shifted in her seat, which created a squeaking sound in her chair as she continued, "So it was decided to draw lots in order to choose the leader, and your uncle, Sekitani Jun, ended up with the short end of the stick. The actual operation of the movement was handled by other people, yet their names would never appear in public.

"The movement steadily gathered steam, and eventually led to the school relenting their plans to shorten the festival. As written in your notes, the festival went on as usual."

Though she described it plainly without any emotion, I could still feel the atmosphere of 33 years ago, whether it was the passion of the movement or the cowardice of the representatives, they were all in the past now. Itoikawa then went on, "But we overdid it. During the movement, I took part in boycotting lessons. Everyone was on the grounds shouting slogans. The construction of a campfire brought the atmosphere to a climax, and then one night it happened.

"The flames in the campfire went out of control. We don't know if someone did it on purpose, but the Martial Arts Dojo was set on fire. Though the fire was eventually put out, the considerably old dojo was badly damaged by the water sprayed from the fire engines."

Chitanda and Ibara's expressions went stiff, I guess so did mine. Even we could tell this sounded bad, as indirectly, it meant this damage of school property could not be ignored.

"Such a criminal act was way out of the ordinary, and could not be overlooked. Fortunately, the school did not wish to make things any worse and so decided not to involve the police. Though no one could argue against the school finding someone to take responsibility once the Cultural Festival was over... Since everyone would be saying they didn't know anything once the festival ended.

"And so, while the cause of the fire was unknown, the one that ended up taking the blame was none other than Sekitani-san, the official leader of the movement.

"Back then, it was much easier to expel a student. Credit to him, Sekitani-san remained calm to the very end. Though I believe your question was whether he wished to become a shield for everyone, right?"

Itoikawa merely smiled and looked at me.

"I think you already know the answer yourself."

After finishing her long story, Itoikawa stood up to pour some hot water from a flask into her coffee mug before drinking it.

We said nothing. Perhaps we couldn't find anything to say. I could only see Chitanda's lips move a bit, as though muttering "how awful", or "how cruel", though I have no idea which it was.

"Well, that's all I have to say. Do you have anything else you wish to ask?"

As she returned to her revolving chair, Itoikawa spoke in her usual tone. This was indeed just a story from the past for her.

Ibara finally broke the silence and said, "Then, I'd like to ask about the cover illustration that was drawn back then..."

Itoikawa nodded silently.

I was reminded of the cover of 'Hyouka', the one with the dog and hare chasing each other, while a number of hares formed a circle and watched them. The dog probably represented the teaching staff while the hares the students. And the hare that led the dog around in circles was probably Sekitani Jun.

After Itoikawa came gave us the answer that I had just guessed, I asked her, "Of all the buildings in Kami High, the Martial Arts Dojo is by far the oldest, so does that mean it's been rebuilt before?"

I noticed how ancient the dojo was when Chitanda showed it to me back in April, though I gave no thought to that afterwards.

"Yes, that's right. Since public school buildings are rarely renovated unless they reach their sell-by date. When all the other buildings were renovated ten years ago, only the dojo was left untouched since that was renovated before by itself."

Satoshi then said meekly, "Umm, Sensei, I noticed you never referred to the festival as the Kanya Festival,"

As the topic was changed altogether, Itoikawa ended up smiling faintly.

"Why do you even ask? Surely you must have figured it out by now?"

"Huh?"

Kanya Festival?

I see. I remember my sis mentioning in our phone call that the term was considered taboo within the Classics Club. Though it was a bit late, I finally understood why that was taboo.

"It's because Sekitani Jun did not wish to become a hero, right? That's why you refrained from calling the festival the Kanya Festival."

"Fuku-chan, what does he mean by that?"

Though Satoshi smiled while answering, this smile was different from usual in that he wasn't smiling for fun.

"'Kanya' isn't an abbreviation of 'Kamiyama', but rather it's an alternative kanji pronunciation of 'Sekitani'. I managed to find that out at last a while ago. It's probably an alternate name for 'Sekitani Festival', in order to fool the teaching staff while honouring their hero."

... Chitanda then asked, "Sensei, do you know the reason why my uncle used the title 'Hyouka' for the anthology?"

However, Itoikawa gently shook her head.

"That name was probably thought up by Sekitani-san on a whim while he had a feeling he was about to be expelled. He said it meant something that he could not do in his current state at that time. But otherwise, I don't know what it means myself."

... She doesn't know?

Does she really not know? Or Chitanda, Ibara and Satoshi, for that matter?

Though I rarely get angry, even now I was getting exasperated. Right now all I was feeling was a sense of irritation, as no one seemed to get the message that Sekitani Jun had left behind. I was annoyed that no one managed to get such a trivial message.

Without realizing, I began to speak up, "Don't you guys get it? Just what have you guys been listening to? I'll just come out and say it, it's nothing but a silly pun."

"Houtarou?"

"Sekitani Jun wanted to relay a message to us, the descendants of the Classics Club, and he placed that within the title of the anthology. Chitanda, you're good at English, right?"

Chitanda went flustered at suddenly being called out.

"Eh? E-English?"

"Yeah. This is actually a secret message. No, more like a play on words..."

Itoikawa didn't seem to make any responses while looking at us. I wondered if she could have realized, no she must have realized. Yet for some reason she's not telling us anything. While I didn't understand completely, I tried putting myself in her shoes and noticed this could be something that could not be spoken out loud. Perhaps this was also one of the traditions of the Classics Club?

"Have you figured something out, Oreki-san?"

"Oreki, stop making us guess anymore. Do you really get it?"

"Tell us already, Houtarou."

How many times has it been that I've been pressed for an answer by these guys? I sighed as I prepared to give my explanation. Though this time I felt like this had nothing to do with luck or having any flash of inspiration. I just felt like conveying Sekitani's regret within his pun to someone.

And so I spoke, "What do you think 'Hyouka' means?"

Chitanda answered, "That's the title of the Classics Club anthology."

"I'm asking about the meaning of the word itself."

Satoshi followed, "It's the Japanese word for 'ice', right? So 'ice candy'?"

"Try 'ice cream'."

Ibara spoke, "Ice cream? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Try rearranging the syllables."

Ah, dammit. Why do I always have to go through so much explanation? For once get what I'm trying to say!

"'Ice cream' itself means nothing. That's why I said it's a play on words."

Satoshi's expression first read "I dunno" before his face went pale as though all the blood had been drawn from it. Next was Ibara, who muttered "Ah, that!" with an annoyed expression.

Finally, Chitanda seemed like she still didn't get it. Being an honours student, I hear she's good at English as well. However, it doesn't seem like she's grasped the language's functions completely. I wasn't in the mood to tease her further.

I took the copy of the foreword of 'Hyouka Volume Two' and wrote on it with a ballpen I brought.

"This is the message your uncle left behind."

Chitanda nodded while still looking perplexed.

When she finally understood, her eyes widened instantly. "Oh!" She gasped and went silent.

Everyone's gazes were focused on her.

Chitanda's eyes were moistening. It was then that I realized that her months of requesting my help had finally come to fruition.

"... I remember," she whispered, "I remember now. I asked my uncle back then why the anthology was called 'Hyouka'. He merely said, yes, he told me to be strong.

"It was a message for me to live on whenever I should feel weak, or when I encounter times when I could not scream..."

She turned her gaze towards me.

"Oreki-san, I remember now. I was crying because I was afraid of the thought of living while being dead inside... Thank goodness, now I can send my uncle off properly..."

A smile appeared on her face. Noticing that her eyes were getting wet, she moved to wipe them with her hands. She then turned to look again at the note I was holding. On it was the true meaning of the word that I had written:

*I scream.*

# **Translator's notes and references**

1. ↑ TL: Hyouka was published in 2000, before Kosovo declared independence
2. ↑ TL: Again this part is all liberal translations of things having to do with Japanese words
3. ↑ TL: Pun changed to make sense in English (beast and feast are not the original words because if the original words were kept, it wouldn't be a pun anymore in English)

# **8 - The Daily Life of the Future Classics Club**

And so the Cultural Festival slowly approaches. Looking out at the autumn sky from the Geology Room, I find it quite hard to believe that summer vacation had just ended not long ago. Ever since discovering Sekitani Jun's feelings of regret behind the meaning of the title "Hyouka", we have begun work on compiling our anthology.

Currently, we're still not finished with it.

As I wrote a response to my sis's letter from months ago, a scene of carnage was occurring beside where I was sitting.

"Fuku-chan, are you done yet? The publisher's deadline is coming soon!"

Ibara was nearly screaming as Satoshi had still not completed his allotted number of pages. Even Satoshi, who was normally calm, was beginning to show some anxiety.

"Just a little bit more, just a little bit more. I'm almost there."

"That's what you said a week ago."

Though the senior editor for this anthology was nominally our club president Chitanda, the actual work of distributing page numbers for each author and dealing with the publishers was done by Ibara due to her experience with such work before. Under Ibara's strict schedule, progress in the completion of this edition of "Hyouka" went on smoothly. While I've not yet seen Ibara's manuscript, she'll probably write something about her thoughts on a classical manga series. I remember she said it's called tera,

mu or numbers, or something like that, but somehow I get the feeling she was just randomly picking a title.

On the other hand, Satoshi's unfinished manuscript which Ibara was trying to whip to completion was what Satoshi described as a comedy related to Zeno's paradox. That sounded like a rather random title, though reading the back issues of "Hyouka", it does seem that they publish almost anything. Hence Satoshi decided his "classic paradox" themed title was considered "classic" as well, though I do think he could have come up with something better. As Satoshi was already busy with the Handicraft Club and the Student Council committee, he seemed to be in distress as only a small amount of his allotted pages were filled. It seemed Satoshi wasn't particularly good at writing, which was a surprising weak point I've discovered.

As Satoshi scrambled to write his manuscript with a stiff smile, Ibara walked in circles behind him while looking at her wristwatch. As though remembering something, she turned to speak to me.

"By the way, where's Chi-chan? I needed to talk to her about the budget."

Satoshi looked as though he wanted to say something, but frantically went back to work upon being stared at by Ibara. I had no choice but to stop my writing and answered, "She went to visit the cemetery."

"Cemetery?"

"Sekitani Jun's grave. She wanted to offer those manuscripts in honour of his memory."

"Those manuscripts" referred to a conclusion that we wrote concerning the event 33 years ago. It was written by me with Chitanda's assistance. I refrained from any unnecessary rhetoric and kept the text dry and prose-like.

"I see."

Ibara said without her usual sarcasm, "What else did Chi-chan say?"

"She didn't say anything else."

That wasn't a lie. As I handed the manuscripts over to Chitanda during Sakitani Jun's funeral, as well as today when she visited his grave again, she didn't seem to show any emotion whatsoever. Perhaps she was hiding them, but I didn't think so. That day when the true meaning of "Hyouka" was revealed, Chitanda had considered the matter resolved. She'd probably taken in my explanation since, but I have no idea of knowing.

"Ughh... Fuku-chan, your hand's stopped writing. We only have five minutes left!"

"Five minutes! Mayaka, this is too brutal!"

As the skit beside me resumed once again, I went into thinking. That incident didn't just concern Chitanda herself to begin with, as Ibara and Satoshi have also given their part into solving this mystery.

But what about me?

... As I finished my letter, I placed it in my shoulder bag. I felt sleepy with the blow of the autumn breeze. No hard feelings to the struggling Satoshi and Ibara, I think I'll be going home soon.

And then it happened.

The door opened and someone flew into the room. She seemed pretty flustered. It was our club president Chitanda, who was busy catching her breath with her head facing down. We were all lost for words by her sudden appearance. After getting her breath back, Chitanda lifted her face at last.

"Hey, Chitanda-san. I thought you'd gone to visit the cemetery?"

She nodded at Satoshi's question.

"Yes. But, there's just something that I feel curious about."

Feel curious about?

I had a bad feeling about this. No, this wasn't just a feeling, it was the experience of knowing something is about to happen. Chitanda's hair was glossed with some sweat while her face was slightly red. And those eyes, which were sparkling, felt so full of life. It was a sign her curiosity was about to explode.

"Chi-chan, what do you mean feeling curious?"

*Stop asking!* I said to myself as Chitanda turned and prepared to leave the room.

Or that's what I thought she was about to do, but nothing ever escapes her attention. I found my wrist being caught by her hand.

"Oreki-san, let's go. To the Archery Hall, we might still make it."

"What is it, all of a sudden?"

Even though I knew it was pointless, I still protested. But Chitanda shook her head at my request for an explanation.

"It's much faster to see it than to speak about it."

It's useless. Once Chitanda decides on something, it would be more efficient energy-wise to just go along with her whims. Satoshi smiled while Ibara shrugged her shoulders as they looked at us. Giving up, I said, "OK, OK, I'm coming. Since you're grabbing me, it means that, right?"

Chitanda stopped and turned to face me. As her huge eyes stared at me, she slowly replied, "Yes, that's right... I am *very* curious."

## **9 - Letter to Sarajevo**

Dear Sis,

I'm writing to you as there's something I wanted to ask you. I'll just have to trust that the hotel you said you're staying in gets this to you.

Just how much do you know about the Classics Club?

Why did you have me join the Classics Club?

You probably know very well what my lifestyle is like. Yet ever since enrolling in high school, I've been surrounded by Satoshi and other people that you've not yet met. As I watched these people with a completely different lifestyle from me, I somehow felt uncomfortable. It was a feeling you wouldn't feel unless you joined the Classics Club. Had I remained unaffiliated, I probably wouldn't have thought of questioning my own motto.

Could it be that it was your expectation all along for me to waver?

And then there's "Hyouka".

I joined the Classics Club according to your letter from Benares, and looked for the safe in the Biology Room based on your letter from Istanbul. But it doesn't end there. Upon opening that safe, I was placed in a fix in trying to find out the truth concerning Sekitani Jun from 33 years ago.

In short, the students of 33 years ago were living in an active style that was overflowing with energy. The so-called rose-coloured life is probably borne out of this style and the style of "Hyouka". Ever since discovering the truth of that event, I no longer feel as uncomfortable as I did before. While I wouldn't say my own style is good, at least I now know at least it's not that bad.

Sis, I...

No, this can't be.

This has got to be a bad joke, it's as though you're trying to manipulate my mind. But that's impossible.

Anyway, no need to be too concerned about that. I've written all I could about my present status now. Any further would just be a bother for me.

Have a fun trip.

Regards,

Houtarou

P.S. Thanks for the advice.

# Afterword

Greetings, this is Yonezawa Honobu.

About 60% of this novel was pure fiction while the rest was based on historical facts. This story is based on meagre events chronicled in local newspapers.

By the way, for the art of fusing fiction and historical facts, anything that you can come up with a conclusion would be fiction, while historical facts would be the part that you could not nothing about. That's the gist of it. However, for this novel, while basing it on a historical background, I had difficult in thinking out ideas in how to resolve the fictional part.

In order to finish a story, one must imagine a deflationary spiral. I think *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, which was aired on NHK-E a while ago, does a better job at that.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the assistance of many people. Especially the following:

Yamaguchi-san and Nakai-kun, who provided important hints for me at the eleventh hour. Saitou-san, who urged me to make this story likable and interesting. Tada-san, who has been patiently waiting for me all this time. Akiyama-kun, who has tirelessly warned me not to get too complacent.

I give my sincere thanks to these people. Thank you all. As it's nearly the season for yellowtail sushi, you're cordially invited over to my place to try some.

Secondly.

To everyone from the selection committee who has given this novel a chance, from S-san in charge of the whole thing, to Uesugi-san, who designed the cover illustration (for the first edition), *Hyouka* would not have been possible without your contribution. You have my deepest gratitude.

By the way, the other day a friend invited me to have some sushi. As the sushi there was befitting of its price, I was glad he offered to drive me there, yet my friend didn't seem to be in a hurry as I was when he drove.

As it's nearly dinnertime, the car park was slowly getting full. To be honest, it was troubling, yet no matter how I rushed my friend, he merely smiled ambiguously as the car moved slowly.

I knew my friend wasn't the sort to tease people, rather he was quite prudent and serious. So I had no idea what's gotten into him that day.

Perhaps I'll reveal the truth in a later opportunity.

Until then, thanks for reading.

Yonezawa Honobu

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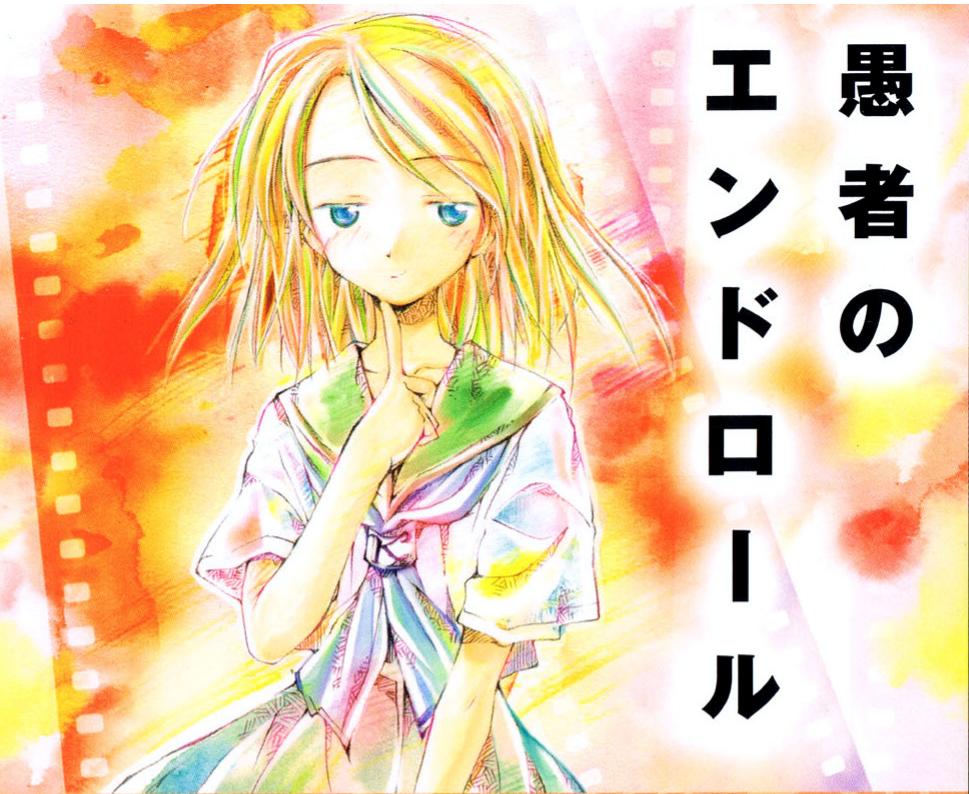
愚者のエンドロール

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# 愚者の エンドロール



WHY DIDN'T SHE  
ASK EBAA?



米澤穂信

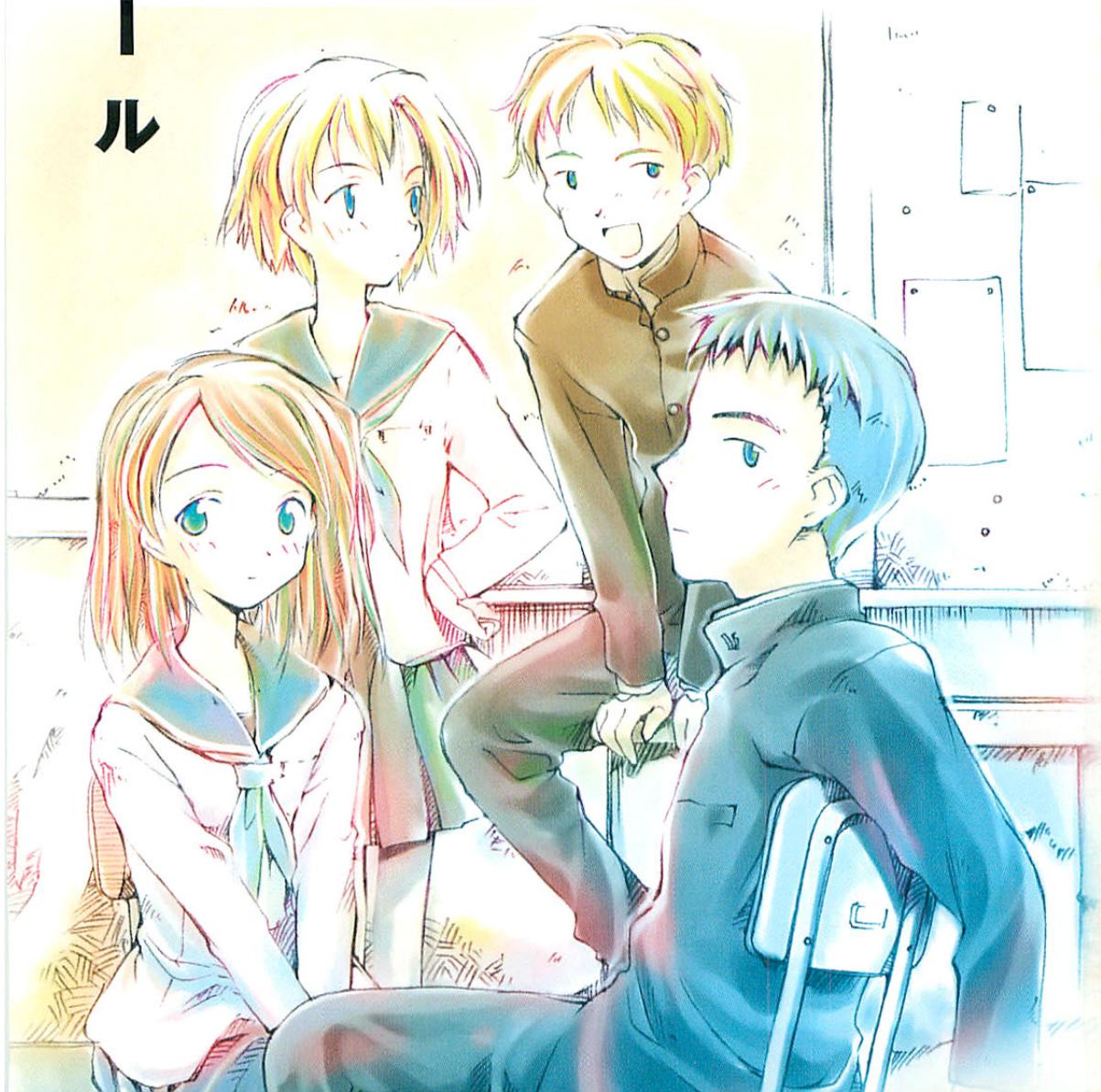
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# 愚 者 の エ ン ド ロ ー ル

米澤穂信

Honoka Miyazawa



# **0 - Avant Title**

## Log No. 100205

**Anonymous:** are you sure you're alright?

**Mayuko:** i'm sorry

**Anonymous:** everyone would blame you, are you sure you're alright with that?

**Mayuko:** i'll apologize to them

**Mayuko:** i have no other choice

**Anonymous:** apologizing is not the problem here

**Anonymous:** you'll still be blamed

**Anonymous:** they'll say that the problem still hasn't been resolved

**Mayuko:** i know

**Mayuko:** but I'm out of ideas already

**Mayuko:** i

**Mayuko:** i'm sorry

**Anonymous:** ok, I understand

**Anonymous:** it's indeed true that there was no suitable material to begin with

**Anonymous:** so good job for lasting till now

**Mayuko:** sorry

**Anonymous:** there's no need to apologize

**Anonymous:** i'll take care of the rest

**Mayuko:** you're doing this?

**Anonymous:** i'd start from scratch if it were me

**Anonymous:** i can't do this, but I'll think of something

**Mayuko:** ?

**Anonymous:** but it'll probably not be as good

**Anonymous:** as you would expect

## Log No. 100209

**A.ta.shi♪:** sorry~

**Anonymous:** don't be

**Anonymous:** we had no choice since things turned out this way

**A.ta.shi♪:** since a cute lower classman has asked me to help,  
I've gotta do something

**A.ta.shi♪:** you went through all this trouble after all...

**A.ta.shi♪:** but as I'm so far away, I probably won't make it in  
time

**Anonymous:** umm

**Anonymous:** then is there anyone else you could suggest?

**Anonymous:** anyone that could do this

**A.ta.shi♪:** suggest huh?

**A.ta.shi♪:** hmm

**A.ta.shi♪:** ...

**Anonymous:** senpai?

**A.ta.shi♪:** ZZZ...

**Anonymous:** senpai

**A.ta.shi♪:** kidding

**A.ta.shi♪:** i wouldn't say he could do this, but you could make  
him do errands for you

**A.ta.shi♪:** you could even make him dance

## Log No. 100214

**Anonymous:** how about it?

**L:** Yes, I'll definitely come!

**L:** No question about it.

**Anonymous:** glad to hear that

**Anonymous:** i'll let you know the time and location afterwards

**L:** Lookinf forward to it

**L:** Looling

**L:** Looking

**Anonymous:** you might not know this

**Anonymous:** but if you just type the first few letters and wait for a bit

**Anonymous:** it'll suggest the correct word for you

**L:** Reallu?

**L:** Really?

**L:** Ah, I see.

**Anonymous:** anyway, I'm counting on you

**Anonymous:** btw

**L:** Yes?

**Anonymous:** you can invite your friends. Those 3 would do

**L:** Is that okay with you?

**Anonymous:** they're with the Classics Club, right?

**Anonymous:** i'd be glad if you could bring your club members along

# 1 - Let's Watch a Movie Preview!

There was a saying that all men are created equal. At the same time, it was also said that nobody is born perfect. If both of these phrases were valid, then the order of heaven would be unenforceable. As a person's value would change depending on the region they're from, one cannot just dismiss their values entirely. Let alone being born perfect, just being born with one talent is difficult enough. While the common folk may be envious or jealous of geniuses around them, for me their talents are just a part of our daily lives, so I don't see what the fuss is all about.

It was the end of the summer vacation. I was having such a conversation with my old mate Fukube Satoshi, who nodded in agreement with my thoughts.

"Exactly. For the past 15 years of my life, I haven't seemed to be the sort to possess any talents at all. There's a saying that great talents mature late, but that sounds more like working hard through nurture rather than talent. So I guess wishing for some talents is a distant dream for us."

"Well, geniuses are geniuses for a reason. If we common folk could obtain their talents, then we wouldn't need to be envious of them."

"My, longing for the life of common folk now, aren't you, Houtarou? ... If it's you, then..."

Satoshi then casually quipped, "I think you're actually quite talented."

I had no idea what he was talking about. As I gave a puzzled look, Satoshi chuckled and said, "I know very well that I'm not the talented sort, but the same cannot be said about you, Houtarou."

"Wha?"

As his manner of speaking was usually filled with jokes, I thought a little about accepting the good parts of what he just said at face value. I had two rebuttals to make, firstly, "If I had to say it, I think it's premature of you to call yourself a normal person. Aren't you pretty good at collecting vast amounts of knowledge?"

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I guess, even if it sounds like bragging. Though I wouldn't go so far and say that I'm good enough at winning quiz shows. The knowledge I learned isn't that vast."

Really?

Anyway, second rebuttal, "If I wasn't not a normal person, then there's no way I could observe people."

"Then I won't say anything more. Though I still have reservations about you not having any talents."

"Where have you ever seen me using my talents anyway?"

"Hmm, where, huh?"

After pretending to think, he pointed his finger towards Kamiyama High School.

"There."

"The school?"

"No, the Geology Room, AKA the Classics Club room... You were simply amazing in solving the 'Hyouka' incident. Truth be told, I never expected you to be that good. That's why I said I'm having reservations about you not being talented based on that," He said while smiling. In contrast, I looked bitter.

The "Hyouka" incident. It was not a criminal incident, neither was it civil. "Hyouka" was the name of a series of essay anthologies published by the

Classics Club, a mysterious organization which Satoshi and I belonged to. The reason why the anthologies were named as such cannot be explained in a few sentences, and for very good reason as well. Thanks to such a reason, I was involved in all sorts of bothersome events. And Satoshi was commenting on my role in such events.

He continued, "The one who solved all that was you."

"Now you're exaggerating. I was just lucky."

"Lucky, huh? I wasn't talking about how you think of yourself, but how I see you."

He can say such haughty stuff with such a calm tone. As I was used to his manner of speaking, I was hardly annoyed.

Besides being an old mate, Fukube Satoshi is also a good rival. As a guy he was short in stature, and his weak-looking appearance could easily be mistaken for that of a girl if seen from afar. However, he is actually quite spirited, especially when pursuing things that interest him. So much so that he would prioritize that over other things that are considered "necessary" by everyone else. He is always seen carrying a smile and a drawstring bag. As he swung the drawstring bag around, he asked, "By the way, what time is it now?"

"Check your own watch."

"It's inside my bag, it's too bothersome to take it out," he tapped at his bag and said. Satoshi considered carrying a wristwatch around too troublesome, and would prefer to check the time via his cellphone.

"I'm the one that's feeling bothersome here."

"If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, hurry up and finish it.' Right?"

Satoshi smiled while poking fun at my motto. I checked the time on my wristwatch and corrected him, "It's 'If I have to do it, make it quick.' ...

Anyway, it's just past ten."

"Do you really have to memorize every word of that? It's not like it's some grandiose motto or anything. Wow, is it ten already? We'd better hurry. Chitanda-san may be able to forgive us for being late, but it's Mayaka I'm scared of."

I agree with that. Ibara Mayaka can be very scary when she's angry. I don't know if Satoshi knows this or not, but I have a feeling that Chitanda Eru's the same as well. As Satoshi picked up his speed, I followed suit.

Crossing the crosswalk, we came upon the school gates. It was a typical day in Kamiyama High, where there are students everywhere despite it being a school holiday.

The courtyard was filled with students either in uniform or casual wear. The music from the musical clubs could be heard playing. Besides the courtyard some sort of large monument was being erected, probably some attraction devised by some club. Even though it was summer vacation, Kamiyama High School was still filled with students full of energy, as everyone was preparing for the Cultural Festival.

The total number of students attending Kamiyama High School numbered about a thousand. The school provided curriculum for university entrance exams as well as having a lively club activity scene. If you excluded the exalting Cultural Festival, Kamiyama High was just a normal school like any other. The campus contained three buildings; the General Block which houses the regular classrooms, the Special Block with their special purposes classrooms, and the Gymnasium. The Classics Club room was located in the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block.

Amidst the singing of the Chorus Club and A Capella Club from the courtyard, we hastened our pace. As Satoshi said, my motto was "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick." To put it simply, I

was an "energy saver". Such a lifestyle was totally different to those that go all out in these student activities like the Cultural Festival. Though I wasn't in the mood to think about such things now.

From the entrance, we headed towards the corridor leading to the Special Block. A long painting from some club could be seen placed on the side of the staircase to dry as we climbed them, taking four steps at a time, which was quite exhausting. As it was late summer, I took out my handkerchief to wipe my sweat as we entered the Geology Room.

We were at once greeted by someone yelling, "You're late!"

Standing firmly in the centre of the room like a guardian god was none other than Ibara, the actual person in charge of overseeing the publication of the Classics Club anthology "Hyouka", with whom I have a long acquaintance.

Ibara Mayaka. While we were not exactly intimate with each other, for some reason we just couldn't avoid seeing each other all the time. While she had grown since primary school, she still had a childish-looking face despite being a high school student. Despite her appearance, she was actually quite strict. Besides being unforgiving to mistakes made by others, she was even more demanding towards herself. The reason for her wrath was simple, as it was agreed that we were supposed to meet up here at ten in the morning.

Maintaining her guardian god stance, Ibara spoke, "Fuku-chan, explain yourself."

Satoshi's smile became stiff as he said, "Well, we couldn't use our bikes today..."

"You should have known that already!"

By the way, while people were free to come to Kamiyama High School via bicycle during summer vacation, as the bicycle park was currently under maintenance, it was unusable.

"Get a grip already, Fuku-chan! You still haven't handed in your manuscripts!"

Satoshi spread out his hands as he struggled to protest, "W, wait a minute Mayaka! Isn't Houtarou late as well?"

Ibara turned to look at me, and upon meeting my gaze, turned back towards Satoshi.

"Who cares about Oreki?"

... Double standards, huh?

The reason Ibara paid so much attention to Satoshi was because she had a crush on him. And she herself made no attempts to hide this. On the other hand, Satoshi had been evading her advances to this day. As to when they started all this, I had no idea.

Anyway, the Classics Club was made up of four members: myself, Satoshi, and Ibara, as well as the President, Chitanda Eru. Though right now Chitanda was nowhere to be seen.

"That's double standards!"

"What're you talking about? There's no double standards."

I interrupted their meaningless exchange and said, "Hey, Ibara, Chitanda's absent as well."

"How can I have double standards... Huh? Chi-chan? That's right, she still hasn't arrived. That worries me."

"I see, indeed it's not double standards," Satoshi muttered.

"Yeah, it's triple standards."

Unusually, Ibara replied while smiling.

As if on cue, a silhouette was seen silently opening the door and entering the room. It was Chitanda.

Chitanda Eru. With her long, dark hair and frail-looking figure, she gave the look of an elegant lady. And that was a fact, as she was the daughter of the Chitanda Clan, which owned vast tracts of farmland within a corner of Kamiyama City. However, in contrast to her graceful nature were her large eyes. To me, those were what represented her the most. If Ibara was a child in appearance, then Chitanda was a child due to her incredible curiosity to every mystery she ever encountered. Yet she was intelligent despite such a childlike nature, which made it all the more difficult to cope with her.

The clock pointed to half past ten. Chitanda bowed deeply and said, "I'm very sorry for being late."

Chitanda hardly ever looked this unkempt. While not strictly punctual, it was rare to see her late. Ibara must have been thinking the same thing as she asked Chitanda without blaming her, "Did something happen?"

"Yes. A little bit. I was having a long conversation just now."

What conversation? We won't know if you don't elaborate. That said, Chitanda continued before I could ask.

"I'll explain later about what conversation I was having."

What's she up to? I have a bad feeling about this.

"Hmm... Oh well, let's get started then."

The reason the Classics Club was gathered here today was to hold a meeting concerning the publication of the club anthology "Hyouka", which included what design and fonts to use, how to arrange the articles and what paper to print on. While it would have been better if I had just suggested to let Ibara handle everything, she probably wouldn't allow it, as she reasoned that since we have all contributed our money and manuscripts, it's only fair that we take part in compiling the anthology as well. I didn't exactly want to

do this, but then I don't have anything better to do during summer vacation anyway.

Ibara took out a few paper samples from her bag and began speaking.

"This is the highest quality paper that our budget could allow, while this is the cheapest. They're very different, and not just in appearance, but how the ink appears on them..."

As she began explaining, both Satoshi and Chitanda listened with enthusiasm. While I felt like a piece of rotting wood on the mountain<sup>[1]</sup>, I still made an effort to listen, so that Ibara wouldn't get mad.

The editorial meeting was over sooner than expected, just under an hour after it began. Ibara had written down the items which had been approved in her note, which she would then relay to the publishers. Being an editing supervisor sure sounds tough, so I placed my palms together in gratitude of her hard work.

It was now afternoon. While we were free to go home, we decided to stay and have lunch, having just bought some boxed lunches from the convenience store. As I took my boxed lunch worth less than 400yen out of my shoulder bag, the other three followed suit.

As he peeled the film wrapping around his rice ball, Satoshi spoke without addressing anyone specifically.

"So, when's the anthology gonna be published?"

The one who should have an idea as to how to answer that question was of course Ibara, who grumbled as though saying "As if I could remember exactly when" and said, "We should have the sample copy by early October, but we won't be getting the actual copies until just before the Cultural Festival."

It was now late August, a week to go before summer vacation ends. It would become bothersome to continue writing when classes resumed in September. As an energy saver, I do not like to leave work undone as it's inefficient. It is of course better to get it finished as soon as possible. Anyway, we've still got plenty of time.

The sound of Chitanda opening the lid of her boxed lunch could be heard. For girls her age, boxed lunches would usually be small and contain food as simple as small snacks. Though her box was just as small, the food it contained looked quite filling: Stewed butterbur, sweet omelettes and minced meat. Before taking out her chopsticks, she asked nonchalantly, "By the way, are any of you tied up this afternoon?"

As I was never the sort with anything better to do anyway, I do have time to kill. Naturally, I shook my head. So too did Ibara.

"I've got to take these notes to the publisher, but it won't be until this evening."

Satoshi thought for a while,

"I was thinking of heading to the Handicraft Club to see if I could help out. I haven't gotten my hands on sewing equipment for some time now. Besides, it's been a while since I hung out with the Student Council committee. But why not?"

As all three of us were in agreement, Chitanda looked as though she was the happiest person alive. Seeing her smile, I suddenly had a bad feeling. Though I wouldn't go so far say this was based on experience, I was just apprehensive of trouble, that's all.

As she placed her chopsticks down, she said with vigour, "Then, let's watch a preview!"

Preview?

I had no idea what she was talking about. Did something happen which I have no knowledge of? Without thinking, I turned to look at Satoshi, who

simply shook his head to indicate he too knew nothing. Ditto for Ibara, who looked puzzled.

"Chi-chan, what preview are you talking about? A movie?"

"Yes... Umm, it's not really a movie, but more like a videotaped movie."

Videotaped movie? Surely she means home-made movie.

"Is it with the Movie Studies Club?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"Not really."

"Then, the Home Movie Studies Club?"

*Stop being stupid, Satoshi.* Both Ibara and I stared coldly at his smiling face, though he continued smiling as usual and said, "I'm sure it exists! If there exists a Classics Club, surely a Home Movie Studies Club would exist as well."

Satoshi dispelled his joke right away, true to his motto of "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away." If he says it exists, then it probably does exist. This was not something to be surprised about, as Kamiyama High School does have a huge variety of arts-based clubs out there.

But still Chitanda shook her head.

"It's not that either. It's an exhibition movie made by Class 2-F."

"Wow, a class exhibition."

Ibara nodded in admiration.

"Don't think my class would have the energy to organize their own exhibition, as everyone is busy with their own clubs."

Indeed. Even for my class 1-B, no one made any proposals to organize something for the Cultural Festival in the class's name, as everyone was tired out by their own club activities. Besides, holding an exhibition would be quite a huge task. Come to think of it, this would make Satoshi pretty amazing, as he's busy with the Classics Club, Handicraft Club, and Student Council.

"Some Class 2-F students belonging to various sports teams decided they too want to take part in the Cultural Festival. As I know someone from Class 2-F, I was invited to their movie preview in order to ask for my opinion of it. How about it? Are you interested?"

"Yeah, I'll come!"

Satoshi agreed without even batting an eyelid. Then again, anything that interests him would elicit such a reaction.

Ibara raised her brows slightly and asked, "What kind of movie is it?"

"Umm, I hear it's a mystery movie."

That answer was enough to satisfy Ibara.

"Sounds entertaining. Sure, I'll come as well."

"I thought you hated artistic movies, Mayaka,"

"I don't dislike them... This one's made by people with an interest in movies, after all."

Indeed, no one would think along the lines of wanting to watch a movie made by people who just "want to take part in the Cultural Festival".

Now, what about me?

To be honest, I'm not exactly that interested in movies. I've never felt like watching any movie, whether it was arthouse movies or blockbuster movies. As to why that is, I'm not too sure myself. Probably something to do with watching movies being too time-consuming, I was told that I'm

missing half the fun of my life as a result. I don't exactly hate watching them, and there were some movies which I was fond of...

Anyway, guess I'll go home.

Before I could speak, Chitanda cheerfully opened her mouth.

"Then it's decided! We're all going then!"

"No, I..."

"Actually, besides myself, I was told to bring three more people along with me. I was thinking that there are three of you here in the Classics Club; the number is just right."

She's not even listening.

Smiling mischievously, Satoshi pointed his thumb at me and said, "Chitanda-san, Houtarou seems to have something to say."

"Oreki-san, you're coming, right?"

Ugh.

"... Aren't you?"

Argh.

Why was it that I could never figure out how to handle Chitanda every time? No matter what kind of responses I thought up beforehand, she was bound to make me go. Of course I could have chosen to just turn her down without feeling guilty, but the problem was I could find no reason to refuse her.

I shrugged my shoulders in resignation. Whatever, there was nothing for me to do even if I went home now anyway.

The Audio/Visual Room had its curtains drawn, blocking out the light of the setting sun from outside, turning the room dark.

From within that darkness a female student emerged suddenly. The reason for such an illusion probably had something to do with the navy blue dress she was wearing, which blended well with the darkness.

Chitanda called out to her.

"I've come as you requested me to."

She walked towards us, and it was only then I could make out her features.

Her height was similar to Chitanda's, perhaps a bit taller, while her figure was slim. Her eyes were slightly raised and small, and her face looked refined. It wouldn't be too far off to describe her as pretty, though to me she felt more stern than pretty. While it was hard to determine whether she was a year older than us, there was a sense of majestic solemnity exuding from her. Rather than a high school student, she felt more like a stereotypical police officer or teacher... no, more like a female Self Defense Force officer, with a rank no lower than Major. Speaking in a calmly soft voice, she said, "Ah, so you've come."

She looked at each one of us and continued, "Welcome. You have my thanks for taking the time to come."

Chitanda slowly introduced us one by one.

"This is Ibara Mayaka-san, Fukube Satoshi-san and Oreki Houtarou-san. Like me, they're all members of the Classics Club."

The girl seemed to give a rather ambiguous expression as we were being introduced. I couldn't tell if she was smiling or looking depressed. But she soon reverted to her previous expression and bowed to us.

"Pleased to meet you... My name is Irisu Fuyumi."

As she introduced herself, Satoshi reacted at once and raised his voice in exaltation.

"Ah, just as I thought, you're Irisu-sempai! I knew I'd seen you somewhere before."

"Your name is Fukube Satoshi-kun, right? I'm sorry, but have we met before?"

"You attended the meeting for the Cultural Festival Organizing Committee during the end of June, right?"

"I can't quite remember, did something happen?"

Regardless of whether she really forgot or was playing dumb, Irisu answered as such. Satoshi continued cheerfully, "I saw the way you resolved the conflict between the musical clubs and the drama clubs. Truth be told, I was amazed! Since then I've always wanted to meet with you at least once!"

"Ah, now I remember," she replied bluntly, "I didn't do anything particularly special then."

"No, really, you were great. I still remember it now; three times you urged the chairperson to duly restore order at once so members could voice their opinions without interruptions. The conflict was sorted out in less than five minutes as a result. I virtually gave a standing ovation in the bottom of my heart, as Irisu-sempai felt more like the chairperson back then."

If Ibara was not the sort to give compliments, then it was also rare for Satoshi to give praise to someone in such an over the top way. Now here's the interesting part, how would Irisu Fuyumi react to such a compliment? I listened intently as I wondered.

Yet despite Satoshi's gaze of admiration, she hardly reacted much and said, "Is that so?"

"Irisu-san, you did say you weren't that interested in what happens around school, right?" Chitanda asked, to which Irisu nodded.

"Fukube-kun was part of the Committee on my behalf as club president, so that meeting probably did happen. So please don't be too startled by his words."

"I see. I wasn't really startled though."

Satoshi looked dejected as she said that. Ibara then asked Chitanda, "Chi-chan, how are you acquainted with her?"

"Irisu-san? ...Our families are quite close to each other. Irisu-san would often look after me when I was younger."

So the Chitanda Clan does have people to hang out with as childhood friends, that sure is some luxury the Oreki Clan couldn't afford. They sure are a prominent clan. Come to think of it, was Irisu's clan also just as famous? I'm not quite sure myself. Anyway, it probably doesn't concern Irisu Fuyumi herself.

"Anyway,"

Irisu returned to the subject at hand, and showed us the object she was holding in her hand. The rectangular object seemed to be a video cassette.

"You have been invited today to watch this tape. As I'm sure you've heard from Chitanda already, this video is a movie made by my class. My wish is for you to watch the movie and give us your honest feedback."

"We look forward to doing so."

So said Chitanda.

Seemed like a real movie preview, alright. But what for? As the question popped in my head, I asked, "Is that all we have to do?"

Irisu looked straight at me with her grim gaze. Feeling the pressure from her gaze, I continued, "Just watch, and then provide feedback?"

"Is that so strange?"

"Even if we really do give our critique, you're not going to amend the movie, are you? Surely a preview is mainly for the purpose of advertisement, where you ask people to spread the word about your movie, isn't it?"

For some reason, Irisu nodded as though satisfied.

"A good question. Indeed, there's no point in just watching this movie. I will answer your question, but it would be better if you could first watch the movie. Shall we?"

Hmm, something didn't feel right. But due to her efficient answer, I said no more.

Upon seeing my agreement, Irisu continued, "We have yet to give this movie a name. For now it simply goes by the working title 'Mystery'. When the video ends, there's something we would like to ask of you, for that purpose, we wish for you to watch it first."

This time it was Ibara's turn to speak.

"If it's called 'Mystery', then is it a detective movie?"

"It wouldn't be wrong to call it that."

"Then may we take memos during the movie?"

"Of course. Do write as many details as you see."

That said, we left all our stuff in the Geology Room. As Ibara was about to ask if we could go back to get our bags, Satoshi spoke.

"I'll do the memo taking then."

And duly took out a notebook from the drawstring bag that he always carries along... I didn't know he'd brought that inside as well.

Irisu looked at her simply designed silver wrist watch and said, "Now, let us start. Please take a seat."

As suggested, we took the seats nearest to us. Satoshi opened his notebook while Irisu headed towards the control room. Before entering the iron door, she turned to us and said, "Enjoy the movie."

As she closed the door, a mechanical sound could be heard. A white screen slowly descended before us. We duly sat upright and leaned as far back as possible.

By the way, Irisu sure didn't prepare enough for this preview. She should at least have provided us with some popcorn.

A movie whose title had not yet even been decided should normally not exist. Yet an image appeared before us. It was none other than Kamiyama High School, which we were all used to seeing. It showed a classroom with tables and chairs lined up tidily. A look outside the window showed that the time was during sunset.

A narrator began to speak in a husky male voice.

*"It all began when a group of determined students from Class 2-F decided to participate in the Kanya Festival in order to leave behind memories of their high school life. So they held a meeting one day after school to decide what to do."*

By the way, "Kanya Festival" is the nickname for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, though we in the Classics Club do not call it as such. As for the reason, that's another long story.

A group of students then appeared on the screen. Six of them in total, seated around tables arranged facing each other. This must be the meeting scene

that the narrator just mentioned. The camera then showed each person while the narrator introduced them with their names.

First off was "Kaitou Takeo", a muscular male student who looked as though he belonged to some martial arts team. Sporting a crew cut, he was the tallest of the six students.

Second was "Sugimura Jirou", a slim looking student and the only bespectacled male student. Perhaps due to having the camera pointed at him, he couldn't remain steady.

Third was "Yamanishi Midori", a girl with tanned skin and dyed brown hair going down to her shoulder. Though a few seconds elapsed between various shots of her, her hair seemed to have grown a bit already.

Next was "Senoue Mamiko", a short girl with a slightly wide girth. Rather than plump, it might have something more to do with her round face instead.

Following her was "Katsuda Takeo", a guy with rather good looks. Though his hair was dyed reddish, he felt like more of the serious sort of student.

Finally, "Kounosu Yuri", a plain-dressed girl who looked quite relaxed despite having the camera facing her. She was the shortest of all the girls.

As their names were being introduced, Satoshi quickly scribbled them down in his notebook. Most of the name spellings were guessed as they weren't written on the screen.

After the introductions, the next scene showed the bespectacled Sugimura speak.

*"How about we visit the Narakubo area?"*

*Ugh* Ibara could be heard groaning. I knew how she felt, since the guy was reading his lines in a deadpan manner.

*"The Narakubo area?"* asked Yamanishi, whose hair length varied depending on the scene. The red-headed Katsuda replied, *"I think I've heard of that area, it's in Furuoka Town, if I remember correctly."*

*"Exactly, it's an abandoned mining village. It was born during the mining boom, though there's hardly anyone there now."*

It was deadpan dialogue all the way, but that was to be expected. Chitanda did say these were people from sports teams who wanted to take part in the Cultural Festival, after all. Can't really expect them to perform like the Drama Club.

The well-built Kaitou raised his arm to speak.

*"Research in an abandoned village, huh? Sounds good to me."*

*"It would be good to go there once, as it does have an appeal that makes it worth visiting. A village with a history worth one's lifetime, that sounds interesting."*

Yamanishi's line here was slightly better as she imbued it with some emotion. It's probably her genuine feeling about the place. Meanwhile, the round faced Senouchi responded with an equally good performance, *"The material may sound interesting, but it's an abandoned ruin, isn't it? Not exactly my type of place."*

Kounosu, who wore a downcast look all this time, interjected, *"I know how to get to Narakubo... It's deep within the mountains. If we walk from the nearest bus stop, we'll get there in about an hour."*

*"Eh~"*

Yamanishi didn't sound too pleased. She's probably the character that complains a lot. On the other hand, Kaitou looked rather relaxed.

*"We should be able to handle it if it's just an hour. We could ride bikes there, and even have a picnic while we're there."*

*"Then it's decided. Our exhibition for the Cultural Festival will be a research into the history of the Narakubo area."*

Sugimura then gave a dissenting opinion, citing that just covering an abandoned village isn't interesting enough. He was backed by Yamanishi, who preferred to go somewhere else. Senoue suggested it could be fixed by presenting the story from an interesting perspective. When asked how it could be done, Sugimura suggested covering it like an adventure story, but was rejected for being too traditional. Kounosu then suggested covering the occultish aspect of the area, which was approved for being interesting. Though Sugimura countered that more research would be needed as there were hardly any ghost stories from that area. What followed was an awkward series of give and take between the classmates as they debated heatedly amongst themselves on which ideas to adopt and which to reject. That was the main flow of this initial scene. As the scene blacked out, the narrator spoke again.

*"A week later, the group headed towards the Narakubo area in Furuoka Town."*

As the screen faded back in, the school scenery was replaced by that of a mountainous forest amidst the midsummer heat. This was no doubt the Narakubo area.

I knew where Furuoka Town was. It's about 20 kilometers north of Kamiyama City. It was once a prosperous town due to a rich deposit of lead or some other metal in the mines nearby, but like any other town that solely relies on one industry to prosper, it has since fallen into hard times once the mine was exhausted. But what of the Narakubo area?

That was the topic Ibara and Satoshi were discussing.

"Fuku-chan, you heard of Narakubo?"

Unsurprisingly, Satoshi of course knew.

"Yup, it used to be the main mining area for the Furuoka Mines. While getting there is inconvenient, at its height it was pretty prosperous."

He then went on to list a few famous enka<sup>[2]</sup> singers.

"... These were the sort of celebrities that they managed to invite to perform in the area."

Ibara looked a little surprised. So did I, for the names Satoshi listed were quite prominent.

"However,"

As Satoshi was about to continue, Chitanda cut him short.

"It's about to start."

As the picture moved along the dense forest, it showed a group of students. Naturally they were in their appropriate casual wear for such hot weather. Each carried their own rucksack, though we had no idea what was inside of them.

Yamanishi stood upright and said, "*Sure is hot. We've been walking for some time, are we there yet?*"

Sugimura replied, "*Almost. About five minutes, I guess.*"

*"That's what you said a while ago. Darn, it's so hot, I'm tired already."*

*"Well, you're not the only one who's hot, so hurry up and keep walking."*

So said Kaitou. And they all began to walk again, with the camera following them.

The Narakubo area indeed looked like it was situated deep within the mountains. While there were signs of human activity along the road, they were largely covered up by the forest. Amidst the bushes one could occasionally catch a glimpse of the streets of Furuoka Town below the mountains. While the road was paved, one could see signs of damage. The asphalt on the pedestrian sidewalk looked as if it was about to come off in pieces the size of fists. Whether it was due to such poor walking conditions, the camera constantly shook as it moved along. If the actors were amateurs, then so was the cameraman. Even a layperson like me could tell the camera work looked unusual, resulting in a hard to see visual.

The shot then cut to another angle from behind the group. Before long, Sugimura, who led the group, straightened his glasses and pointed ahead.

*"We're here. That's Narakubo!"*

Everyone followed Sugimura's gaze, including the camera, and a basin within the mountain was shown. On top of the basin was a ruin.

For someone living in a modern city, to think that such a ruin could exist 20 kilometers from where I lived felt surreal. There were many single houses scattered with broken windows and roofs in disrepair. Some were virtually collapsed. If this place was the ore mine, then these houses would be the miners' houses. Disregarding any signs of human presence, these houses were now surrounded by a thick layer of ivy. An enamel signboard could be seen under what used to be a shophouse, further emphasizing the loneliness of the deserted townscape. I see, Sugimura's words weren't made up, this place was indeed worth visiting.

The camera panned quickly across such scenes. Maybe it had something to do with the cameraman's inexperience, or perhaps it was done to conceal the actors' crappy performances. At any rate, the next visual shown was quite intense.

Even the actors looked stunned by the scenery. As the camera faced towards what they were seeing, someone could be heard whispering "Wow". I had a feeling that line wasn't scripted.

But then, the scripted dialogue resumed once again.

*"I see. This is a good place to collect material,"* Said Katsuda, who took out an instant camera from his pocket and began snapping away. Senoue took a notebook out and began writing. After a brief pause, Kaitou began instructing in a loud voice, *"Anyway, we need to find a place to stay for the night. We'll start with the research after that."*

*"How about there then?"*

Kounosu pointed to one of the ruins in Narakubo. As the camera moved to where she was pointing, a large building could be seen, seemingly a theatre.

*"We should be safe from the rain if it's there."*

*"I see. Then let's go."*

The six of them then began to walk down the slope, and the scene faded out.

Upon fading in, the screen now showed the entrance of the theatre. The group stood before its two glass doors and looked up at the building. The camera panned up towards its dirty walls. Looking diagonally upwards, the theatre felt surreal.

The camera then returned to the group, where Kaitou opened the glass door, and each of them followed him into the theatre. The last one to enter was Kounosu, with her eyes looking down. She muttered, *"For some reason, I have a bad feeling about this."*

She then entered the theatre, and as the six of them entered the darkness within, the scene ended.

Both Satoshi and Ibara raised their voices unexpectedly. Satoshi looked delighted, while Ibara looked displeased.

*"Aha, a mansion mystery, huh?"*

*"Hmph, just a mansion mystery?"*

The next scene resumed within the mansion... sorry, I mean theatre. As there would be no electricity in an abandoned village, it was dark inside the building. Compared to the silhouettes of the buildings outside, which could be clearly seen under the summer sunlight, the visual inside was difficult to see, though not bad enough to not be able to make out the actors' faces. The flooring was made of stone, as their footsteps could be heard knocking on it as they walked.

*"It's full of dust..."* Yamanishi muttered as she swept the dust off her clothes and fiddled her hair. The blurry visuals probably had something to do with it actually being dusty. Walking beside her, Katsuda looked up and said, *"Seems like the building's still sturdy enough."*

Senouchi, still holding the notebook in her hand, turned and asked Sugimura, *"They've got quite the theatre built in these mountains, haven't they?"*

*"The ore mine was profitable, after all. In the past anyway. And it's exactly because the mine is so deep in the mountains that they decided to build something like this to entertain themselves."*

*"Ah...,"* whispered Satoshi, who had an interest in such trivia, and said to me, "Now they're saying something interesting."

It's not as if we were expecting some interesting dialogue to begin with anyway.

Kaitou then stamped his foot, creating a loud noise that echoed across the hall. As I wondered what was going on, the camera zoomed in on something besides their feet, which seemed to reflect what little light there was. It looked like some shattered glass.

*"While we're going to stay here for the night..."*

Kaitou raised his brow and continued, "*It's probably not safe right here, with all the glass shards around.*"

The camera then moved around. While it was hard to see, if this was the theatre, then they would be in the entrance lobby. From there, one could see the second floor, as well as two flights of stairs and one room. Once again, the camera moved up to show the second floor. It seemed the lobby was surrounded by an atrium. Sugimura and Katsuda then spoke respectively.

*"Guess we'll have to find somewhere suitable for sleeping then."*

*"You're right, before it gets dark."*

Nodding in agreement, Kaitou looked around and said, "*Let's split up to search then. Is there a map we could use?*"

*"How about this one?"*

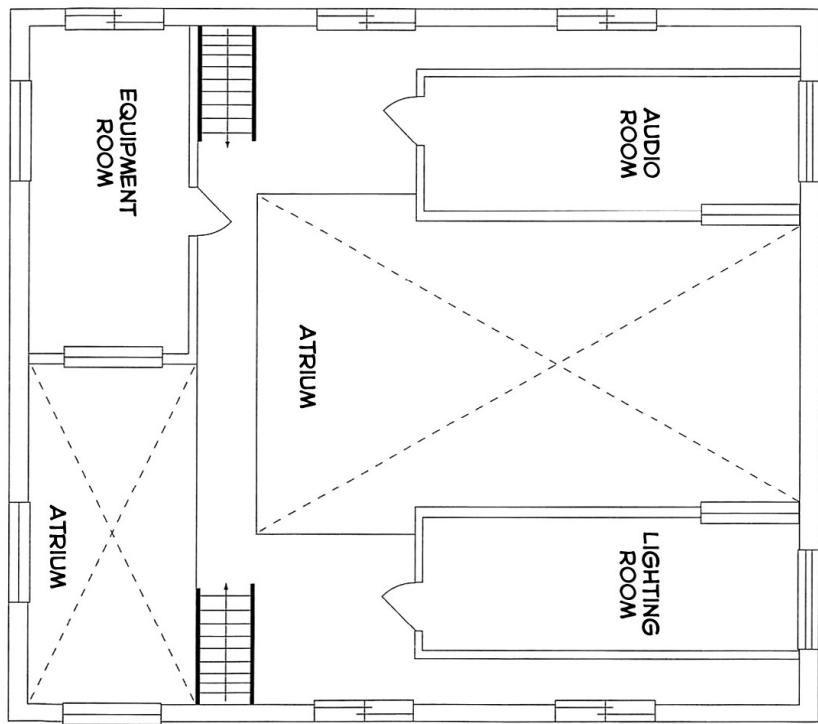
Kounosu beckoned them to come to the side of the entrance, and the movie cut to the next shot.

The following shot showed a map of the theatre which Kounosu was looking at. As it was dark and hard to see, someone should have shone some light on it with a torchlight.

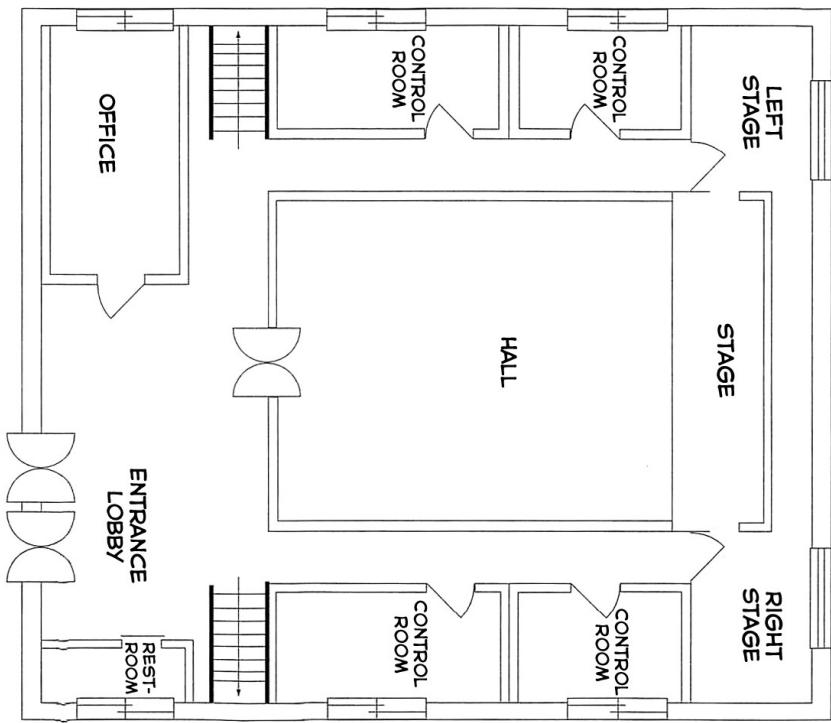
*"Aha, a map!"*

Satoshi exclaimed gratefully and began to copy that map into his notebook. Though the details were hard to read, as the screen was big, the words were still legible. As the map was shown for about 30 seconds, Satoshi was able to finish copying in time.

Z ↑ THEATRE 2/F



Z ↑ THEATRE 1/F



As shown on the map, the theatre was composed of two storeys. In front of the entrance was the entrance lobby, where the group was right now. Next to the lobby was the office. Going further in was a wall with a set of doors, which led to a hall, and naturally a stage at its end. On both sides of the hall were two corridors, with two control rooms on each side. At the end of those two corridors were the backstage areas. On the right side of the audience hall was the "Right Stage" and on the left, the "Left Stage".

Two flights of stairs on either side of the lobby led to the second floor. The stairs on the right led to the lighting room, with lighting equipment from its side to shine down onto the stage. Above the office was the equipment room, and opposite the lighting room was the audio room. As both sets of stairs led to the same place, it was possible to get to the equipment room via both sides.

The map was also what the group should have seen.

The screen then panned towards Kaitou as he spoke.

*"Then let's split up and have a look inside."*

*"Won't that be dangerous?"* asked Katsuda.

*"There's nothing but ruins here, what's so dangerous about it?"* asked Kaitou.

Senoue then asked, *"But, if we're going to enter the rooms, won't we need a key?"*

Kounosu answered in place of Kaitou, *"That won't be a problem. There's bound to be one..."*

She then entered the office next to the lobby. Incredibly, the office door itself wasn't locked. The camera followed Kounosu into the office, where she looked around two to three times, before noticing a keybox hanging by the wall.

*"Here we go."*

She then exited the office with one set of keys, leaving the other set inside the box, which the camera remained fixed on. Though the lighting was dark, on the key holder was clearly written "Master Key".

*"With this, we should be able to look around the building."*

Kounosu returned to the hall and showed the set of keys to Kaitou, who nodded and took out one key from the set.

*"Then, let's each take one and see if we can find any rooms that we could stay in. It doesn't matter if we end up in separate rooms. Also have a look for rooms where it's safe to start a fire or clear from any other danger."*

Everyone then took one key from the set held by Kounusu, and before long, all the keys were taken.

"You know," Satoshi said while smiling, "Realistically, who would ever think of everyone splitting up and moving on their own in such a situation?"

"Isn't entering an abandoned house in a ruin unrealistic enough? So what's wrong with this scene?"

Satoshi smiled even more, "Nope, nothing's particularly wrong. Since if they didn't split up, we would have no mystery. We're guaranteed one, after all."

"In other words,"

"Something is about to happen soon. I'll bet one cheese hotdog with you that by the time they're all gathered, they'll be one person short."

Sitting next to Satoshi, Ibara looked at me with a grim stare. She was probably saying, *Stop talking about irrelevant stuff and watch the movie already!* ... Even though I wasn't the one that started the conversation.

The screen then showed each member checking the map to find the room their key leads to, and disappearing into the darkness of the building one by one. First it was Kaitou, followed by Sugimura, Yamanishi, Senoue,

Katsuda and Kounosu. No one was left inside the lobby. The screen continued showing the empty lobby for a little while before cutting off.

Within the darkness, the narrator spoke again,

*"It was here that the incident happened."*

"Figures," said Satoshi.

*Shut up!* Ibara glared at us again.

The next scene opened at the entrance lobby.

Again there was nobody.

Kounosu was the first to return from the stairs on the right.

She was followed by Yamanishi, who came out of the left corridor.

Katsuda too emerged from the left corridor, who then asked the two that arrived before him, *"So? How did it go?"*

Yamanishi replied with a sulky expression, *"It was full of shattered mirror pieces. It's unusable without anything to sweep them away."*

Kounosu too shook her head.

*"I see. It's the same here."*

Senoue then descended from the stairs on the left. As she approached them, she made an 'X' with her hands to motion that her search was also

unsuccessful.

Katsuda looked upwards, and the camera duly followed his gaze. Thereupon, the equipment could be seen via the atrium. After showing the window of that room for an unusually long time, Katsuda could be heard shouting upwards, "*Sugimura, how goes your end?*"

Sugimura stuck his head out from the window and shouted, "*Though it's surprisingly pleasant inside, there's not much we could use to make fire with.*"

*"I see. Anyway, come down first."*

*"Okay."*

Sugimura promptly came downstairs. There were now five people in the lobby. It seemed all but one of them had returned. I see, so the "victim" has been decided. Yamanishi spoke.

*"Where's Kaitou-kun?"*

Katsuda shook his head.

*"Since we're all here, let's go look for him. I think he headed that way, right?"*

He pointed toward the right corridor. The rest all nodded in turn. With Katsuda leading, the group entered the right corridor, with the camera following them. As they went deeper, the light went dimmer, and before long, nothing could be seen.

Someone turned on a hand torch and illuminated a door in front of the corridor, which Katsuda opened. It was a control room, with a line of mirrors and a bunch of abandoned costumes scattered around. There was no one inside.

*"That's strange."*

*"Could he be in the backstage area?"*

Heeding that suggestion, they all went deeper into the corridor, which was even darker.

The hand torch was turned on again, where a door leading to the Right Stage was shown with a sign saying "Staff Entry Only". Katsuda tried turning the doorknob, but it wouldn't open.

*"What's wrong?"*

*"It won't open. Maybe it's locked."*

*"What do we do?"*

*"... There's another set of master keys in the office, can someone go get them?"*

Without knowing who was being addressed, someone went running off. The sound of footsteps overlapping could be heard; it sounded like two people had run off to get the key. The next cut showed the door lock being turned opened by the key, and the group entering upon opening the door.

Inside the Left Stage was a window. As the curtain was drawn open, the sunlight outside shone in. And in the centre of the sunlit room, someone was lying down on the floor. Naturally, it was Kaitou.

*"Kaitou!"*

Sugimura rushed towards him, followed by Katsuda. Sugimura knelt down before Kaitou and tried to lift Kaitou up, when he felt something in his palms. The camera moved to show what was within his palms. While it was hard to see with so little light, it seemed that Sugimura's palms were quite stained. He muttered, *"Blood..."*

Someone screamed. The camera turned to face the three girls standing by the door. Yamanishi was lost for words as she covered her mouth, Senoue held her hands together, while Kounosu gripped her fists. Blood stains were flowing out from the abdomen of the collapsed Kaitou, whose eyes were closed. It was just as well, as his crappy performance would have been

exposed if he chose to have his eyes opened. The camera then panned towards Kaitou's side, which showed his arm being severed. Probably some prop. The dark lighting helped raise the tension as the camera slowly revealed within the severed arm was the key that Kaitou had taken with him.

"Ahh..."

Someone gasped while watching the scene. It was Chitanda.

Back to the movie, Katsuda yelled, "*Kaitou! Dammit! Somebody help!*"

He quickly stood up and headed toward the window to try and open it, which was designed to be opened while pulling upwards. But as the window had not been used for so many years, it didn't seem to be able to open. Katsuda pressed his hands against the window frame and used his full strength to pull the window upward, which created a loud squeaking noise. Upon finally opening the window, he stuck his body out and looked outside. The camera showed what was outside the window - nothing but a thick layer of wild grass.

Katsuda returned inside and headed toward the stage. The screen suddenly went dark while going from the illuminated room into the dark stage; it was clear it was following Katsuda, who ran straight toward the Left Stage, where he came to a stop. The door connecting the Left Stage and the left corridor was blocked by some boards of squared timber.

"No way..."

The screen faded to black.

And then,

The movie seemed to have ended right there.

"....."

We waited for a little longer, but the screen didn't come back on.

"Huh, it's over?" Ibara whispered in an annoyed tone.

"..... Seems so."

As if on cue, upon Satoshi's response, a mechanical sound was heard, followed by the screen being drawn upwards. As though trying to stop the screen from withdrawing, Chitanda stretched her arms forward pitifully.

"Eh? Eh? But it's not over!"

"Maybe they're having some technical difficulties?" I said to her, though a voice from behind instantly replied, "No, that is incorrect."

As we turned around, Irisu had already exited the control room and stood behind us, holding the videotape in her hand.

"The tape indeed ends here."

She said in a calm tone. Of course she would know exactly when the tape ends. Satoshi asked, "So, is that the end of the story, if that's where you intended it to end?"

"Of course not."

Then it means that this tape was incomplete. I've never heard of a movie preview where people are invited to watch a movie that has yet to be completed.

Muttering under my breath, I asked, "Would you please care to explain what's going on? This 'preview' isn't gonna end here, is it?"

Irisu was constantly looking at me as she nodded.

"Of course not. But before that, I would like to hear something from all of you... What did you think of the movie you just saw? In terms of its cinematography?"

We exchanged glances with each other. I didn't know about Chitanda, but I was sure the rest of us were in agreement. Ibara replied on our behalf, "To be very honest, we thought it was crudely done."

That answer was to be expected.

"That was what I thought as well... You may probably have known this already, but the Kanya Festival is a festival mainly for the arts-related clubs. There was no place for activities by individual classes. However, our class was not content with that. We could not enlist the help of people with the required skills, as they're already busy with their own club activities, but despite that, we still decided to make something of our own. We merely wanted to show people the result of our passion and hard work."

She described such a bitter reality in a plain manner devoid of any emotion.

However, were they satisfied with just that? As I was thinking, Irisu spoke again.

"I thought this was good enough, as everyone is enjoying what they're doing and making something of their own. Even though the end product will end up being laughed at, they wouldn't be too concerned at all, as they're easily satisfied. I know it's quite silly, so I would please ask that you turn a blind eye to how crudely they made the movie."

"So it doesn't matter whether it's crudely done or not?"

Irisu nodded in answer to Ibara's question.

"It's not really too much to ask, is it? If it's well made, they would also be satisfied on a different level. Yet the essence of their objective remains the

same... Now, what do you think would happen if something calamitous occurred during the making of the movie?"

After thinking for a while, Satoshi replied, "The movie wouldn't be completed."

"Exactly. And we are not satisfied with that. However, we cannot complete the movie. As you have seen, the location for the movie is quite unique, and we could only go there to shoot during summer vacation."

"Are you having some problems with the cinematography?" Chitanda asked anxiously.

"While that's a problem as well, I'm sure they can sort that out eventually. Taking into consideration our traveling budget and script progress, our schedule was to film on location twice. According to our plans, we should be going once again this Sunday to complete the movie."

"But something else happened?"

Faced with my cold remark, Irisu responded truthfully, "Yes, we never expected assigning work to an unskilled amateur would create such strain. When we all decided on making a movie, it was agreed that it would be a mystery movie. However, we had no one capable of writing such a script. Only one person amongst us had any experience writing stories; her name is Hongou Mayu. She had some experience writing manga, so we entrusted her to come up with a script for a one-hour movie."

For someone who's never written any stories before, I had no idea how tough such an assignment was, though I noticed Ibara raising her brow. She too had experience writing manga, so she's probably sympathizing with Hongou.

"Hongou was amazing. She had managed to come up with a script despite not having any contact with mystery novels before. However, she was at her limit, and by the time she wrote up to the part where you saw in the movie, she collapsed."

Collapsed, meaning she's not alright. Chitanda gasped and asked, "What happened to her?"

"Gastritis from stress, a form of depression. Though it's nothing serious, it's not possible for her to continue her task, so we're seeking out a replacement writer."

Sounds like replacement on the battlefield.

"You're not seriously asking us to do that, are you?"

Taking over the role of screenwriter for them?

Irisu laughed softly and said, "Oh, no. We wouldn't impose on you so far. I merely invited you to a preview, and would like to ask one question of you... Who did you think was the killer?"

Come to think of it, the movie didn't seem to have anyone resembling a detective character despite this being a mystery movie. That was probably one of the reasons why the movie couldn't make any progress. The second reason was probably due to every actor being assigned similar screen time, resulting in the audience being unable to determine who will play the detective. However... While I was still far from convinced, Ibara was the first to reply.

"But Sempai, surely the movie must include scenes for us to deduce who the killer is before we could guess?"

Irisu shook her head and said, "You need not worry about that. Hongou said she had already written the outline of the resolution before she collapsed, and we should be able to get that part filmed in time."

Satoshi inquired further, "But if it's a script written by a beginner in detective fiction, surely she would have left clues before coming to the resolution, or it would seem quite awkward."

"That has also been taken care of. She managed to put in everything her wits had to offer. She did say she did some research into detective fiction after all. I believe she stayed true to both Knox and Chandler's Ten Commandments and Van Dine's Twenty Rules." [3]

Chitanda looked puzzled at the mention of the Ten Commandments; I probably did as well.

"Ten Commandments? As in 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'?"

Why did she have to quote such a minor Commandment of all Commandments? Satoshi answered confidently at Chitanda's question, "No, that's Moses' Ten Commandments. We're talking about Ronald Knox's Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction here, rules like 'No Chinaman must figure in the story'. Hongou-san must have studied those rules to ensure fair play - giving the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery."

Why can't a Chinaman appear in a story anyway? Does their appearance, no matter how entertaining it is, have something to do with politics or some other issue? Then again, these rules are often seen in science fiction as well... Though I don't think it has anything to do with fair play. I wonder if I could find the answer if I researched Knox?

As I was pondering these questions, Irisu concluded, "In other words, all the clues have been shown... so who do you think the killer is?"

Asking us to figure out who the killer was in an abandoned village deep within the mountains, huh? This sounds ridiculous.

Satoshi, Ibara and Chitanda all exchanged glances with each other.

"Who, you're asking me? That's kind of hard. Conclusions cannot be made from the database."

"You're right, I'm not confident I'll be able to solve this myself... Though I do suspect a few things."

"Um, is Kaitou-san confirmed dead already in the movie?"

Upon asking all the questions they wanted to ask, they all turned to look at me at the same time. I could feel my back drooping slightly as their gazes were fixed upon me. I tried to turn my eyes beyond their glare and said, "... What?"

"Nothing, I was just thinking this was perhaps a job for Houtarou."

Satoshi smiled impudently as usual.

"What job are you talking about?"

"The detective, of course."

I could totally imagine what sort of expression I was making then, which Satoshi was quick to describe.

"You look as though you don't like that."

I nodded silently. As a normal high school student and fervent energy saver, there's no way I would ever get myself involved in anything out of the ordinary. I feel troubled by being so overestimated. In response to my expression,

"It probably means you weren't paying enough attention to the movie," Chitanda interrupted with her voice raised, "So why don't we watch it one more time?"

Is she serious?

As though sensing my thoughts, Irisu intervened and said, "I'm just asking you for an opinion. You don't have to be too serious about it."

"Is that so? Then I think Yamanishi's the killer."

Chitanda turned her head to me and asked, "How come?"

"Because she had a terrible attitude?"

"Oreki!"

Ibara scolded me with a sharp voice, though I was hardly intimidated. Ibara's only scary when you've truly made a serious mistake, but I was not exactly wrong with my guess here.

"Then Katsuda, he looked quite muscular."

Satoshi sighed and crossed his arms.

"Hmm, you don't seem to be too eager about this? Even I feel like saying 'Stop saying strange stuff already'."

It's not exactly strange, but that itself won't do, as they don't seem to be convinced. I decided to confirm something with Irisu.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are you asking an outsider like us? If this question was conceived by Class 2-F, surely it ought to be figured out by someone from Class 2-F as well?"

As with before, Irisu nodded and replied, "We did discuss this question amongst ourselves, though we wish to receive more suggestions from outside. No matter what theories we proposed, we were still clueless in answering it. Like I said before, only those with the necessary skills can do the job required."

"Not even you could do it?"

"Unfortunately, no. More than anyone, I too would like to figure out who the killer is. Moreover, I have to take care of the filming operation, so I'm quite short on time here."

"In that case, why didn't you start anew with something other than mystery then?"

It was starting to become like a cross-examination. For the first time, Irisu lowered her eyes, though she still maintained her stern voice.

"I was not present in the original planning stages, as I happened to be in Hokkaido for the past three weeks. I only heard about the problem from the director upon returning to Kamiyama, and it was only the day before yesterday that I agreed to try and solve this problem. If I had been involved from the beginning, I would not have agreed to make a mystery movie."

*Then it has nothing to do with you, does it? You're just doing it out of pity for your classmates. ...* Though that's what I thought, naturally, I couldn't say that out loud.

So I modified my question a bit.

"Secondly, why us? I know you're acquainted with Chitanda, but it seemed like you had intended for us to come all along. There are about a thousand students in Kami High, why did you specifically choose the Classics Club?"

"Well, it's given that I knew Chitanda personally,"

We probably came because of that, as she knew Chitanda would probably be interested in it. Irisu then met my gaze and continued, "Furthermore, you are present."

"Me?"

That was a surprising answer. I could sense Chitanda, Satoshi and Ibara looking at me. Though it was mainly down to luck, those involved in investigating the "Hyouka" incident all seemed surprised at how it was solved. But how did an outsider like Irisu find out about that?

Irisu slowly explained the reason, "I have heard much about you from three people: The first is Chitanda here, the second is someone from outside the school, while the third is Toogaito Shouji. I'm sure you've met him before."

"Who?"

"Oreki! How can you forget!? He's the Wall Newspaper Club President!"

Oh! Him. Now I remember. Upon mentioning his name, I suddenly felt daunted.

Toogaito was a third year whom I crossed paths with before. To put a long story short, I managed to obtain knowledge of a dirty secret of his and used it to my advantage to blackmail him. It's not something I'd like to recall too much. Irisu seemed to be able to read my thoughts as she said, "Don't worry. Toogaito does not think badly of you at all."

Well then, do tell him I bless his good soul.

"When I realized there was no one else who had the skills to finish the story, I immediately thought of you. If it was you, you might be able to play the role of the 'detective'."

"....."

"That's amazing, Houtarou! Your talents are being recognized!"

I glared at Satoshi for his teasing before returning my gaze to Irisu and sighed. Me? A detective? I gave my honest reply.

"I feel quite uneasy to have such expectations placed on me."

Surprisingly, Irisu was quick to withdraw her stance.

"You're right."

She sighed and continued, "I was merely making a gamble while deciding to invite you to watch the preview, in the hope that the problem could be solved as soon as possible. But I was indeed naive... I apologize for causing you such distress."

She bowed upon saying that.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

In awe of her vigour, even if I had any further questions, I was left speechless.

Upon confirming there were no more questions, Irisu quickly wrapped things up.

"Then this ends the preview. Thank you for coming."

However, the story did not end here. I had totally forgotten the presence of a certain person. Indeed, it was none other than Chitanda Eru, the very incarnation of Curiosity itself, who would go to all lengths to solve every mystery the universe had to offer.

As Irisu was about to turn away, Chitanda called out to her, "Please wait!"

"... Is something the matter?"

"Um, then how would the story end? What's going to happen next?"

Irisu said as she turned back around, "We don't know, we're still working on it. But you must be prepared to accept that it may never be finished."

"That would be terrible."

Terrible? ... Well, Irisu's feeling terrible as well. Chitanda then stepped up her reasoning.

"Irisu-san, if what you said was true, then it would be a pity if the movie could not be completed. I don't want that to happen."

Well, neither does Irisu, but even if you say that...

"Besides, besides,"

I started to raise my brows worryingly. This was bad, something was about to happen. Irisu probably made the right choice in picking Chitanda to solve her problem.

"Why did the screenwriter Hongou Mayu-san, upon being entrusted with the role, decide that the role was so important that she worked till she collapsed? ... I'm *really* curious about it."

Standing beside me, Satoshi spoke.

"Houtarou, whether it's as a 'detective' or whatever, don't you think we have insufficient data needed to solve this?"

"Indeed."

"That means we'll just have to gather the clues ourselves, right?"

It's not as easy as it sounds.

Yet upon hearing that, and this was probably Satoshi's plan all along, Chitanda quickly turned towards us with great vigour and said, "Oreki-san, let's do this! We must find out what Hongou-san's legacy was!"

"Hongou's still alive."

Irisu calmly corrected her, though I had no idea whether our lady heard that.

Satoshi spoke once again.

"Mayaka, how goes the progress for the anthology? You think we could take time off for a week to solve this?"

Ibara replied with a sour look, "The only one not making any progress is you, Fuku-chan. I've pretty much finished my allotted segment already."

"N-now, don't sweat the small stuff."

Ibara then added as though muttering, "I too would like to see this movie completed. Despite its poor cinematography, I never thought images of abandoned villages would look so stunning."

As for me...

I really was no good at dealing with Chitanda. Since it had come to this, even if I had refused, I would not have been able to escape from her. If I had tried to escape, I would merely end up expending lots of energy, which would be a waste. And I hate wasting energy.

But, this time...

I just didn't feel like accepting Irisu's offer to play the role of "detective". Despite my energy saving motto, this time my reason was altogether different. I didn't know whether the other three realized it or not, but even if they did, I decided to ignore them as I said coldly, "Let's say we accept this challenge. What if we fail? Do we have to bow apologetically on all fours to the dissatisfied members of Class 2-F?"

For starters, we were not members of the Detective Fiction Study Club. We're members of the Classics Club, a club whose activities were yet to be known. For me, I firmly believed that solving the "Hyouka" incident was mainly due to luck. As Irisu's offer promised little in return, why should we bear the burden of taking care of Class 2-F's project?

Chitanda felt as though she had had a bucket of water poured on her upon hearing these harsh words. Ibara felt like rebutting, and was about to open her mouth.

It was at this perfect timing that Irisu decided to offer a compromise.

"Then, we will not ask you to play the role of 'detective'. As there are also people in my class that would like to take on that role. Instead, what do you think if we ask you to act as 'observer' and decide whether their deductions make sense?"

An observer, huh? If it's to determine whether someone is the killer or not, then that role would be akin to judge and jury. If that's the case, our burden would be considerably lighter.

As an energy saver, my urge to turn down this offer had increased, though it was probably not enough to convince Chitanda, whose eyes were beginning to tear up.

So I said reluctantly, "We can do that, I guess."

Upon hearing that, Chitanda smiled again, while Ibara crossed her arms, Satoshi gave me a thumbs-up, and Irisu bowed her head in admiration. Darn, I got dragged into something bothersome again. Oh well, I sighed in my heart and thought, if all we had to do was sit and listen, then I could do that.

... By the way, for an instant, upon raising her head, Irisu looked as though she had just successfully accomplished something. Was that my imagination?

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ Oreki seems to be referring to the idiom "枯れ木も山の賑わい" which means "even the dead trees contribute to the mountain's prosperity". It carries the meaning "even things that seem useless have their uses" and also "something seems useless only because we don't know what its use is". Oreki is probably comparing himself to the tree from this idiom, saying that he is useless, or that he doesn't know what his use is in this situation.
2. ↑ [Wikipedia](#)
3. ↑ [1] [2] [3]

## 2 - "The Murder in the Abandoned Village of Furuoka"

Upon returning to the Geology Room after returning from the preview, Satoshi spoke.

"Irisu Fuyumi is pretty well-known, you know?"

"Really? So does she have three different faces on her head or something like that?"

"Well, I dunno about that, but I wouldn't be surprised if she did. I've mentioned this before, but Irisu belongs to one of the clans that rival the four Exponential Clans."

The Exponential Clans refer to the Juumonjis, Sarusuberis, Chitandas and Manninbassis, seemingly four of the most prominent old families in Kamiyama City. By the way, this rather weird term for them seems to have been coined by Satoshi himself, as I've only heard Satoshi use it.

Satoshi pointed to the streets outside the window.

"The Irisus run the Rengou Hospital over there."

The building that Satoshi was pointing at seemed to be Rengou Hospital, alright. It's a private general hospital with facilities on par with those run by the Japanese Red Cross. As it's only a five minute walk from Kamiyama High School, any students that get injured or sick would end up visiting them. I see, so that's why Irisu Fuyumi is famous.

Though I was starting to be convinced, Satoshi didn't stop there.

"But that's not the only thing Irisu Fuyumi is famous for. She has another nickname."

"Really?"

"So how about it, Houtarou? Wanna guess what it is?"

While I have no intention of attending a game show, I decided to think about it upon being asked. If it's Satoshi that's asking such a question, then Ibara-style nicknames like "Iri-chan" would be out of the question. Since she has that ice-cold aura of grace about her, something that would make her classmates shiver, then...

"Theresa."<sup>[1]</sup>

Satoshi smiled broadly.

"Amazing! You were actually very close. It's 'the Empress' to be precise. Just think about it, to be entrusted with solving something by 'the Empress', doesn't it sound awesome?"

The Empress, yet another very exaggerated nickname. For her to be honoured with such a name...

"Is she sadistic or what?"

Ibara, who was speaking to Chitanda for some reason, now turned around to interject, "That would be a dominatrix, not an empress."

She then turned her back to us again. I admire her ability to quip at will.

"I see. Then why is she called 'the Empress'?"

"Well, she's pretty and all that, plus she's good at making people do her bidding with a cool attitude. It always seemed like she could control the people around her with ease."

"Really?"

"Take the incident with the Student Council Committee meeting with her that I mentioned earlier as an example. Irisu-sempai managed to see through to the root of the problem between the three debating members, and directed them into taking turns listing their points, thus leading to a resolution as a result."

Sounds amazing. She was able to deduce a problem just from listening. She seemed to be the sort of commander-type person. Yet because of that, things have now developed in a way not to my liking. I had no intention of doing anything for anyone, but I've ended up doing an errand for her.

As I crossed my arms, Satoshi tapped his fingers on the table. Just as he had stopped his rhythmic tapping, I saw him grinning once again.

"Besides,"

"Besides what?"

"Since we're talking about 'the Empress'<sup>[2]</sup> and all that stuff, how about we assign a symbol for ourselves as well?"

"A symbol?"

For a short while, I was led on by Satoshi. Before long, he continued, "First, Mayaka would be 'Justice'<sup>[3]</sup>."

"The Empress" and "Justice", huh? As a person of reason who hardly believed in any superstitions, even I knew he was referring to Tarot cards. Satoshi spoke in a voice which Ibara could hear, so I duly kept quiet to see how things would develop.

As expected, Ibara snapped back at us from across the classroom, "And why am I a guardian of justice anyway?"

Satoshi turned around to face her.

"Not a guardian of justice. You're confusing it with 'Judgment'<sup>[4]</sup>. People of the 'Justice' types tend to be stern with themselves, right?"

He seemed to be blowing off steam. While I had absolutely no idea what meaning the card 'Justice' holds, Satoshi's description pretty much matched Ibara quite well. As I was thinking that, Ibara turned to glare at me.

"What's so funny!?"

"Hey! You should complain to Satoshi, not me."

"Even if Fuku-chan was talking about me, you weren't exactly listening, so you're not supposed to comment either!"

... What a way to justify things.

Her interest ignited, Ibara got up from her seat, and so too did Chitanda. The girls then walked towards us. Ibara leaned her flat chest towards Satoshi and asked, "So, what would Fuku-chan be then?"

"Me? Hmm, I'd be 'the Fool'<sup>[5]</sup>, I guess... No, more like 'the Magician'<sup>[6]</sup>. 'The Fool' would be Chitanda-san."

How thoughtlessly rude for him to call someone a fool. Yet Chitanda didn't seem to have taken it badly. Just to be safe, Satoshi added, "I don't mean any disrespect, by the way. But I'm sure Chitanda-san gets what I'm saying."

Chitanda slowly opened her mouth.

"Yes, I do. Now that you mention it, I do match the description for 'the Fool', I don't think it's anything disparaging, but... Fukube-san, you do indeed suit the image of 'the Magician'."

Seems like they were talking about the hidden meaning behind each Tarot card. While Satoshi and Chitanda each understood what the other was saying concerning Tarot cards, I was completely out of the loop. While Ibara was also involved in the conversation, she probably didn't get it either.

"Then what about Oreki-san?"

Satoshi replied right away, "That would be easy, 'Strength'<sup>[7]</sup>."

"? Why is that? I thought he would be more like 'the Star'<sup>[8]</sup>..."

"No, he's definitely 'Strength', fits him to a tee."

He smiled as I slowly realized he was jesting with me. Chitanda tilted her head while trying to think, but still could not comprehend what he was saying. Neither me nor Ibara could find anything to say either.

"But why is that?"

"Well, no, 'the Star' would also suit him."

Satoshi somehow evaded her question. Chitanda now tilted her head from left to right, but fortunately, she didn't go "I'm *really* curious about it" this time. I leaned further back in my chair as I frowned.

"... Hmph. It's not like you're complimenting me, anyway."

"Oh, no, that's not the case at all!"

He smiled briefly again. An annoying fellow he was.

The subject then moved on to something else. While the day turned out to be quite unproductive, efficiency-wise, not much energy was expended anyway. I'm sure things will be the same tomorrow.

The following day.

The Classics Club gathered in full force at the club room - though we've only got four members in total. Its objective today was to kill time..... sorry, I mean, to review a murder mystery. To think that I would take time off this sacred summer vacation just to come to school, I've become rather active lately, or so I joked to myself. All in all, this was all Chitanda's fault..... To

be truthful, I didn't want to come, but guessing my intentions, Satoshi called me and said if I didn't, our most gracious lady would personally come to my house herself to pick me up, in all her vigour as well.

For some reason, Chitanda seemed pretty pleased as she grinned, which was in contrast to me sighing besides her. On the other hand, Satoshi and Ibara began discussing today's agenda,

"Guess we would have to visit the scene of crime after all."

"But that's all the way in Furuoka Town. Are we seriously going there? Though it's approachable by bus, it's still quite a long train ride away."

"A detective does not do his work on foot, huh? That said, it's only twenty kilometres from here, should be just right if we go by bike."

"Rather than working on foot, this feels more like a standard police field investigation than detective work....."

Twenty kilometres? Gimme a break. I thought we were supposed to just listen to what the "detectives" of Class 2-F have to say.

But how exactly do we hear from them? We have hardly met anyone from Class 2-F, so it'd be awkward for lower classmen like us to suddenly go and ask them for their opinion. Besides, we have absolutely no idea who we should first listen to. As I was wondering what we should do, I noticed Chitanda was looking quite calm.

"Chitanda, is something going to happen today?"

Upon being asked, she nodded.

"Really? So what is it?"

"Irisu-san will be sending a representative to guide us to hear from the movie crew."

A representative? That means this has all been sorted out already. Come to think of it, this made sense.

"When did you sort this out with her anyway?"

Chitanda spoke as though revealing a secret,

"Actually..... I was using a browser."

A browser?

"Stop saying things so strangely. Just say you communicated via the internet, it's not so strange nowadays, is it?"

"Just a moment there, Houtarou. Technically, she's using the world wide web, not the internet."

I ignored Satoshi's protests and continued,

"So, what did you do over the internet?"

"I was in a student-only chatroom on the Kamiyama High School website."

"You got the expression wrong, Chitanda-san. It's accessing the chatroom *via* the website."

Chitanda ignored Satoshi as well and went on,

"And I communicated with Irisu-san there. She said she may not be able to come herself, but she's arranged a place for us to meet with her classmates, and will send a guide to lead us to them."

Hmm, she was quite prepared for this. Though it may be somewhat bothersome, at least for an Empress, she wasn't simply sitting on her throne with her legs stretched out doing nothing.

Chitanda looked up at the clock above the blackboard. It was just past one.

"It is almost near the appointed time. She should be here any moment now."

As though right on cue, the door opened quietly.

The person that entered the Geology Room was a girl, who was shorter than Chitanda but taller than Ibara. In other words, she was of average height. Overall, she was of small stature. If there was anything special about her appearance, it would be her short hair, which reached to the back of her neck. While I'm no expert in fashion, at least I knew such a mature hairdo was quite rare for girls her age. Coupled with her thin lips, she gave me the impression of a polite person.

Upon entering, she gave us a deep bow.

"Is this the Classics Club room?"

Chitanda replied right away, "Yes, it is... Are you from Class 2-F?"

"Yes. My name is Eba Kurako. Pleased to meet you."

She bowed courteously once again, and deeply as well, despite the fact that we were her underclassmen. The girl called Eba then raised her head up to look at us and spoke in a business-like manner.

"Today, I have been entrusted by Irisu to guide you to meet a member of our class project's filming division... Shall I lead the way if you're ready?"

It's not like we have anything to prepare anyway. I stood up to indicate I could leave right away, and the others did the same. Eba nodded and said, "Then let us go."

We duly left the Geology Room at her words. While we were merely going to listen to people's opinions, I just had a bad feeling about this, as though we were merely going along with the flow.

The sound of the brass band blowing their instruments was heard on the corridor. As I was wondering why that melody sounded so familiar, I realized it was the theme song for Lupin III. Humming along with the tune,

Satoshi approached my side as though amplifying the music and said to me, "She's like a butler, isn't she?"

Was he talking about Eba? Thinking about it, she sure did match the description.

The music faded a bit as we descended down the stairs. Eba then stopped and turned to face us.

"Feel free to ask any questions you'd like."

Speaking in a casual tone, Ibara was the first to ask the first question that came to her mind.

"Who will we be speaking to today?"

"His name is Nakajou Junya."

I looked at Satoshi to ask whether he knew this guy, to which he shook his head. Didn't sound like someone famous, I guess.

"What does he do?"

"He's the assistant director of the filming division, so he's most familiar with the scenes that have been shot."

Chitanda then asked, "When you say filming division, does that mean there are other divisions involved in making the movie as well?"

Eba nodded.

"The project is split between three divisions. The filming division was the one that went to Narakubo to film on location. The other two divisions are the props division and the marketing division."

"Then the actors would come from..."

"The filming division, as it's the biggest division with twelve people in total. This is followed by seven from the props division and five in the

marketing division."

That's quite a lot of people. To be honest, I was in awe of them.

Chitanda then asked a natural question.

"What about you, Eba-sempai?"

As with before, Eba answered without delay.

"I was not a member of the project... as I wasn't particularly interested in it."

I grinned, as that was my preferred type of answer as well.

We then came to the connecting corridor linking the Special Block with the General Block. As its name suggests, the General Block contains regular classrooms. There was less activity related to the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival on this side. Unlike the Special Block, there were more empty classrooms.

Eba stopped right in front of one of those seemingly empty classrooms. Looking up at the plate, it indicated the classroom for 2-C. But Irisu should be from 2-F. Upon seeing our faces, Eba explained, "It would be better to discuss in a quieter classroom, as I was told. As Class 2-C have no exhibition whatsoever, no one will disturb you during your discussions."

She then opened the door.

It was a typical classroom. Symbolized by the usual desks, chairs, teaching podium and blackboard, there was nothing else.

Sitting at the front of the room was a guy with his arms crossed. He seemed to be of the muscular type with his hulky arms. He also had thick eyebrows and a stubbly chin, though it did seem like he had shaved somewhat... This should be the assistant director, Nakajou Junya. Upon seeing us, he stood up with composure and spoke with an unnecessarily loud voice.

"So you're the guys who're familiar with the mystery?"

So he said.

I felt tempted to reply that we were not exactly familiar with anything, as I wasn't particularly interested in making fun of people. As we kept silent, Eba spoke on our behalf.

"Yes. These are the capable people that Irisu managed to find. So do be respectful."

She then turned towards us and introduced Nakajou.

"This is Nakajou Junya."

Nakajou lifted his chin upwards. It seemed he was greeting us.

Chitanda stepped forward to introduce herself.

"I'm Chitanda Eru of the Classics Club."

She then introduced us one by one, with me the last one being named. Eba led us to sit opposite of Nakajou. As we all took our seats, Eba said, "I shall be taking my leave. I leave the matter in your hands now."

And left the classroom. She's not staying behind? So she really was playing the role of Irisu's "butler".

Being left behind, we now faced Nakajou. Let's start this then.

Nakajou crossed his arms as he slowly began, "Sorry to get you involved in all this. As this is a project started out of interest, it'd be a pity if we couldn't finish it. So we had to ask for some help."

I see, out of interest, huh?

"I'm sure you've heard everything from Irisu. Everything is as she said."

Pretty straightforward fellow. Before I was a bit worried about how a senior would take an underclassman criticising his theories, but seeing how Eba and Nakajou have conducted themselves, they're hardly bothersome to handle.

Sitting beside me, Satoshi stuck his hand inside his drawstring bag, and took out a leather-covered notebook and a fountain pen, and duly opened the notebook as though declaring himself the official scribe.

While it was fine for Nakajou to start right away, most of us didn't seem to have grasped our situation yet. Firstly, Ibara decided she had to start with some formal niceties.

"It must be terrible, Sempai, for the script to not be completed. I was surprised when I heard that."

Nakajou nodded in an exaggerated way.

"Exactly. We've come all this way. We never thought something like this could have happened."

"Is the filming tough?"

"We get through the acting parts with the occasional ad-lib, since we're having fun anyway. The tough part is actually the traveling, since it takes an hour to get there by train and bus, and we could only film there on Sundays. I still wonder why we selected that place for our location."

I noticed Ibara squinting her eyes.

"So why did you?"

"Hmm? The location? Well, someone suggested that the place was interesting to go have a look. It's true that we've shot some amazing scenery there that we won't find anywhere else, and that's good and all, but I still think it's too far."

So Irisu was right when she said she wasn't involved in the planning stages of the movie. If I had to vote on whether to head to a place where a round

trip takes two hours, I'd definitely oppose it.

Probably realizing we were getting nowhere near the main topic, Satoshi lifted his gaze from his notebook and asked, "I heard the Narakubo area is an abandoned village. Is it reachable by bus?"

"Well, we traveled via minibus. It's a chartered bus rented from a hotel where a relative of mine works."

"So the place isn't restricted to outsiders?"

"We had to pull some strings in order to get in, as the place is still run by the mining company. We had people who knew someone from the company, though all he did was ask if we could enter the premises."

"You could only go there on Sundays?"

"While Narakubo's an abandoned village, the mining facilities are still operating. The noise generated by the mining would just get in the way of shooting. Not to mention cars would occasionally drive by at high speeds, so there's no guarantee of our safety, and all that stuff... Does this have something to do with your case?"

Satoshi smiled.

"Oh no, just curious. I learned something new."

*Don't mind him, Nakajou-sempai, that's just the kind of person Satoshi is.* I said in my mind.

Next was Chitanda.

"How is the scriptwriter, Hongou-san, doing now?

"Hongou? While I'm not sure of the details, I hear she's not feeling quite well. I can't really blame her, can I?"

Nakajou replied and raised his brow. Assuming Irisu was right, Hongou's probably been under so much pressure from everyone in Class 2-F that she

fell ill because of it. It's probably hard for them to even contemplate blaming her or demanding an apology from her, which was what Nakajou was expressing in his demeanor.

Most likely not sensing such sentiments at all, Chitanda maintained her gentle disposition.

"Is Hongou-san a very delicate person?"

Nakajou moved his brows quickly and groaned deeply.

"I've never seen her that way, though. Rather than delicate mentally, she's more delicate on the physical side."

"So she has a tender physique?"

What kind of description is that? I instantly spoke without thinking.

"He means she's often getting sick."

"Exactly. She's taken leave from school many times now, and she couldn't even come to the filming location."

Nakajou showed some regret as he said that. Logically speaking, you don't really require the scriptwriter's presence in order to film something. If things don't go according to script, they could just adapt accordingly, and everyone would know what to do even without Hongou around... since the script would have already been written to begin with.

Being mindful of this, I asked, "Is Hongou-sempai's script being received badly by anyone in the class?"

Nakajou gave an indignant expression.

"No one thought that way. As I said, no one blamed her for what happened."

"So you mean what you said?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What are you trying to say? Everybody, including myself of course, recognizes Hongou's role and knows how important her involvement is."

Yet Hongou collapsed before she could complete her work. If that's the case, then it'd be like Chitanda put it, Hongou was probably a bit too delicate.

In order to change focus from the unpleasant atmosphere, Ibara cleared her throat and said, "By the way, Sempai,"

"Yes?"

"While we know the script made no mention of who the killer is, what if it's actually a sort of filming trick, where someone has already been assigned the role without it being mentioned in the script?"

A bold suggestion. But if that's true, it'll make things much easier and our role as observers would be rendered obsolete. Nakajou crossed his arms once again as he tried to recall from his memory.

"...Hmm"

"Well?"

"I don't recall something like that... No, wait... Come to think of it, Kounosu was saying something like 'let's give it our all' or something like that..."

Anyone could have said "let's give it our all". Ibara must have been thinking the same thing, as her disappointment showed on her face for a brief moment, though she quickly suppressed it and asked, "Then, have you asked the actors themselves? About whether they've been assigned the role or not?"

"We did, and they all said they'd heard no such thing."

She bit her lips.

"Then what about the detective role?"

"That too."

*Sigh*

Come on, you can do this, Ibara. She then asked, "How about this then? Was it ever mentioned whether this filming trick is a physical one or a psychological one?"

Nakajou looked puzzled at that question.

"What's the difference?"

As I wondered what sort of reaction Ibara would give, our eyes met. She slowly shook her head with a mix of irritation and resignation on her face. If Nakajou wasn't there, she would probably have disregarded etiquette altogether and sighed loudly as well.

We then asked a series of questions, but in the end, it didn't seem like Nakajou held any vital information at all. Then again, if he did, there would not have been a problem to begin with. Besides, we were too ill-prepared and were unable to come up with questions that could turn attention to anything vital. As an energy-saver, this was a massive blunder for me. If I have to do something, make it quick. I ought to have started asking the right questions in the appropriate sequence.

Yet Nakajou spoke looking as though he was satisfied.

"Will that be all?"

Ibara replied with a smile, "If you mean whether we're done with our questions, yes, that will be all."

Why did I get the feeling her sarcasm was aimed at both sides?

As we've gotten our collection of information, Satoshi closed his fountain pen. Upon that signal, Chitanda asked calmly, "It's Nakajou-san, right? What do you think of what Hongou Mayu-san intended to do with her script?"

Realizing we'd entered the main topic, Nakajou gave a broad smile.

"Alright, be easy on me and hear me out."

"Please do begin."

I was wondering whether Nakajou should be feeling happy at such a time. As he licked his lips and started speaking, it turned out he could actually speak quite a lot.

"If you think about it, such a filming technique may cause some fuss, but I don't think the audience should pay much attention to it and just treat it as a plot device. After all, good drama should always have the detective identifying the killer before everyone else, forcing the killer to confess to how and why he did it. While I can't possibly take over what Hongou is doing, if you ask me, I thought she was rather weak when it came to writing an exciting story. We don't even know who the main character is.

It would be good if Kaitou were the one that died. You may not know this, but Kaitou is actually quite well-liked. The people from the props division said they were quite impressed by how dead he looked in that scene. As expected from a popular person to give such a performance. While it's not exactly a good idea to have the protagonist as the killer, it's not impossible either. So I think the killer is Yamanishi, since she also has many friends."

.....

"Generally speaking, our classmates can be quite obsessive when it comes to some stuff. That includes writing a mystery story, where they would argue about how this part isn't exactly mystery, or how that part doesn't feel right. But the movie would only last for an hour. If they were to include every aspect of mystery fiction in it, we wouldn't be able to film them all in time. And I'm sure you've all noticed, you could hardly see any clear details on such a small screen. So I think this is more of a drama story. We could

still stick with a title of 'The Murder in the Abandoned Village of Furuoka" or something like that, just to entice the audience to come watch it. I'm sure that's what Hongou would think as well."

How should I say this. I was in a daze for half of the time Nakajou was speaking. I'm not that much of a fan of detective fiction. I would usually buy paperback novels to read in my spare time, and there would be the occasional mystery genre amongst them, but that's about it. Besides, I find something strange about Nakajou declaring that the audience wouldn't care about such filming techniques.

...But thinking about it a bit more, just what sort of person would be coming to watch a movie produced by Class 2-F?

There would probably be people from the Detective Fiction Studies Club, no doubt, but how many of these people would have read detective fiction? This wasn't some baseless speculation, as there was once this silly questionnaire run by the Kami High Monthly which investigated the "Literacy of Kami High Students". Recalling how Satoshi was reading enthusiastically about it, I remember that the findings said that about 40% of the students have read at least one novel. And of those 40%, how many of them would have read detective fiction to know how to notice such a filming trick to begin with?

Thinking along such lines, Nakajou's theory may have some foundation after all.

Crossing his legs as well as his arms, Nakajou continued, "Yet, it just doesn't feel exciting not to show how the killer had killed Kaitou. And to think Irisu went out of her way to make this request of you guys... Since you guys are interested in mystery and all that, right? No offense guys, but I think I've found a way to spice up the movie, myself."

Like I said, you've got it all wrong. We're the Classics Club, not the Detective Fiction Studies Club... Anyway, if we end up not being able to solve this, then it would clear up the misunderstanding.

Nakajou started to become more passionate in his speech.

"The script contained a vital element - a sealed room. Kaitou died in a room with no other exits present. So the problem would be: how did the killer kill him?"

"The answer is simple: The killer entered through the only entrance available to him."

Raising her brow, Ibara asked, "How?"

Nakajou laughed.

"Don't be so dense. He came in through the window, of course."

... The window?

I recalled the movie we saw yesterday. Only fragments of the movie still remained in my head. Though the scene which Nakajou mentioned was dramatic in itself, I couldn't even recall the layout of the scene of the crime.

Left with no other choice, I spoke.

"Satoshi, gimme the map."

Looking delighted, he saluted.

"Yessir! Hang on just a moment,"

And stuck his hand into his drawstring bag to take out a piece of paper - a rough drawing of the theatre map.

Based on the story, Kaitou would have died in the Right Stage area. The other characters would have entered via the corridor on the right hand side. I also remember someone running back to get the other master key to open the door. So from the perspective of the people in the right corridor, the Right Stage was a sealed room.

Afterwards, Katsuda tried to enter the Left Stage via the backstage, believing that the Right Stage was accessible from the left corridor via that way. Yet he found the way was boarded shut, if I remember correctly.

.....

To begin with, it was strange for Nakajou to call this a sealed room.

It cannot be called a sealed room in the purest sense, as no one can enter or exit a sealed room to do any killing. While it was hard to see from the movie visual, things become clearer with the map. Was there not another exit besides the window?

I pointed to the door leading to the main hall and asked, "What about this entrance?"

Nakajou quickly replied, "Can't be opened."

".....?"

"The door's tightly bolted with nails, so I don't think there's anything there."

I was dumbfounded. I then noticed Ibara looking distasteful, perhaps she was showing that expression to me. Hey, it's not my fault that no one told me anything about that entrance!

Irisu promised yesterday that Hongou's script would give the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery. Yet if I recall, the filming division was probably not informed about the filming of any vital clues. So they weren't told anything... As I felt exhausted, Satoshi smiled while promptly putting a cross over the entrance leading to the hall.

Anyway, with the hall entrance out of the question, that leaves just four exits for the sealed room. The doors and windows of the Right Stage and Left Stage. The doors for both rooms are blocked, so that leaves the windows.

"When you said window... which one were you referring to?"

Nakajou snorted at Ibara's question.

"This one, of course."

"The Right Stage window, right? But why is that?"

"It's a no-brainer, since the Left Stage window is blocked by a costume cabinet."

So that's why. Satoshi continued to smile as he crossed out the Left Stage window as well.

It's a waste of effort for us to continue at this pace. As an energy-saver, I dislike such meaningless waste of so much effort, so I put together everything and asked, "Sempai, there are too many unclear factors from the movie itself. Of course, this may have something to do with the quality of the screen itself. So could you please tell us if there are other rooms besides the two which we've discussed which are also inaccessible? It doesn't matter if they're sealed rooms or not."

"That so? Lemme think,"

Nakajou began to think a bit upon being asked.

"...Ah, yes, the inner control room on the left corridor could not be entered, as the doorknob was broken and we couldn't insert the key... And all the rooms facing North, that is, all the rooms besides the left corridor on the map, have their windows boarded up by wood in order to block out the snow during the winter, so they can't be removed."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yeah, that's all."

Nakajou asserted clearly.

While I was still suspicious, credibility was a valuable thing, after all, so I guess I'll have to trust him on this. It was at this moment when Chitanda, who had been quiet all this time, asked, "Does Hongou-san know about these facts as well? Since she didn't go with the filming crew..."

She's right, that is indeed important. If Hongou wrote her script based only on her knowledge of the map without knowing the conditions of the scene

itself, she may end up intending one of those inaccessible routes as an exit.

Nakajou's reply quelled those worries straight away.

"Once Narakubo was chosen as the setting with Hongou as the writer, she went there once herself to have a look."

"When was that?"

"Hmm, she probably went in June... no, in the end of May."

"Sorry for interrupting you. Please do continue."

Nakajou nodded and resumed what he was saying, which was the main topic.

"In other words, the killer entered and exited via the window in the Right Stage. In which case, we would be able to shoot the scene where Kaitou's murder would take place while the door was locked. How about that?"

How about what?

You mean the part where the killer doesn't enter through the door but through the window?

"Oh, I see!"

Chitanda was the only one slapping her knees in realization.

I couldn't bring myself to sing a different tune to Nakajou, who was getting passionate. In such moments, I would count on Ibara to do that for me instead.

"But Nakajou-sempai, it wouldn't be a good mystery if that was the case."

While Nakajou didn't express any disappointment at being told off so directly like that, he lowered his voice considerably.

"You may see it like that and think there must be some other route. Besides... ah yes, you guys probably don't know Hongou well. She's not exactly a pro in mystery stories, so she may be employing some other wondrous technique instead."

Saying we don't really know Hongou was hardly a convincing way to persuade us. This... I was intending to just keep quiet and see what he had to say, but I couldn't help but be driven by the mood and said, "So, Sempai, is it possible to identify the killer then?"

"Identify?"

"If Hongou-sempai were employing such a technique, is it possible to deduce who the killer is?"

Nakajou didn't seem to be prepared for such a question, as he crossed his arms and went into thinking. Feeling emboldened, Ibara went for the kill.

"Besides, after the scene where everyone else entered the scene of crime, didn't the camera show the window as well?"

"Yeah."

"Yet if we see that scene, the window ought to have clearly shown traces of someone crawling through it. Based on your theory, this would be impossible."

Outside the window of the scene of crime...

Now I remember, there was a scene showing a thick layer of wild grass right up to a person's height outside the window. I see. If someone had crawled through the window, the grass would have shown signs of being cut and bent.

As Nakajou looked kind of confused, Ibara had to explain it further for him. Though Nakajou was unyielding.

"That wouldn't be a problem."

Really?

I took over Ibara's place upon hearing his rebuttal.

"How so? We thought it was pretty obvious."

"It may be that Hongou had mentioned it in her notebook but had forgotten to include it in the script."

"...If that's the case, then it's all over. What Ibara was saying is that no traces of the killer could be found, and you're saying this was due to Hongou's carelessness. Isn't that stretching it a bit too far?"

Nakajou groaned.

Yet he was surprisingly stubborn. He lifted his head as though thinking of something and raised his voice and said, "That's it, the grass!"

"...What about the grass?"

With his confidence back, he spoke with a bluster, "When you said the window could not be used, it was because the grass outside showed no traces of being cut or twisted, right?"

Ibara nodded cautiously.

"Then you must have been mistaken. As I said before, Hongou went to Narakubo in May. The grass was probably not yet fully grown then, so Hongou must have intended for the window to be usable when she saw it."

*Oh* Satoshi could be heard exclaiming in wonder. If there was anyone that Nakajou could get along with, it was probably Satoshi, as he'd probably say something like "That's the first sensible thing you've said all day". Ibara felt like responding, but couldn't find the words to. I laughed within my heart and thought, *He's pretty good.* To take into consideration the time of Hongou's visit to deduce that she may have intended for the killer to escape via the window, but then have the route end up being unusable during the time of filming.

He may be good, however...

Seeing as we remained silent and seemingly convinced, Nakajou pressed on.

"So, in our next filming, we'll just need to trim the grass and re-do the scene where the body was found. Now why didn't I realize this sooner? We can do this!"

From an outsider's perspective, Nakajou seemed to be soaring... I decided not to rebut him, as it would be a waste of energy.

Seeing that the conversation was over, Chitanda smiled to Nakajou and said, "Thank you for letting us hear your theory. We should be able to give Irisu-san a proper review of it."

Nakajou gave a satisfied nod. He looked so excited as though he was ready to write a script himself right away.

A few minutes later, we were in the Geology Room.

*Grr...* Ibara made an expression that doesn't need much description.

"Are we fine with that? Is that even going to work?"

It seemed that Nakajou's rebuttal had caught her unawares. It was hard to convince with that technique, or anything to suit that technique. That said, Nakajou's reasoning concerning the grass did make sense. For Ibara, this sealing off of the remaining hole in Nakajou's argument got her very frustrated.

"Well, physically it is possible,"

Satoshi too sounded unsatisfied as he whispered.

As for Chitanda,

"....."

She'd been gazing at me intermittently for some time now. As it was bothering me, I called out to her.

"What is it, Chitanda?"

"Ah, yes,"

Chitanda looked uncertain at first, but decided to say it.

"Oreki-san, do you think Hongou-san's true intention was what Nakajou-san described?"

"...Before I answer that, what do you think of it yourself?"

Upon returning that question to her, she seemed hesitant to speak. It was quite rare to see someone whose attitude and feelings are so easy to read. While her composure didn't dramatically collapse, her mouth and eyes were doing all the talking for her. And so I said to her, "You don't like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it! But... I find it unconvincing."

Isn't that another way of saying you don't like it?

Nakajou's attitude was, how should I put it, imposing. He was insistent in maintaining his own viewpoint and was unwilling to yield, as well as sealing off any chance for us to rebut it. No matter how passionate he may be, if his argument was unconvincing, then it was unconvincing. If we didn't feel that like we liked it, then we couldn't like it.

While I had no intention of imitating Nakajou, I still crossed my arms and said, "Well, it's not impossible. Though Nakajou's theory probably won't stand. Perhaps this would explain why we felt subconsciously that it was so out of place."

Instead of Chitanda, the first person to react to that was Ibara, as she snarled, "Theory won't stand? Aren't you contradicting yourself!?"

She pressed me for an answer. Was she that desperate to overturn Nakajou's theory?

I made a gesture to Satoshi. Without even asking, he understood what I meant right away and tossed the map over to me. I laid it flat open on the table so that the girls could see.

I then spoke in a regular tone.

"While Nakajou's theory is simple, upon seeing the movie you'll find that it's quite silly. The reason is simple, as physically it's difficult to execute. Ibara, if you had said it was physically impossible, he would not have been able to say anything."

Her sour look confirmed what I said.

On the other hand, Chitanda, who was now overflowing with interest, leaned forward toward me, causing me to withdraw my chair backwards a bit.

"So you mean it's impossible from other places?"

"I won't go so far as to say it's impossible... Do you remember what Ibara asked Nakajou? About whether Hongou ever mentioned employing any filming trick."

Chitanda nodded clearly.

"Yes, I remember. She asked 'Was it ever mentioned whether this filming trick is a physical one or a psychological one?'"

"Exactly. In other words, if this could all be solved physically, then there would be no need of any psychological trick."

Satoshi suddenly laughed upon hearing that.

"Hahaha, what a roundabout way to put it, Houtarou. As expected from the 'Designated Detective'!"

A mean fellow he was, despite him already knowing I had no wish to play such a role. Though it was indeed a roundabout way of saying it. I reflected upon that and said it directly this time, "In other words, if we stand in the killer's shoes, we'll realize there's no way we could use the window."

I pointed to the scene of crime on the map, or to be precise, the window.

"For anyone amongst the cast to enter via that window, they would have to do so from outside the theatre. However...

It's not possible for someone to sneak off in broad daylight after splitting off from the others in the theatre. You only need to see to understand, no matter who it was that headed towards the scene of crime, they would have to enter someone else's field of vision while doing so. Not to mention they would be making footsteps that could be heard. I wouldn't take such a risk."

"Hmm,"

Satoshi rubbed his chin.

"I see. If I had wanted to kill someone practically, I wouldn't expose myself in the presence of so many people, thus making Nakajou's proposal unworkable. It may work at night, but the scene was during the day. Physically it would be stretching it a bit too far."

"Well, that's the gist of it."

As I replied, Chitanda sighed.

"I understand now. I think the reason why Nakajou-san's theory couldn't work was because he confused the scene we saw in the movie with how he has imagined it, which he based his theory on. I find it strange that he would conclude the killer sneaked in via an alternate exit just because someone else might have been inside the room with Kaitou."

That said, someone was still looking very unsatisfied. It was none other than Ibara.

"It may be true that what Oreki said is right, but we don't know whether Hongou-sempai herself realizes this."

She had a point. If we could just ask Hongou, everything would be solved... But we couldn't do that, or we wouldn't be here trying to use our wits. Still, I couldn't leave that question unanswered.

"We have no way of knowing how much Hongou knows, but we could figure it out indirectly,"

It was at this moment a guest arrived at the Geology Room. It was our "Guide" Eba, who stood just outside the door with no intention of entering.

"So what is your conclusion?"

Satoshi answered with a sarcastic smile, "We came up with something,"

"In other words?"

"We have decided to reject Nakajou-sempai's proposal"

While Eba muttered "I see" without looking too bothered, Chitanda bowed her head deeply.

"We're sorry."

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault... Then I shall lead you to meet the second person tomorrow."

Tomorrow? We're doing this tomorrow as well? ...What about my summer vacation?

After asking what she wanted to ask and hearing what she wanted to hear, Eba promptly left. I called out to that back of hers, to which she stopped and turned around in puzzlement.

"Yes?"

Her response somehow felt cold. I ignored that and asked, "I wonder if it's possible if we could have a look at the script? The actual screenplay used for the filming."

Eba looked at me as though evaluating something and said, "The script is what you have seen in the movie. Do you really need that?"

"Yes. Well... we need to understand how much attention Hongou-sempai has put into her script."

She gave a small nod and said it would be done.

Afterwards, though we continued talking about Nakajou, the topic gradually drifted away from the solving of the case itself. We ended up talking non-stop about our impressions of Nakajou and his eagerness, with the outcome of today's observation taking a backseat.

If you ask me what my impression of him was, I would say Irisu's quote "only those with the necessary skills can do the job required" fits him just right.

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ [Maria Theresa](#)
2. ↑ [The Empress \(Tarot card\)](#).
3. ↑ [Justice \(Tarot card\)](#).
4. ↑ [Judgement \(Tarot card\)](#).
5. ↑ [The Fool \(Tarot card\)](#).
6. ↑ [The Magician \(Tarot card\)](#).
7. ↑ [Strength \(Tarot card\)](#).
8. ↑ [The Star \(Tarot card\)](#)

## 3 - "The Invisible Intrusion"

The next day.

As I was rather reluctant to take action the previous day, I received a call from Chitanda early that morning. It was pretty much an order from our club president asking me to come no matter what. As I had no good reason to resist such a gently worded request, I ended up heading to school that day as well. Well, it's not practical to jump off a ship in the middle of its voyage, and I had no intention to.

As I exited my house, I noticed an international letter had been delivered to our letterbox. As it was addressed to my old man instead of me, I didn't bother to open it. I didn't even need to see to guess who the sender was: Oreki Tomoe, my older sister.

My sis was not content with just staying in the country, but desired to wander around the world. She should be somewhere in Eastern Europe by now. Time and again my sis has got me involved in all sorts of bothersome things. Though those bothersome things are on a completely different meta-level from the type that Chitanda gets me involved in. But as the letter this time was not addressed to me, this probably means I'm more swayed by the frank and honest Chitanda than by my sis, which isn't a bad thing.

...Or maybe not.

Anyway, we now come to the Geology Room.

We didn't particularly do anything prior to Eba's arrival. As per usual, I took a seat in the shade and started reading my paperback novel. Just because I watched a mystery movie didn't mean I would go out of my way to buy a mystery novel. It was just a normal novel bought from a regular bookstore.

Opposite me was Chitanda, who stood by the window, unbothered by the scorching summer sun while looking at the grounds below. She must have a resistance to heat, as she doesn't seem to be tanned at all despite standing under the sun for so long... She just stood there staring at the grounds below, or to be more precise, she may have found something to meddle in amongst the people preparing for the Cultural Festival. But it was just her curious eyes sparkling, meaning she too was bored.

Ibara, on the other hand, was far from bored. As the real person responsible for the compilation of the "Hyouka" anthology, she was busy writing notes about it this time as well. A while ago I asked her what she was writing when all that's left is just to publish the manuscript. She gave me a terrifying stare and said, "If the manuscript could be sent to be published right away, there wouldn't be any need to edit it!"

Well, keep up the good work then.

As for Satoshi, he was reading a paperback novel just like me. As his hands were covering the book cover, I had no idea what he was reading. Though smiling was his default expression, he doesn't do it when he's reading. Having said that, it was strange to see such an expressionless Satoshi for once.

As I was thinking that, his expression gradually returned to normal. Placing down his book, he lifted up his face and looked around.

"Say, how many detective novels have you guys ever read before?"

Ibara stopped writing upon hearing that question and turned her head around.

"Fuku-chan, what are you trying to say?"

"You know, after listening to Nakajou-sempai yesterday, it got me thinking. Though his method of deduction was quite like those seen in detective novels, it was still way off the mark. So I thought maybe I should read a few more detective novels to help us deduce this better."

Hmm. Indeed, while Nakajou's reasoning sounded innovative at first, after thinking about it overnight, it was no different from your average detective show on TV. It was not rare for Satoshi to make such connections in the strangest places.

"Hmm, for me I've only read a normal amount of detective novels,"

"So how normal is your amount anyway? That's why I'm asking," Satoshi said and smiled, to which Ibara also smiled bitterly.

"Well, for me, hmm, normal would mean having read Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen, I guess."

Was that normal? Though I do know the authors' names at least... Satoshi tilted his head as well.

"Rather than normal, that amount of reading should be considered expert. Those are more like classics befitting of the Classics Club, aren't they? ...Is that all? What about Japanese authors?"

"Though there are many of them, it's not like I read much. I read a few railroad mysteries, but that's about it. While I may be somewhat interested in mystery novels, there are many authors whose works I can't seem to enjoy."

Well, it seems the more you read the more you're familiar with them, aren't you? You were the one who showed interest when you heard Class 2-F was making a mystery movie. I suppose amongst the four of us, Ibara was the most proficient in detective fiction.

"What about you, Houtarou?"

I closed the book I was reading and replied, "I don't read those,"

"Are you especially conscious about not reading detective stories in particular? You haven't got much honour in your reading methods, you know?"

Oh, leave me alone.

"I've read a few paperbacks with yellow book covers like this one, that's all."

Without being serious, I gave him a suitable response.

"Ahh... So that means, only Japanese authors, huh? You're kinda rigid, you know?"

He gave me an instant reply. It seemed like this answered his question well enough. As always, Satoshi possesses a wide range of knowledge for no particular reason.

Satoshi now turned to Chitanda, who shook her head slowly,

"I don't read any of those."

"Eh?"

He sounded surprised. Though it was also surprising for me as well, as based on her tendency to seek out an answer for every riddle she encounters, I would expect her to be pretty interested in detective fiction. Satoshi tried to make sure of that.

"Not a single one?"

"I think I'm probably not that interested in mystery novels after reading some. And it's been many years since I've touched one."

Rather than not having read any detective novels, she ended up rejecting them after reading them. To think that our lady would be weak at detective novels despite encountering situations not unlike those seen in detective novels. Sounds pretty contradicting. That would be like a businessman who dislikes reading business novels. But thinking carefully, that isn't entirely strange.

"Really? But Chi-chan, weren't you enjoying it yourself when we were watching the Class 2-F mystery movie?"

Chitanda smiled gently.

"I was just happy that Irisu-san had invited us to show us something she and her friends had made... It's not like I particularly enjoy watching mystery movies."

I see, that makes sense.

Well, that means there's just one person left. Everyone must be included, after all. I asked Satoshi, who looked as though he had understood everything and was nodding eagerly, "So, what about you?"

"Me?"

"I presume you've read all the detective novels around the world, past and present?" I asked jokingly, to which Satoshi flatly denied, "No, I haven't."

Hmm?

Ibara began to smile from the tip of her lips.

"Oh, I know what Fuku-chan likes to read,"

Satoshi hung his head in embarrassment. It would seem Chitanda's interest was piqued.

"Eh? So what is it? Fukube-san, it's not a secret, is it?"

In other words, if it's a secret, Chitanda would definitely not pursue it any further. I know this based on experience, that our lady does have some restraint on her curiosity.

Meanwhile, Satoshi was at a loss for words.

"Well, I..."

What? Just say it, already.

As I thought that, Ibara quickly spilled the beans.

"Fuku-chan's an avid Sherlockian!"

...Ah, I get it.

A Sherlockian is a fan who is passionate about Sherlock Holmes. While I'm not too sure of the details, I've heard these people have actually done research into the fate of the bulldog raised by Holmes' partner. It was a serious interest that was not to be treated as mere child's play or entertainment. Though for Satoshi, it was probably a bit of both.

"What's a Sherlockian?"

"Um, you see,"

As Ibara was trying to explain to an oblivious Chitanda, Satoshi corrected her quietly.

"An avid fan is not called a Sherlockian, it's Holmesian..."

What's the difference anyway?

Just as we were teasing Satoshi, Eba had arrived at the doorway and bowed her head courteously as usual.

"I'm sorry to inform you that we could not secure an empty classroom today, so we would request that today's meeting take place at the classroom for Class 2-F, if it would not trouble you too much, as it might be a bit messy."

I don't see why she finds the need to apologize for that.

"Well then, let's head to Round Two of our Deduction Meeting then,"

Upon hearing Satoshi's intentionally cheerful voice, we proceeded to exit the classroom. Though I think it's a bit too much to call it a Deduction Meeting.

Activities from the various clubs were just as lively today, as music combining instruments and people singing were heard. The tune sounded familiar. It turned out to be the theme song of Mito Komon<sup>[1]</sup>. It sounded elegant, but yet not quite.

As we were walking, Eba gave us a briefing in advance.

"The person you'll be meeting today is Haba Tomohiro, of the props division."

I looked at Satoshi, who shook his head. It would seem this Haba was hardly famous either. Yesterday it was the filming division, so today it's the props division, huh? We seem to be going on a trend here. Eba continued solemnly, "Though he wasn't assigned any specific role to begin with, he had decided to barge... actively involve himself in all sorts of fine details. Is there anything else you would like to ask?"

Ibara, noticing something specific, asked, "Umm, if this Haba-sempai was barging... actively involving himself in the making of the movie, why wasn't he assigned an acting role?"

Heh, I see. Indeed, such a person should have been standing in front of a camera. Eba turned to face Ibara and nodded.

"He was passed over."

"That means,"

"The roles were decided by a count of hands. He didn't get enough votes."

Now I get it. I finally spoke.

"And why are we meeting this person?"

In other words: *Would someone who decides to barge... actively involve himself in a project accept the opinion of us outsiders?* Eba showed an unusually troubled expression.

"I too have doubts about his selection... but it was Irisu that chose him, so she must have her reasons. If you ask me, it probably has something to do with him being the most proficient in mystery fiction amongst the entire crew. At least that's what he claims, himself."

As I could find no response, I decided to force a smile to her.

Still, Satoshi had emphasized "the Empress" Irisu being good at making people do her errands skillfully. If he was correct, then it would be as Eba has said, that Irisu does have her reasons for picking Haba. To begin with, this was just one of the matters that Irisu had gotten us involved in, so it's not like we hadn't suspected such a ploy from her. As I was thinking, Satoshi showed some dissatisfaction.

"Just where on earth has Irisu-sempai gone? She has totally not shown herself since."

Come to think of it, he's right. We haven't seen her since the day before yesterday. Though Eba answered our question right away.

"She said she would be looking for a replacement screenwriter while you figure out the 'correct deduction'. She's also having some difficulty on her end."

We came upon the corridor linking the Special Block with the General Block.

Before we arrived at the Class 2-F classroom, Chitanda opened her mouth gently.

"Eba-san,"

"Yes?"

"Are you close to Hongou-san?"

Eba looked briefly confused. Though she didn't look worried, I could feel she was struggling to find the right words to answer.

"...Why do you ask?"

"I was just curious," Chitanda smiled at Eba and said, "I couldn't stop thinking about what the person who wrote the script was like. She seemed like a very serious person,"

We now arrived before the Class 2-F classroom. Eba stopped her footsteps, turned around, and slowly said, "Hongou is a good friend of mine. She's sincere, attentive, and has a stubbornly strong sense of responsibility, as well as being kind and tender. But, is there something you would learn from me telling you this? ...Anyway, Haba is expecting you inside."

She then turned her back towards us and left without even introducing us to Haba.

It was just as Eba had described it—the Class 2-F classroom was quite untidy. There were the rucksacks seen in the movie as well as their yet to be shown contents lying everywhere. On the blackboard were some messy notes that seemed to be the filming schedule, with a long sentence written across the top in yellow chalk that read "Next Sunday = Absolute Ultimate Deadline!" The tables and chairs too were in disarray, and for the first time I realized how much of a crisis this class was facing with their project. As I wondered whether this was also part of Irisu's schemes in having us meet Haba here, we entered the messy classroom.

In the corner of the classroom where the sun didn't shine stood a male student. Bespectacled, he was rather skinny for his size. Upon seeing us, he raised his hands in a melodramatic way and said, "So you're the observers sent by Irisu. Pleased to meet you, my name is Haba Tomohiro."

Like yesterday, Chitanda once again introduced us starting with herself. Haba repeated our names many times as though trying to memorize them before gesturing us to take our seats.

While I have no idea how Haba would have behaved normally, he seemed to be in a good mood today. As he watched us take our seats with a satisfied expression, he nodded.

"I hear you guys are quite good with mysteries, at least compared to our class, where there's hardly anyone that's good with them."

It would seem the people of Class 2-F have been misinformed. Even Chitanda had noticed this and stated, "We're with the Classics Club."

Haba's eyes widened.

"Ah yes, the Classics Club. So you must be familiar with all the books from the Golden Age, then? Wow."

He seemed to be even more mistaken than before. Then again, as the Classics Club was a club engaged in unknown activities, it's not surprising that it would be mistaken as a club that is proficient with mystery novels.

As Haba was still muttering "Wow", he took out a piece of A4 sized paper and placed it on the table before him. It was the map of the theatre seen in the movie. On it were written the formal names for each room as well as the positions of all the windows, and an unintelligible designer name called "Nakamura Aoi" or something like that. Even the blocked passageway was well-marked.

Satoshi raised his voice without even thinking.

"Sempai, what is this!?"

"Hmm? Were you not shown this before?"

Without saying a word, Satoshi took out his own self-drawn map.

Haba groaned, "...This makes things easier,"

"Umm, where'd you get this map?" asked Ibara, to which Haba replied, "This building was built by the Furuoka Town government, after all, so I

only needed to look it up in their town hall. The deduction can only be done with this map,"

He then smiled.

On Haba's map were marked the position of the body, as well as where everyone else was scattered before. Him being this enthusiastic wasn't a bad thing, as I too would want to know such information.

Haba looked even more excited as he went on, "Still, for a mystery writer or reader, a mystery written by an amateur like Hongou wouldn't be enough to satisfy them,"

He sounded pretty confident. Chitanda asked, "Was Hongou-san not proficient with mystery stories?"

"Yup. She had never read any before the making of this movie."

"But I heard she did do some research,"

Haba raised the corners of his lips to form a smile.

"They're all old stories. Look over there, those are the things she went through overnight,"

He pointed to a corner of the classroom with his chin, revealing numerous volumes of books piled up together. A glance at them showed they were all paperbacks. Chitanda leaned over and asked, "Umm, would you mind if we had a look at those?"

Haba looked troubled at Chitanda's interest being directed to such unexpected places. I too was wondering what she was up to, though our lady's curiosity was easy to read. Without waiting for a reply, she got up out of her seat and went to pick up a book.

Looking at the mountain of books beside the map, Satoshi said in an intrigued voice, "Ahh, the Nobahara translated version... And it's the new edition as well."

They were the Sherlock Holmes stories that we were just talking about a while ago. The covers were well embossed with a handwriting-like font printed on a white shiny paper, enticing the reader to start reading the Sherlock Holmes stories right away upon buying. Ibara gazed at the books and said coldly, "So she only studied Holmes as research?"

Haba replied, "Yup. That's why I said she's an amateur."

...So people who read Holmes are only amateurs, huh? Quite a bold statement he's making here. And he's saying it in the presence of Satoshi, a Sherlockian (though he prefers to call himself a Holmesian). Yet Satoshi smiled without seeming too bothered.

"Well, I get that a lot."

Hmm.

Taking the first book from the top of the mountain of books, Chitanda began flipping through the pages. We really should be getting back on topic... I had no idea whether she noticed my anxiety or not; most probably not. Chitanda's hand stopped at one of the pages.

"Oh,"

"What is it?"

"There are some strange markings in here. Look,"

She showed me the page she was on, and I instantly knew it was the Table of Contents without even reading the words. Indeed, there were markings before the title of each short story. Though I did not think of those markings as "strange" as Chitanda had.

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

- A Scandal in Bohemia
- △ The Adventure of the Red Headed League
- X A Case of Identity
- △ The Boscombe Valley Mystery
- X The Five Orange Pips
- The Man with the Twisted Lip
- The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle
- X The Adventure of the Speckled Band
- X The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor
- △ The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

"And this one as well,"

### The Case-Book of Sherlock Homes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

- The Adventure of the Illustrious Client
- The Adventure of the Blanched Sailor
- △ The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone
- X The Adventure of the Three Gables
- The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire
- The Adventure of the Three Garridebs
- △ The Problem of Thor Bridge
- △ The Adventure of the Creeping Man

- The Adventure of the Lion's Mane
- The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

Upon seeing those, I quickly dispelled Chitanda's concerns.

"What's so strange about those? They're probably just marking notes used by Hongou."

"Is that... so?"

Though she didn't seem too convinced, she decided to let the matter rest for now. During this time, Satoshi seemed to be muttering something, as I was about to ask him, he met my gaze and gave me a gesture that said he wouldn't know either, and turned his attention back to the map.

"Let's leave that aside,"

Tapping his fingers on the table, Haba spoke.

"Rather than that, let's begin with the deduction,"

Sigh. Seemed like he couldn't wait to start with his own deductions already. Then again, I too wanted to hurry up and get this over and done with. So I grabbed Chitanda's hand to stop her from picking up another book, and she only then realized that Haba was waiting, and reluctantly placed it back on the mountain-like pile.

"I'm sorry. Please do begin."

Haba gave a nod, and took a ballpen out of his chest pocket. Probably an item needed in order for the lecture to proceed, so pay attention, folks.

"All right. The way I see it, this mystery isn't that difficult. In fact, it could be classified as an easy one."

He paused to watch our reactions. I didn't give any, by the way, and I had no idea what reactions the others were giving either.

"First, this murder was unpremeditated, or rather, it was only half-premeditated. So it's not one of those 'Just as planned' cases. It just so happens that the conditions were right for the killer to carry out his plans. Are you following me?"

Not a bad opening speech. No, to be honest, that's not exactly what I was thinking. I see, now that he mentions it, no matter what technique the movie employs, it won't be able to portray an elaborate plan without it not making sense. As for the reason,

"...What's the reason for that?"

Chitanda just asked something incredible. Haba looked rather displeased that he was interrupted so soon after starting, but quickly replied with a cheerful expression, "The reason being that if everything was planned, Kaitou would be asked to go to the right side of the theatre. Instead, what we saw was that he picked the key at random and went off to that side on his own. So I believe the killer merely made good use of this condition. Well, it shouldn't be too far from the truth, since there are many such examples in murder mysteries."

Though there are many instances of a trickster making a person pick the exact card that he wants to be picked, it didn't seem to be the case this time. So Haba's making sense so far.

Haba continued by pointing his ballpen at the Right Stage on the map, the room marked "body found".

"As you all know, this is a sealed room murder. The only exits available at the scene are here, here, and here. Two of them are sealed off and unusable, while the other was locked when the body was found. There are also two windows, with one sealed off while the other was covered by tall grass on the outside, which showed no signs of anyone treading through it. In other words, Kaitou's killer did not escape via normal means,"

He'd now reached the point where Nakajou had stopped, to which he smiled.

"That said, the killer was no longer in the room after Kaitou was killed, a typical sealed room situation. While you may not have thought of this before, a sealed room situation is usually established the moment the body is found. Or to be more precise, when everyone else has entered the room and found the body. Now, how is this established? One only has to think along the lines of detective fiction writers past and present.

"Let's start with the simplest method. The killer may choose to take the master key and use it to enter the scene of crime, and then return the master key to where it was.

"But this is totally uninteresting. There would be an uproar if that was actually the case. Not even an amateur like Hongou would choose such a method. So let's have a look at the facts.

"The keys were found in the theatre office. In order to get to the office, one has to go past the lobby. And anyone passing through the lobby would be seen by Sugimura in the second floor equipment room, or would at least attract his attention. So if the killer had wanted to get the master key, he would have had to hope that he didn't get seen by Sugimura. It just doesn't make sense for a killer to take such a risk.

"Now, what if it were Sugimura that was the one to take the key? That wouldn't do either, as he too would have to risk being seen by Senoue, Katsuda and Yamanishi."

Hmm, he's quite prudent with his deductions, isn't he? Now if only he could do the same with his attitude.

"Now, this fact that the lobby cannot be entered without being watched is quite important, as it means not only the Right Stage, but the entire corridor cannot be entered by the killer from the lobby. Do you now know the meaning behind this?" he asked as he lifted his face from the map. Like a teacher waiting for a student to answer his questions, he looked at us one by one.

*...Oh!* Ibara noticed his gaze meeting hers.

After a brief silence, she gave a short reply.

"The killer used some sort of physical trick?"

A momentary glimpse of disappointment was shown on Haba's face.

Though he soon returned to his upbeat manner.

"Exactly."

What's his problem anyway? Was he getting upset about someone guessing his questions correctly? He seemed rather lacking in prudence and blunt about it.

"Indeed, if the killer used some sort of string to lock the door from outside the room. But that doesn't make sense either. As the killer would not be able to come out of the right corridor, which is effectively a second 'outer sealed room'. In other words, it was not possible to create a sealed room from the outside.

"One may argue that this sealed room is made by none other than the victim himself. Perhaps the victim wasn't killed instantly, and decided to lock himself inside to run away from the killer, and ended up dying in there. But that doesn't change the fact that this 'outer sealed room' still exists.

"Then, what other possibilities are there available? These include the killer not being present when the victim was killed, or the murder still taking place when the victim was found. To put it simply, the victim was killed by some mechanics, or he was quickly killed without anyone else knowing. Do you get it now?"

Yeah, I get it.

Though there were also people who did not get it, especially Chitanda, who had hardly read any detective fiction. She raised her hands apologetically.

"Umm, excuse me, but could you please elaborate further?"

Haba seemed pretty pleased with Chitanda's request, and nodded as he began explaining cheerfully, "Mechanics basically means the room was rigged with some sort of booby trap, which ended up killing Kaitou. For example, it could be a bow gun or poisoned needle. Being quickly killed without anyone else knowing means Kaitou was still alive the moment the door was unlocked, and the murder took place discreetly during this brief moment when everyone went to confirm whether Kaitou was dead or not."

Chitanda let out an unsavoury gasp.

"Anyway, these two possibilities are rejected as well as they have the same flaw, do you know what that is?"

Haba turned to Ibara as though goading her to respond. Ibara raised her brows indicating she knew what he was up to. She didn't need to answer but still decided to.

"Yes, it's the condition of the body, right?"

"...Exactly. It is indeed interesting to speak with someone who gets it."

Though he was being unreasonable, I sort of got what he was doing, and I laughed in my thoughts. Haba cleared his throat and said, "The condition of the body, in other words, the theory that Kaitou could have had his arm severed and been killed by a machine or killed quickly upon the room being entered is rejected. First, for such a machine to kill him with such force, it would have been discovered right away. Second, as a strong force would be needed to kill him, killing him discreetly under everyone's noses was just not possible.

"This means..."

"It is difficult for the sealed room created by Hongou to be entered from the front."

Haba finished his explanation, sat further back into his chair and took a breath. He soon resumed his extremely confident attitude and turned to me.

"You, Oreki-kun, was it? What do you think of this deduction?"

At that moment, I had really wanted to tell him, *It was great, can we go now?* But I get the feeling Haba is purposely saving the best of his deduction for last. He probably had a standard answer prepared in advance no matter what I said. But as I remained silent, he made a forced smile, as though gesturing to me in an attempt to get the flow moving, *Hurry up and say you don't get it!*

As expected, he made a scoffing laugh and raised his voice.

"No, this won't do! But this isn't impossible, right?"

He then slowly stood up and walked toward one of the rucksacks seen in the movie, then stuck his hand inside the bag and carried it like that over to us.

"As you know, I'm with the props division. I'm responsible for buying the necessary equipment needed for the filming of the movie. It was we who made Kaitou's 'blood' as well as his 'severed arm'."

The object he pulled out from the bag was exactly what I expected it to be.

A rope.

"Hongou can be quite careless in her preparation. For example, though she intended there to be lots of blood to be used in that scene, the filming crew was in a panic when we found out our stock of fake blood was not enough. Still, she specifically requested us to get a rope. She told us as someone would be required to climb down it, so we would need a very sturdy rope. So I asked if a standard safety rope would do, and she was fine with it. Do you realize what she was intending to do with this?" he said while returning to his seat, placing the rope on the table. He puffed up his chest confidently as he continued, "Let me give you a hint. Despite her slender appearance, Kounosu is actually a member of the Hiking Club."

He took a glance at every one of us. Ibara probably gets it. Satoshi continued to maintain his smile while looking at his notebook, but he

probably didn't get it. Chitanda simply looked puzzled, so she certainly did not get it.

In any case, seeing as we all said nothing, Haba spoke in a voice as though telling us an incredible secret.

"In other words, if the killer can't enter from the first floor, then he only needs to enter from the second floor. That is the remaining viable route. The right corridor on the second floor was occupied by Kounosu, and it was no coincidence that she was assigned there. If I had to guess, it's probably due to her being in the Hiking Club.

"Hongou's trick is actually quite simple: To have the killer climb down from the window on the second floor using a rope, kill Kaitou without anyone noticing, then return back up the same rope."

"Umm, so the killer enters the Right Stage from upstairs, right?"

"Well, duh. If the killer had entered from any other route, the locked door would serve no purpose... Now, I'm sure you all get it by now. As the movie hasn't got a title, if it's to have one, then it ought to be named 'The Invisible Intrusion'."

Haba puffed his chest as though declaring, *Now how's that?*

As though what he just said was the undeniable truth, he said, "Now, let me hear what you think of it."

He asked us what we think of it, huh? We exchanged glances with each other. Ibara's face looked as though she was prodding me to show him some; I decided to ignore her, I had no intention of wasting any unnecessary energy just to rebuke him as we did with Nakajou yesterday. While Nakajou was very passionate, Haba was extremely confident. I turned my head the other way and met Chitanda's gaze. I sensed what she wanted to say and gave her an approving nod.

Nodding back, she turned and said to Haba, "We think it's a wonderful deduction."

While Haba may have thought her response a matter of fact, she was merely saying it out of courtesy.

"Oh, you flatter me too much,"

He then turned to Ibara with a smile.

"What about you?"

Damn, he's trying to provoke her. Yet Ibara, despite feeling frustrated, decided to nod upon seeing Chitanda's response.

Haba seemed to have finished what he had wanted to say. Sensing the time had come, I proceeded to speak.

"It was a great deduction, Haba-sempai. We shall be able to provide Irisu-sempai with a proper review... Have a good day."

Haba nodded satisfactorily. I stood up upon finishing. We each bade him goodbye and moved to leave the Class 2-F classroom.

Before leaving, Chitanda looked at the Sherlock Holmes books on the chair and said, "Excuse me, Haba-san, but do you mind if we borrow these?"

Though it was a strange request, as Haba was in a good mood, he agreed.

"Those are Hongou's books. Make sure you return them as you have borrowed them,"

*Don't freely lend out other people's belongings.* I said within my thoughts.

Ibara and Satoshi too left the classroom. As I was about to close the door, I stuck my head back inside to ask something.

"Haba-sempai,"

"Hmm? Is there anything else?"

"No, it's nothing important. I was just wondering if you've seen the movie yet. I thought Kaitou-sempai's severed arm effect was done rather well."

Thereupon Haba shook his head and smiled bitterly.

"To be honest, I've yet to watch it myself."

That answer was good enough for me.

"Man, he pisses me off," Ibara said, the moment we returned to the Geology Room. As we could feel the seething anger within such a brief sentence, I had no intention of teasing her.

The only person capable of doing that would be Satoshi.

"What's wrong? You look as though you got struck dumb by Sempai's provocative attitude."

Ibara gently shook her head.

"Well, if you're talking about provocative people, I get provoked by you all the time,"

Her description was apt in a strange way. Though Satoshi was known to live his life without much fear, I'd never heard him being called provocative before. Because I would have thought that she would find Haba's in-your-face way of presenting himself annoying to say the least. Seeing as we didn't get what she meant, Ibara sighed and continued, "What I didn't like was the way he treated me like some idiot."

"Mayaka an idiot, huh?"

"Besides that... it's not just me, but all of us, even Hongou-sempai and the rest of Class 2-F were treated the same way. Just because I don't have a good reason to be angry doesn't mean I'm not."

Rather than being angry, she's feeling peeved because she couldn't find a good reason to be angry, huh?

To me, Haba was merely displaying his confidence, though to Ibara it was nothing but a show of arrogance, as she said Haba was looking down on everyone. Indeed, there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Perhaps they're actually one and the same thing even. Yet to even feel angry with that, I felt Ibara pretty much matched the description for the card "Justice" and smiled to myself in amusement.

"He even made fun of Sherlock Holmes! Aren't you mad about that, Fukuchan?"

She sounded really forceful. Yet Satoshi merely shrugged his shoulders and took it quite well.

"Not really."

"Why!?"

"Well, it is indeed true that Sherlock Holmes is beginner level stuff for mystery readers. When I heard Hongou-sempai was doing some research into mystery fiction, the first thing I thought she would look into would be Sherlock Holmes. Weren't you thinking the same thing as well, Mayaka? So don't be so angry, okay?" he said while patting Ibara's shoulders. Rather than Haba's arrogant attitude, she was actually more pissed off by his disrespect of Sherlock Holmes... Well, seeing as Ibara looked at ease saying what she wanted to say, there was no need for me to intervene.

Now for the main problem; I shifted around on my seat and said, "So, what now? Do we submit Haba's proposal to Her Imperial Highness?"

Including Chitanda, who was looking at the Holmes book she opened, the other three all turned to look at me.

First was Satoshi, who said with some doubt remaining in his mind, "Well, why not? To be honest, his conclusion was hardly interesting, but he did say

Hongou-sempai had specifically asked for the use of a rope. Leaving the details aside, I think perhaps he's got it spot on."

Ibara followed, unexpectedly nodding in agreement, "I don't find any particular problems with it either... There are no contradictions in his deductions, nor any inconsistencies with the script. I'm not going to reject it for the sake of rejection alone."

The ayes have two votes now. What about the third vote?

As we looked at Chitanda, for some reason, she looked rather troubled. Unable to stay calm, she widened her eyes and opened her mouth, but was at a loss for words.

"What's wrong, Chitanda?"

"Eh... I, I just couldn't agree to it for some reason."

Hmm.

Ibara asked in a sociable way, which I could never do, "Chi-chan, how come?"

Chitanda looked even more troubled.

"Umm, well, I'm not sure of it myself. But, I just feel it's not Hongou-san's true intention... Ahh, I just can't accept this deduction. While it's different from the sense of disorientation felt from Nakajou's deduction yesterday, I just couldn't accept it!"

As long as we don't hear it from the author herself, if Chitanda didn't get it, then there was no way I could get it either. It would seem that Chitanda was against the deduction. Suddenly, Chitanda turned her eyes towards me like a wasp. S-stop looking me like that with those eyes!

"What about you, Oreki-san? Do you think that deduction is correct?"

Ugh. I never thought I would attract so much attention. And I was intending to say something carefree. I shifted on my seat and swung my legs about,

and shook my head as dramatically as possible.

"No, I don't."

Ibara fired a response at me right away, "Why, Oreki!?"

...Those are some double standards from you. Feeling sad for her, I answered, "Because Haba's proposal is unworkable. If a murder were to really take place in such a theatre, such preparations might have worked. But it is impossible for that movie."

Satoshi urged me on with his usual smile.

"In other words?"

"In other words, it's contradictory to what we have seen in the movie. Leave the map aside and try to recall the movie we saw the day before yesterday. What do we see outside the window of the Right Stage?"

I'm quite amazed that even I was able to recall, considering I wasn't particularly paying attention when watching the movie. Upon suggesting to them to disregard the map, it wasn't hard for them to recall it either.

Satoshi led the way nodding.

"Ah yes, that window."

"Exactly. The building had fallen into disrepair for so many years, even the sturdy looking Katsuda-sempai had a hard time opening that window. I'm sure you all remember the creaking noise made as he struggled to push it open, showing it to be quite hard to open.

If they were to shoot a scene showing the killer entering via the window, then they would have had to arrange for Kounosu-sempai to climb down from upstairs using a rope, and in order not to disturb the grass, she would have had to open the window while maintaining an awkward hanging position. That is quite difficult to accomplish, as opening such a window would take time, not to mention the sound it would make. And if it wasn't opened properly, the glass may even have shattered. Besides, what do you

think Kaitou-sempai would be doing? Would he have just stood there and watched? Of course not.

"Had Hongou not visited the location herself when writing that script, then this method might have had no problem being adopted, considering she wouldn't have known about the window's condition. Haba's suggestion is based on the map alone without even watching the movie itself."

"Oh, so that was why you asked Haba-san whether he'd seen the movie!" Chitanda raised her voice as she exclaimed. She actually heard my exchange with Haba? I have never failed to be amazed by her extraordinary senses.

"Right. If he had seen the movie, then he would have known it was impossible to enter the room from upstairs.

"The truth is that Hongou had been to the site herself and wrote the script based on her observations. Nakajou said so. If Hongou had really intended for the window to be used as Haba had described it, and assuming that Irisu is right about Hongou being a meticulous person, then she would have requested the filming division to prepare for some lubricant to be used on the window at the crime scene. I do not believe she would have simply ignored such defects in the building.

"In short, I can't agree with Haba's deduction. How about it?"

I didn't even need to ask. I could tell Satoshi thought my explanation was appropriate, while Ibara gave an expression as though she didn't really want to agree.

"Well then," a voice behind me said, "This means you have not come to an agreement today either, right?"

As I turned around, I found Eba standing there without even realizing it.

She must be really looking forward to the solving of this mystery. Though she didn't show it as she said, "Then I look forward to guiding you to meet the third person tomorrow."

"Oh... Yes, thank you. We look forward to your assistance."

Chitanda bowed right after finishing. Eba shook her head, and added something else as though it were nothing important.

"But tomorrow will be the last day. If the problem is still not solved by the evening of the day after tomorrow, then the script will not be able to be made in time for the filming."

Today's Wednesday. I see, we're running on a tight schedule here.

As we felt a sense of unease, Eba relaxed her expression and bowed her head deeply.

"...It is I who should be looking forward to *your* assistance."

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ a Japanese period drama, [Mito Kōmon - Wikipedia](#)

## 4 - "Bloody Beast"

The next day.

It was another fine day, with fine weather covering the entire country. A good day for leisurely activity. Watching a bit of TV for once in the morning, it showed people heading off to the sea and mountains. Ahh, tanned skin, smiling faces, that's what I call a vacation!

And here we were, huddling our desks in the corner of the classroom having a meeting.

Then again, I had no preference either way. In fact, having a meeting might even suit me better. If I had to be free, then I would prefer killing time in an air-conditioned cafe sipping away at a hot cup of coffee. On such an occasion, only black coffee with its bitter taste would suffice.

"Oreki, stop daydreaming! We're supposed to be thinking of a solution here!"

My consciousness returned to the meeting. Even without being told, we all knew the agenda today was the solution to the movie "Mystery (working title)". Since we were only discussing it, we weren't exactly going beyond our responsibilities as "observers". But then, I was merely listening silently, as it was just Satoshi summarizing the situation,

"...In other words, what Haba-sempai said was correct — the sealed room was rather rigid, as it's not easy breaking into a double sealed room. Especially the outer sealed room, which was practically shouting 'as though you can break in',"

The outer sealed room Satoshi was referring to was the second sealed room which Haba was mentioning yesterday. As the entrance to the right corridor

was being watched by Sugimura, no one would be able to sneak inside perfectly without being seen.

Chitanda tilted her head and said timidly, "So it can't be broken into? But, how could you be so certain?"

"Well, you see, Chi-chan,"

Ibara took over the explanation.

"It's under the pretext that Haba-sempai's second sealed room exists. If that is to be broken into, then they must have filmed something about when and how it was broken into. If that's the case, then the cast could have treated this 30 seconds as a blind spot where they would show how the killer breaks in. But we've not seen anything of that sort in the movie. As the movie was very simple, there's just not enough room to insert anything extra."

"Oh, I see. So it was never mentioned whether the killer sneaked through during the brief moment Sugimura-san wasn't watching the hall, right?"

Ibara nodded and continued, "Besides, it's the same thing if it was Sugimura-sempai trying to escape from Senouchi-sempai and the others' lines of vision. That's why I hadn't thought Hongou-sempai would consider the possibility of a second sealed room. That was just Haba-sempai thinking too much. Instead, thinking from the premise of who had entered the right side corridor would have been better."

Give it up already, Ibara. Where's the fun if you have to do all the thinking? Though Ibara quickly gave a self-deprecating smile and waved her hand to dismiss what she just said.

"Nah, that probably won't work as well. Since they've already shot the part with Sugimura-sempai shown standing above the hall, which means he was watching the whole time."

Silence. The meeting had come to a deadlock.

Recognizing the stalemate, Chitanda suddenly spoke.

"By the way, I nearly forgot,"

She took something out of the bag she was carrying on her shoulder.

"Here, have some."

It was some sweets wrapped in small elegant boxes with English words written on them. It seemed they were whiskey bonbons.

"What's with these?"

Faced with the sudden appearance of such luxury, Ibara said that looking half-amazed. Chitanda smiled gently.

"These are samples for a new recipe. It was sent to us as a gift by the candy makers for the Bon Festival. Though we hardly eat many sweets, so..."

Upon opening the lids, each small box contained around 20 rather large whiskey bonbons.

"Since I got it as a gift, feel free to have them."

She handed one over to me. I removed the paper wrapping and put the chocolate in my mouth. I could smell a strong flavour of almond and whiskey as I bit it.

Chitanda asked, "How is it?"

"...It tastes strong."

To the point of getting drunk. I was thinking of having another one, seeing as she went out of her way to give them to us, but decided otherwise.

As each one of us got their share of candy, I began to do some thinking.

The biggest challenge this mystery posed was its limitation of information. As Ibara had put it, as it wasn't really filmed meticulously, there was hardly

room to insert anything extra. To begin with, was it even possible to solve the mystery just by watching the movie? I really don't want to watch it again just to confirm. Besides, the movie never even showed the fact that the entrance to the hall and the north-facing windows were boarded up. Was it possible to film the rest of the scenes in time for the day after tomorrow (Yes! The day after tomorrow!) just by our own observations...

I thought from the perspective of the retired screenwriter Hongou Mayu, writing a mystery script despite having no prior knowledge of detective fiction, and working so hard on it that she got gastritis from being too stressed out. Eba was right in describing her as a sincere and attentive person. She has my sympathies though, as the people from the filming division were unable to get the script she worked so hard on. I wonder how she would feel if she were to hear people tell her "Can you really solve this just by watching the film?"

Well, I'll leave that aside for now.

"...Whoo."

A strange sigh was heard.

An amazing sight appeared before my eyes. I had two bonbon wrappers in front of me. Satoshi also had two, while Ibara had one. But was that six wrappers from bonbons that Chitanda had eaten? And she was in the process of unwrapping a seventh as we were watching. I frantically stopped her.

"I think that's enough for you. Since it's alcoholic, after all."

Upon being told this, Chitanda stared at the seventh bonbon on her palm, then looked at the wrapper beside it. Just when I was wondering what she would do next, she promptly put the bonbon into her mouth.

As she was quite indulging herself, she said, "Oh, I've eaten this much already. It's got some strange taste, so I felt curious and had more."

Eating more just because she was curious.....

"Chi-chan! Are you alright?"

Noticing how serious the situation was, Ibara called out to Chitanda, who merely responded with a smile.

"I'm fine, why do you ask?"

"But, you look strange."

"I'm fine, I'm fine... Fufufu..."

Umm, your laughing is way different from how you normally laugh.

As the appointed time had arrived, Eba came as usual and stood by the door with her emotionless expression, though this time she raised her eyebrows.

"That smell... is that alcohol?"

Satoshi promptly replied, "Nope, just whiskey bonbons."

As if Eba cares about the difference. In any case, she seemed to lose interest in the smell and handed a bundle of paper over to me.

"Oreki-san,"

Ah, yes. I stood up to receive the copies. It was the script that I requested from Eba the other day. With this, I would be able to find out just how much Hongou intended to put in her script.

"It would've been better if I had this yesterday,"

Indeed it would have been better if I had had this earlier. I then smiled bitterly upon noticing my thoughts. Didn't I decide not to care much about this problem? Maybe I was getting fired up after shooting down Nakajou's and Haba's theories in quick succession.

If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick. At once, I opened the script and looked up the part mentioned the day before, to find out if there was any mention about the surroundings of the scene of the crime. Without even searching, the page I flipped to ended up being the part where I was looking for.

*Kounosu: "There's another set of master keys in the office, can someone go get them?"*

*A cut here is recommended prior to shooting the door being unlocked.*

*Upon unlocking the door, only the boys are to enter the room. (The girls are to stand side by side at the door.)*

*Kaitou-kun is to lie on the ground. While it may be plain to the observer, please have him hold his arm to emphasize the pain. He is unconscious and unable to call out for help.*

*Sugimura: "Kaitou!"*

*The boys are to run towards him.*

*The order of who reaches him first is fine.*

*Upon helping Kaitou-kun up, Sugimura-kun is to discover the blood on the floor with his palm.*

*Sugimura: "Blood."*

*The girls will <scream> together.*

*Katsuda: "Kaitou! Dammit! Somebody help!"*

*Katsuda-kun will go and open the window. (Please be careful not to get injured by the glass.)*

*Please take a few moments to shoot the outside of the window. Make sure there are no traces of footsteps outside.*

*Katsuda-kun is to go towards the Left Stage, whether it's through the stage or the backstage corridor is fine. Though as the stage is filled with rotting wood, please take extreme care when walking through it.*

It was written in quite some detail. I see, no wonder she was so stressed out if the whole thing was written in such a style. From the description "Make sure there are no traces of footsteps outside." - it was how Nakajou had said, when Hongou went there the grass had still not yet grown completely. Based on this fact, Nakajou was actually right.

As I was thinking, Chitanda said to me, "Is that a script?"

"Yeah."

She seemed pretty hammered.

"Looks good, very good. I want to have it."

...She's really drunk. Normally it would have been fine to just hand it to her, but as I'm quite worried about her now, I decided not to. In turn, I called out to Satoshi, "Satoshi, you have a book binder?"

Satoshi gave me an indignant look.

"As if anyone would carry that around."

"You have a stapler then?"

"I do have one; it's a small one, though."

He placed his hand inside his drawstring bag and took out a stapler. Not everyone carries such things around with them either. I quickly stapled the pages together.

"I wonder what we should do with this?"

"Losing it would be bad, so you keep it with you,"

As per Ibara's instructions, I placed the script copy into my shoulder bag. Upon seeing that we were finished, Eba spoke.

"Then, let us go. We'll be heading to the Class 2-C classroom."

Upon exiting the classroom, a tune started playing on cue. It's the light music club today, the song was... *The March of the Black Queen*. I kept wondering why for the past few days the music would play upon us leaving the room. I reckon it probably has something to do with our appointment being at 1pm, which would be the time when the music clubs would take turns having their practice sessions on different days, as I do not hear music from other music clubs.

Ibara asked Eba, who walked ahead of us, "Who're we meeting today..."

"Sawakiguchi. Sawakiguchi Misaki, of the marketing division, though she was hardly involved in the filming process. As the filming is incomplete, advertisement of the movie has also been stalled."

Then she shouldn't be included as part of the crew, isn't that kind of misleading? Such a straightforward question was responded to by Eba with a straightforward answer.

"Sawakiguchi was deeply involved in the early planning stages of the project as well as the direction it would take. So she might have some good ideas concerning the mystery."

She then added, "At least that's what Irisu has determined."

Hmm, initial staff member, huh? Though Eba may say Sawakiguchi might come up with some good ideas, to me it's just another member of a motley crew. Being involved in deciding the direction of a project wasn't really much. As Irisu had mentioned, and based on our conversations with Nakajou and Haba, Class 2-F's movie has no other direction apart from that of the mystery genre. As if someone involved in deciding such a direction would be able to deduce anything... Though as I thought that, I said nothing.

We came upon the connecting corridor, when suddenly Chitanda raised her voice.

"Oh! I remember now!"

"W-what is it, Chi-chan?"

Ibara staggered as Chitanda practically shouted into her ear, while Chitanda looked quite happy as she placed her hands before her chest.

"This Sawakiguchi-san, she's good at drawing, isn't she? My memory seems to be fuzzy today, I can't believe I couldn't remember who she was just now."

Hmm? Chitanda knew who she was? Eba turned her head around and asked, "Drawings? Sawakiguchi does occasionally draw some illustrations, but how did you know that?"

Chitanda smiled and said, "In the Arts Preparation Room. Oreki-san, you should know. And yet you're quite mean to keep quiet about it!"

Now she's got me dragged into this. She sure is a merry drinker. Thank goodness she's of the pleasant type. Umm, where were we? The Arts Preparation Room?

As I tried to recall, Ibara got there before me.

"Oh, she's one of those girls that borrowed that strange library book!"

That strange book, a mean way of describing it, but that reminded me. This spring, I was involved in a quiz challenge involving art and the names of many girls. And Sawakiguchi was one of those girls.

As though trying to recall, Chitanda's eyes wandered round and round.

"Yes, that Sawakiguchi-san. If I remember correctly, her drawing was the one that looked kind of strange,"

While I wasn't too familiar with memories regarding someone else's artwork, as a member of the Manga Studies Club with an interest in all things visual, Ibara nodded in agreement.

"You're right, I remember as well. Whether her drawing was terrible or full of personality, her art just seemed different from what her classmates were drawing for their assignments."

"Maybe she was drawing it in an abstract style?"

Though not familiar with the situation, Satoshi decided to say something.

Ibara said with a troubled look, "Something like manga that looks poor at first glance, but is actually good?"

Walking some distance ahead of us, Eba laughed softly.

"You've seen Sawakiguchi's art? In that case, you probably won't find it strange once you meet her in person."

I wonder what she meant. What's she trying to insinuate?

Eba stopped as we arrived outside the Class 2-C classroom.

The girl there had her hair tied into a chignon. Rather than a chignon, calling it a Chinese hair bun would be more appropriate. With two Chinese

hair buns wrapped with cloths adorned with dragon patterns on both sides of her head, she wore a tank top and jeans. Her skin was slightly tanned. In her hand was a magazine... it seemed to be an astronomy magazine. The overall mismatching girl noticed our presence and waved one of her arms, smiling to us.

"Ciao!"

And greeted us in Italian. Chitanda promptly greeted her back without hesitation.

"Good afternoon, Sawakiguchi-san."

Sawakiguchi gave a big sigh, and shook her head in an exaggerated way that reminded me of those overreactions seen in American movies.

"No, you don't seem to get it. When I say 'ciao', you should greet me back with 'ciao' as well! Otherwise it won't connect. Now, let's do this again. Ciao!"

I looked on with troubled eyes at Chitanda, who took it rather calmly.

"Oh, I'm very sorry. Then, ciao."

Yup, she's *really* drunk. Normally, Chitanda would have been panicking already after being faced with such unexpected responses.

Watching this all along, Satoshi whispered to me, "She's kinda eccentric, isn't she?"

"Seems so."

"So Kamiyama High School still has strange people that I don't know of..."

He sounded quite regretful, as though talking about a companion of his own kind. As though she'd heard us, Eba gave an awkward smile.

Meanwhile, upon hearing Chitanda's response, Sawakiguchi became very cheerful.

"Thank you for coming all this way. The name's Sawakiguchi Misaki."

In turn, Eba introduced us to her.

"These are the people from the Classics Club. Do go easy on them, Misaki."

Indeed, if she didn't go easy on us, I'd be at a loss. As Eba didn't introduce us individually, we had to do so ourselves. Sawakiguchi didn't seem intent on memorizing our names, or maybe she was just listening selectively.

After Satoshi announced his name, she said, "I see. Anyway, have a seat."

"Okay."

As we got ourselves seated, Eba took her leave. As soon as Eba closed the door, Sawakiguchi stretched her fingers so much we could hear them creak.

"So you're the ones who helped us out on our project, right? Well, how did you find the others' deductions? Were they good?"

Satoshi said bluntly, "Not really."

"They were rejected?"

"Yeah."

Satisfied with the response, Sawakiguchi nodded many times.

"That won't do, if the students don't endure hardships. Young'uns these days sure know nothing about hardships."

As she spoke in an exotic deadpan-like accent, for a moment, I nearly couldn't make out that she was saying "Young ones". She seemed to be the sort that likes to utter meaningless stuff, though I don't particularly dislike people with such interests.

On the other hand, Satoshi said jubilantly as though digging out some treasure, "Well, it is a difficult case, after all. If one intended to sit down

and solve this, then it wouldn't be interesting if they didn't digest the details properly."

What do you mean "digest the details properly"? As far as I know, Satoshi has two mottos. The first was "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away." The other was "Conclusions cannot be made from databases alone." And it's not like he could solve the case himself using his own database anyway.

Sawakiguchi laughed.

"You guys sound pretty reliable. As expected of the people Irisu recommended. Well, if my assumptions end up scattered, I'm counting on you to sort out the bits."

"Leave that to us."

If you're gonna make such a verbal promise, don't come crying to me if you end up overdoing it. Though, Sawakiguchi was also overdoing it.

"Alrighty! Then I'll be counting on you fully."

Satoshi spoke in a frank and relaxed manner.

"Sawakiguchi-sempai, you probably must have had it tough. Is the marketing division making any progress? It must be tough with the product being unfinished, right?"

"True."

Sawakiguchi made a sulky expression and crossed her arms.

"It's true that without the product, we couldn't make any advertising posters. But we'll think of something."

"Then, what seems to be the problem?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

She sighed deeply.

"We still need a title. We can't do anything without a title. We can't even decide on a suitable font either. Normally a title would be added when a movie is finished, but the problem now is that the movie is not completed."

That goes without saying. Anyone involved in advertising during the Cultural Festival would have to make banners or posters, but it feels extremely lonely not being able to do anything due to the lack of a title.

Sawakuguchi then smiled at Satoshi.

"At any rate, we'll have to do something with the script. Before you hear my theory, I'll take any questions from you, so fire away."

Even when she asked us to fire away, I ended up flinching at her overenthusiastic manner. Yet Chitanda didn't seem to mind a bit.

"Then we will begin. Sawakiguchi-san, you were involved in choosing the direction the class would take for the festival, right?"

Sawakiguchi looked puzzled and said, "Well, yeah, I was involved."

"You decided to make a movie, with mystery as the genre, and you entrusted Hongou-san with the script, right?"

"Yeah."

Chitanda stretched her body across the table.

"How did you decide upon that? Please tell me."

What's she trying to ask? What's that got to do with the main topic anyway? Though she was still as articulate as usual, she didn't seem to be thinking properly. I promptly chided her.

"Chitanda, stop saying something so foolish."

At which point Chitanda turned her head towards me.

"But I'm curious about it!"

She then turned back towards Sawakiguchi. She's beyond help. Thank goodness that Sawakiguchi didn't take it badly as she smiled and waved her hand.

"If there has to be a relationship, then you could say everyone is involved in the decision-making process. I'm not saying this as a figure of speech, either."

Satoshi asked puzzlingly, "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing really. When a group has very few members, then direct democracy is the best way of getting things done."

"...So they're all given questionnaires to fill out?"

"You think pretty fast."

She tapped lightly on Satoshi's shoulders.

"Numbers are justice, and I believe the best happiness derives from the largest majority, or something like that. As we didn't battle it out through debates, basically we had things decided with questionnaires."

I still have doubts about whether the minority would be convinced as a result, but recalling what Irisu had said, the objective of Class 2-F was to get their project completed. If they could decide on something good, then they would do it. So deciding via a questionnaire might be reasonable after all.

Chitanda asked once again, "Umm, does that include choosing Hongou-san as the screenwriter?"

Sawakiguchi thought for a moment, before smiling bitterly.

"Ah, that one's different. As Hongou was the only one capable of doing it, we didn't even bother with a confidence vote for her."

"She did it voluntarily?"

"No, she was nominated for the role. Though I can't remember who nominated her."

Upon hearing that, Chitanda raised her brows as though looking sad. I had absolutely no idea why, as I didn't know what feelings Chitanda was holding when she asked such a question.

While I was entrenched in thought, I noticed Sawakiguchi take something from beside her feet. It was a sack. Like a drawstring bag, it was the possession of strange people. Sawakiguchi stuck her hand inside.

"Hmm? I thought you were interested in knowing how we got things decided? Anyway... here."

She took out a notebook.

"I don't know if you'll find this useful, but I brought it anyway."

Chitanda opened the notebook that was handed to her. It was full of numbers and words, and it took me some time to comprehend the meaning of them.

*No. 4 - What should we be making?*

- *Art gallery* -- 1
- *Play* -- 5
- *Haunted house* -- 8
- *Movie* -- 10

*Movie decided*

No 5 What movie should we make?

- *Taiga drama* [1] -- 1
- *Absurd comedy* -- 8
- *Slapstick comedy* -- 3
- *Mystery* -- 9
- *Hard-boiled fiction* -- 2
- *Abstain* -- 1

*Mystery decided*

As we flipped through the pages, more details were written.

No 31 What murder weapon should be used?

- *Knife (stabbing)* -- 10
- *Hammer (beat to death)* -- 3
- *Rope (strangulation)* -- 8
- *Others:*

*Burn by oil* -- 1

*Thrown from high places* -- 2

*Knife recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)*

No. 32 - How many victims should there be?

- *1 person* -- 6
- *2 people* -- 10
- *3 people* -- 3

- *Others*:

*4 people -- 1*

*Everyone -- 2*

*About 100 -- 1*

- *Invalid vote -- 1*

*2 people recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)*

I understood after having a brief look at it. It was the collection of questionnaire results. Ibara, who also realized what it was, turned to ask Sawakiguchi, "May we borrow this? It might be important."

"Sure thing. It's already been decided, hasn't it?"

So whether we could borrow it was not a problem at all, huh? Seeing as we were chosen by Irisu to determine the validity of the deductions, she must have deemed the lending of such stuff trivial. What on earth was going on in Chitanda's mind? ...That was the real mystery.

She's probably just drunk.

Chitanda closed the notebook and carefully brought it to her chest.

She then inquired, "This may sound awkward, but may I ask something else from you?"

"Sure."

"Sawakiguchi-san, are you close to Hongou-san?"

That question sounded familiar. If I remember correctly, that was what she asked Eba as well.

Sawakiguchi looked a bit troubled as she replied, "Umm, we were only classmates, that's all."

With such details, one could determine what sort of person Hongou Mayu was. It was not hard to guess that she wasn't intimate with an eccentric person (according to Satoshi) like Sawakiguchi.

Chitanda didn't hide her disappointment as she lowered her head.

"I see..."

"You have anything else to ask?" Sawakiguchi asked Chitanda and the rest of us.

I didn't have anything in particular to ask, and neither did the others. Upon sensing we'd finally come to the main topic, Sawakiguchi leaned forward a bit.

"Right! Now you'll hear my theory. If you were to suggest that it wouldn't work, then... you know what I mean?"

She smiled as she said this in a mischievous tone.

"You know, when I heard the search for the killer starts right after what we have filmed, I wondered whether they're actually gonna go down that route."

Sawakiguchi started off with that while looking at us perplexed. Though we were at a loss trying to understand what she meant.

Ibara asked, "...What do you mean?"

"Well, if we're gonna make something for the Cultural Festival, wouldn't it better if we do it with a bang? It'd be pretty dull if only one person died.

"Haba may go all excited like an idiot and declare 'Now this is bloody true mystery!' Though for me, even if you tell me it's mystery, I just imagine it

to be something else completely. I think Hongou must be thinking the same thing. The real story starts after all this."

Something else completely?

As though looking for something, or someone, she turned and spoke.

"You, over there."

She was speaking to me.

"What would you normally associate with the idea of 'mystery'?"

As if I could answer right away when suddenly asked like that. What do I associate with mystery, huh? As the books I've read would probably not ring any bells for Sawakiguchi, I decided to list some other more famous titles.

"Something like the *Murder on the Orient Express*?"

Yet that answer didn't seem to satisfy her, as she raised her brows.

"You sure are an anorak<sup>[2]</sup>."

I ended up replying instantly.

"But I thought that was a pretty famous title?"

Sawakiguchi raised her finger and waved it while going *Tut, tut, tut*.

"That's why I said you're a 'detective fiction' anorak. Don't you realize? What titles do you normally find when you enter a video rental store under the genre 'mystery'?"

I had no idea what Sawakiguchi was trying to say. Looking around me, neither did anyone else.

Sawakiguchi raised her voice in irritation.

"In the questionnaire, when it was decided that we would do mystery, nobody said anything about detective fiction. Why don't you get it? When one mentions mystery, normally they would associate it with titles like *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street*, right?"

I see, guess I was mistaken in thinking otherwise.

...No, wait a minute!

That's not mystery! The titles Sawakiguchi listed were more like slasher movies involving monstrous serial killers and innocent victims... In other words, that's horror, not mystery.

Yet surprisingly, someone actually agreed with Sawakiguchi. It was Satoshi, who nodded as though feeling moved from the bottom of his heart.

"Ah, indeed, that was a blind spot."

Was he trying to joke along with her? He seemed to have been waiting for the right timing to do so.

In order to stop him from joking any further, I said, "Satoshi, are you serious?"

By saying that, Satoshi is guaranteed to abide by his motto "Jokes are to be made on the spot, so too are misunderstandings to be dispelled right away", and stop right away. So I was surprised by his next response.

"Why do you ask?"

He's actually serious?

"Are you actually saying that *Friday the 13th* should be counted as mystery?"

"I wouldn't. But it wouldn't be strange if it was either."

Sitting beside him, Ibara demanded, "Explain yourself, Fuku-chan."

Nodding and clearing his throat, Satoshi answered, "All right. The problem lies with the semantic use of the word 'mystery'. It is indeed true that mystery includes detective fiction, basically a story with a killer and a detective. But on the other hand, elements of suspense would also be counted as well. In that case, even horror titles would be included... like *Friday the 13th*."

Ibara didn't look particularly convinced. Satoshi relaxed his expression a bit.

"Mayaka, you ever been to a bookstore?"

"Yeah, but not often."

"Go look for magazines under the 'mystery' section. Comic magazines would do as well. You'll see what I mean. Or you could also look for the 'Summer Mystery Fair' lineup. You'll discover that detective stories aren't the only books listed under 'mystery'."

Hmm...

Like Ibara, I wasn't convinced, though I knew where he was coming from. It's true that most media works containing the word "mystery" would be printed in a blood-stained style. As detective fiction would rarely involve such tragic bloodshed, it's appropriate that such a "blood-stained" font would certainly not be suggesting detective fiction. Yet normally, no one would think of associating the word "mystery" that way. Sawakiguchi Misaki was just too original in her way of thinking.

Well, the problem now was how the conversation was relevant to the main problem.

With Satoshi's support, Sawakiguchi said while puffing her chest, "That's what I meant. Come to think of it, you guys are experts in deduction, I heard - that's why you were misled by your instincts. So I'm sure you'll know how this movie would continue? Basically, no one else has entered the room where Kaitou died, which means there's a seventh person amongst

the group. Besides, Hongou was looking for another person in addition to the other six to appear in the movie."

Now that's the first time I heard that. Yet the way Sawakiguchi has gone about it, could it be... Soon enough, she voiced out my concerns,

"As everyone began suspecting each other to the point of losing trust for one another, the serial killer would appear. While we wouldn't know how many he would kill, it's probable that everyone dies in the end. So maybe we could arrange for a couple to survive and kill off the killer. The last scene would have the couple vanquish the killer, and then kiss in the glow of the sunrise. As for the title... How about in English? ...'Bloody Beast', or something like that. Sounds pretty creepy, huh?"

My concerns were completely spot on. Yet Sawakiguchi didn't seem to be joking. She even added "This should be able to convince everyone." She was acting as though horror was the correct answer. She believed too much in her own values that she couldn't accept any other explanation.

Unable to hide her troubled look, Ibara countered, "B-but Sempai, what about the sealed room? The door was locked."

Sawakiguchi replied matter of factly, "Does it really matter whether it's locked?"

"...!"

"Since it's a killer with supernatural powers, he'd just walk through the wall. Aha, then how about this? A cursed spirit. Hmm, that would also be good, an occult movie."

I- I see.

...I just had a feeling at what a flawless explanation that was. Who would have thought that the sealed room problem which had troubled us for four whole days could be solved by such a simple solution? "Does it really matter whether it's locked?" Never a wiser word has been said.

Ibara, Chitanda, and Satoshi all seemed to have something to say, though I was no longer interested in hearing them, as Sawakiguchi had wonderfully deduced that it was the workings of a poltergeist.

Since it doesn't really matter whether the door's locked!

We returned to the Geology Room.

The first to oppose Sawakiguchi's proposal was Chitanda.

"She's wrong, she's definitely wrong. Sawakiguchi-san's theory does not reflect Hongou-san's true intention!"

"Of course. She seemed pretty serious though. It's hard to tell whether she's joking or not."

Ibara too agreed with Chitanda.

Seeing the both of them fervently opposed to Sawakiguchi's proposal, Satoshi probably felt mischievous as he said, "Then try and prove it wrong,"

He added with a gentle smile, "...Theoretically."

Jeez, Satoshi can be mean sometimes. Ibara held her tongue. That was to be expected, as Sawakiguchi had more or less given up on even deducing the case. Whether it's the sealed room, alibis or the murder weapon... they can all be explained away by the fact that "the killer is a poltergeist with supernatural powers". Simply perfect.

Faced with such a perfect despairing situation, Chitanda refused to budge.

"But it's wrong."

"That's why I said try to disprove it theoretically."

"It's wrong, it's just wrong, because... Oh!"

What was it? She seemed to have thought of something.

No, turns out she was just stumbling aimlessly as her eyes wandered drowsily.

"Ah, it's like a kaleidoscope." she muttered.

A kaleidoscope?

...Before I realized, Chitanda's face had gone white. Though her skin was normally quite pale, this time it was whiter than before. I didn't even get to ask whether she was fine or not before it happened.

Chitanda's body began swaying left and right, before finally falling flat on the nearest desk with a thud.

"Chi-chan!"

Ibara tried to help her up, but it was no use. Before long, we could hear her snoring softly. She seemed to have passed out from drunkenness. It's probably not good to stare at her sleeping face. To think that she could take seven whiskey bonbons before collapsing despite each containing so much alcohol... Guess I'll let her rest for now.

As I met Satoshi's gaze, he shrugged his shoulders.

While I wasn't about to avenge Chitanda's fall, I still said, "What about you, Satoshi? Do you accept Sawakiguchi's theory?"

Satoshi smiled and shook his head gently.

"It's true I was interested in her bold imagination, but practically I find it hard to believe. Though I have no basis for disproving it."

So Satoshi's also opposed to it.

I smiled.

"Well, unfortunately, I'm also interested in such imagination."

"Figures. After all, she managed to solve everything with just one simple explanation, finishing everything in one go, so to speak. So it's not unreasonable for you to be interested in it as well."

"Well, it's not exactly free from contradictions."

As I unconsciously let that slip, Ibara's interest was piqued.

"So it can be disproved?" she said while raising her voice.

Contradiction, or something of the sort. While it wasn't exactly a long explanation, I still spoke.

"If you consider Haba's words yesterday, then Sawakiguchi's theory cannot be correct. However, it's not really something complicated.

"Even as Hongou has collapsed half way into making the script, if they were to make the latter half of the movie into a splatter or occult horror movie, then they're gonna be needing plenty of props, that's the truth. And wasn't it said that they lacked the most important prop needed for all that?"

"The most important...?"

Ibara looked puzzled.

Satoshi turned and said to her, "You know, when Haba was complaining near the end,"

Ibara seemed to recall thanks to that hint.

"Ahh!" She yelled and met his gaze, "I know... The fake blood."

"Yup. Hongou's instruction asked for enough fake blood not just for Kaitou alone. As Haba did complain about Hongou's instruction, no matter what, this meant Hongou's instruction did not involve filming of any scene with lots of killing. As Hongou did not intend for any scenes with lots of bloodshed, she only requested one packet of fake blood. She did not request

any other weapons or makeup either. As if that's possible. At any rate, Sawakiguchi had said it herself,"

Satoshi took over what I was about to say.

"A horror movie with only one victim is just too lonely."

I nodded.

Perhaps Sawakiguchi was serious in thinking that way. She may be a bit too self-righteous that anyone else might view it as absurd nonsense. It might work if she had guessed some of it correctly. But as she only worked with the marketing division, she was not aware of the work done by the other divisions, so she ended up guessing wrongly.

Feeling bored for some reason, Ibara muttered, "Hmph, explanations are just supplementary,"

Quite an esoteric way of putting it, I thought.

Neither Satoshi nor Ibara had any objections. And so Sawakiguchi's theory was considered and duly buried. But this meant all three detective wannabes' theories had been rejected...

All we could hear was someone snoring. It seemed Chitanda had yet to wake up.

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ [Taiga Drama](#)
2. ↑ Note for Americans (The Hyouka series is translated in British English): In British slang, an **anorak** is a person who has a very strong interest, perhaps obsessive, in niche subjects. This interest may be unacknowledged or not understood by the general public. Although the term is often used synonymously with geek or nerd, the Japanese term otaku and the American term "fanboy/fangirl" are probably closer synonyms. -[Wikipedia](#)

## 5 - Let's Try This

After meeting with Sawakiguchi, we expected Eba would come, but in the end she didn't. It would be bothersome for us if she did not relay that we had rejected Sawakiguchi's deduction. I wonder what she's up to... At any rate, as the sun was setting, even the energetic Kami High students were beginning to scatter homeward, and we, too, began tidying up the club room. Well, I'm sure there's a way to contact them if something unexpected were to happen, as Chitanda does know Irisu quite well.

When Chitanda finally woke up, she was so embarrassed after realizing she was so drunk that she fell asleep that her face went very red. Though it seemed like she still hadn't completely woken up, as when heading towards the school entrance, she would occasionally wobble to and fro. I hope she reaches home safely.

Chitanda was accompanied by Ibara as they left school, while I walked together with Satoshi for half the journey. As we exited the school gate, Satoshi swung his drawstring bag as he grumbled alone.

"So we ended up rejecting them all. What will happen with the movie, then?"

Wasn't it obvious? For three days no one has figured out a correct solution.

So the only way was to not complete it.

After hearing that answer, Satoshi smiled while raising his brow.

"What a miserable answer. So it's basically *The summer grass - It is all that's left of an ancient warrior's dream*, huh? Or rather, *All of Naniwa is*

*dream after dream.* If Chitanda-san woke up from such dreams, she'd probably make trouble."[\[1\]](#)

"What are you gonna do now?"

"Me? I'll be busy from now on. I don't have the time to help reduce stress for other classes."

We walked amongst the sparsely scattered students heading home. Under the crimson skies, the cool breeze blowing in the late summer was rather cold. Summer was truly coming to an end.

At the first traffic intersection, Satoshi pointed to the path where we part ways.

"I got something else to do, see ya."

And promptly left.

Since I'm all alone, I guess I'll head home.

Indeed, the movie was probably not going to be completed... I recalled the meetings with the people of Class 2-F during the past four days.

Nakajou - Armed with a passion to complete the movie, but not used to solving riddles.

Haba - Confident and prideful of his knowledge of mystery, with the conviction that his deduction was correct.

Sawakiguchi - Self-righteously declaring her method to be a matter of fact, but ended up being too far-fetched.

They all tried their best. Regardless of whether they were thoughtless, haughty or careless, their passion of wanting to complete their own project could not be faked. Though as we were entrusted with the responsibilities of judges, we ended up rejecting all their deductions. The reason being that they were simply wrong.

Well, I guess it can't be helped. They have my sympathies, but it's not our fault. This may sound cruel, but I'm not so softhearted as to oblige myself to put out a fire on the opposite shore of a river. That's why I said I did not want to get involved in this in the first place.

As I approached the residential streets, I could soon see my house. I'm just gonna get some sleep when I get home. Like Satoshi, I have no obligation to burden myself with another class's troubles. The responsibility for the movie being incomplete lies with the crew's lack of planning. They should not have gone ahead with such a project to begin with. I adjusted the shoulder bag that was slipping off my shoulder, and looked upwards at the sky.

As I returned my gaze to the ground, I noticed someone waiting for me in front of my house.

Standing at the end of the intersection where the road signal "stop" was written was Irisu Fuyumi in her school uniform. As I realized it was her, she walked a few steps towards me and said, "Do you mind taking some time off to have some tea with me?"

Incredibly, I nodded honestly and agreed.

Being in the unfamiliar situation of accompanying Irisu, we walked along the river. Just as I was wondering whether there were any cafés here, a reddish brown curtain and an electric lantern entered my field of vision. It was not the sort of trendy café which high school students would normally visit when heading home after school. Irisu flipped open the curtain in a nonchalant way and beckoned me to come inside. As I entered, I noticed the corner of the curtain was embossed in small lettering with the name of the place: "Hifumi".

It was an elegant looking tea house, with tatami mats and filled with the fragrant smell of roasted tea. The place had no counters, and all tables were

boxed in cubicles. Needless to say, they were all covered in tatami mats. Irisu sat down neatly without creasing her uniform skirt, and promptly ordered a cup of green tea from the waitress wearing an apron.

"And what will you have?"

"....."

"Well?"

"Oh, when I heard you say have a cup of tea, I never really thought we were actually coming to a tea house. All right, I'll have iced green tea then,"

I picked an appropriate drink from the menu, to which Irisu smiled bitterly.

"It's my treat, so feel free to order what you like."

I went back to look at the menu upon being told that, though I became even more confused. They had prices higher than the average crappy dinner.

While I knew why Irisu invited me, as she had remained silent, I decided to coldly do nothing in turn as well. Though Irisu merely waited calmly.

Before long, our green tea and iced tea had arrived alongside some complimentary sweets. After taking a sip of her tea, Irisu spoke.

"So, Nakajou won't do?"

I nodded.

"Haba as well?"

"Yeah."

She asked while breathing in, "Then what about Sawakiguchi?"

It wasn't our fault, but,

"...I don't think her idea would work."

All this time Irisu merely stared into my eyes, which made it feel like a very long time. For the next second or so, which felt more like half a minute, I was pinned down by her gaze.

Irisu breathed out deeply.

"I see."

"Is it a pity?"

I took a sip of my iced tea after asking. It was a new taste befitting of its price... I might say that, but in truth I couldn't taste anything. Irisu didn't sound like she was blaming me, neither did she sound upset... It may just be that our personalities just don't match.

Irisu turned her gaze towards her cup. Before long she opened her lips.

"Pity is such a strange word for you to use. The one who should be feeling pity ought to be me or my friend, not you."

It was as she said, which was basically the stance I took for the past three days... But why did I say the word pity myself?

"No, it is a pity. As we could not finish it,"

Softening her tone rapidly, Irisu smiled.

"You sympathize with us?"

"Just my emotions filling in."

I picked up one of the sweets with a toothpick and placed it in my mouth, and the sweetness instantly flowed into my mouth. This was especially true when eaten after drinking the green tea.

Remaining calm as ever, Irisu inquired, "I would like to ask you something. Who was it that rejected Nakajou's deduction?"

Now how should I answer this? Yet Irisu's expression revealed that she already knew. So I made no attempt to hide from her.

"...It was me."

"Then, I presume Haba's and Sawakiguchi's as well?"

"Yes."

"Where were they wrong?"

Since she'd asked me, I explained. About the consideration for the length of the grass, the field of vision of other members, the first sealed room, the second sealed room, the use of a rope to enter via the window, the poorly maintained building, the meaning of the word "mystery", Hongou's instructions... I plainly summarized the essence of the past three days, to which Irisu listened intently. Occasionally she would sip her tea, though I could not read her mind as to what she was thinking.

"And that was why we could not accept Sawakiguchi-sempai's proposal."

As I finished, I noticed my tea was now half empty. Irisu merely said, "I see." And went silent.

Before long, she caressed her cup and spoke.

"Back then, when I requested that you take up the case, you told me that you would feel quite uneasy to have such expectations placed on you. Yet for the past three days, what you have done has far exceeded my expectations. To think you could bury their deductions so neatly... It was just as I thought."

What did she mean by just as she thought? About no one's deductions being correct?

I was aware that I was gazing sharply at her, yet Irisu showed no signs of waver. Neither returning my gaze nor looking away, she said in a natural mood, "In the end, those three weren't suitable for the task. No matter how

passionate they were, I realized from the beginning that they did not possess the skills needed to solve the problem.

"Of course, I'm not saying they are useless. Whether it's Nakajou as a leader figure, Haba as an outsider expert, or Sawakiguchi as a comedienne, they all possess invaluable skills. They were talented in their own right, but it is also because of that reason that I believe they could not succeed in the role given to them.

"If it hadn't been for you, I would have ended up adopting one of their proposals, and would not have realized any adverse effects it would have on the filming, resulting in the failure of the project."

A cold and ruthless assessment.

Irisu had never had any expectations from any one of them.

Then who was it that she had expectations for?

Irisu moved her hand away from the teacup and sat upright. The eyes that looked straight ahead were aimed at none other than me. I got the feeling she was not here to convince me, but to knock me down.

"For the past three days, I have been thinking about how you have proven your skills. I thought, if there's such a thing as a detective critic, then as one who has critiqued other detectives so well, you were good enough to become a detective yourself. I firmly believed my expectations were not misplaced. You are special.

"So, once again I make this request of you, Oreki-kun. Will you please lend your assistance to Class 2-F and show us the right answer to the mystery?"

As she finished, she bowed her head.

I felt as though I was being watched with eyes assessing a highly valued artwork of a deceased artist. My head was filled with all sorts of thoughts. It was my skills, not anyone's, but mine. I was special. She had a request of me.

But should I believe such stuff? For so long, I have always thought of myself as an ordinary person without any particular talents. Even with the bothersome stuff Chitanda involved me in where I ended up solving it before Satoshi and Ibara, it was just luck. In essence, I was hardly any different from them. Yet Irisu did not agree. Those words shook me more than any words of coercion ever could.

Skills, huh? As a result of Irisu's request, for a moment, I started doubting my very own existence...

Though Irisu patiently waited for me, as I was at a loss for an answer, she relaxed her expression and said, "It's not like we're burdening you with any responsibilities or anything... Don't be so vexed."

"....."

"Then let me tell you a story. Don't think too much into it, it's just something I thought of.

"There was once a bench player on a sports team. Everyday she would work very hard in hopes of making it to the regular team. As to why she could endure for so long, it was due to her love of the sport, as well as a modest ambition to make a name or some achievement for herself.

"Yet years had passed and she was still a bench player. As the team would replace the more talented players with other more talented players, it was only natural.

"Among this squad was a very talented player whose skills was on par with some of the top players out there. Of course, the bench warmer's skills were still miles away from this talented player. Then came a tournament, where this talented player was very active, and ended up being selected as the tournament's MVP. When she was interviewed, she was asked what the secret to her success was.

"She merely replied, 'I was just lucky.'

"Yet for the bench warmer, this answer rang with bitterness."

Irisu once again looked at me. I could feel myself getting thirsty again, yet there was hardly any tea left in my cup. The remaining coldness of the cup transmitted to hand.

She had revealed something in her words, it was as though the Empress had finally cast off her cloak. But should I say something then?

...I then heard her continue, "It means everyone ought to recognize their own talents... Or it would be painful to watch for those without."

I did not know whether the chill I felt was coming from my drink.

I did not feel I had any inferiority complex. My views on myself were merely the result of a long period of objective observation.

Yet Irisu had insisted that I was mistaken concerning my own worth with a resounding voice. Irisu was not the only one who had thought that. Satoshi, Chitanda, Ibara, and many others, too, have said the same to me. Were they, too, seeing me via a long period of objective observation?

Besides, compared to Nakajou, Haba, and Sawakiguchi, didn't I feel I could do a better job than they did?

...Perhaps I should believe her.

That I do possess worth of some sort.

As I thought along those lines, I gradually nodded. Yet it was still a long time before I finally spoke, and during that time, Irisu merely waited for me without saying anything.

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ TL Note - Satoshi is quoting poems from [Matsuo Bashō](#) and [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) Both allude to the incomplete movie project being nothing but a "dream".

## **6 - "The Blind Spot of 10,000 People"**

The next morning, after making sure I had the video cassette in my shoulder bag, I departed the house.

After making a promise to review the movie yesterday at the Hifumi tea house, Irisu handed over a video cassette she prepared beforehand and said, "We do not have much time left. I shall meet you at a place designated by you tomorrow at 1pm and hear your conclusion about this matter."

After considering my own house or the Cafe Pineapple Sandwich which I so frequent, I decided to meet her to at the Geology Room.

Right now, I was heading towards the Geology Room. It was nearly ten o'clock when I exited the residential streets and moved on to the main street. For the next fifteen minutes of passing through various cars and people, my mind was blank, save for a favourite folksong of mine which constantly played while I move my legs. I'd more or less forgotten about the details of the movie. It was inefficient to think in such a state.

At the end of the main street, a glimpse of Kamiyama High School could be seen. As I arrived there, a voice called behind me, "Hmm, Houtarou?"

Small town this was. I turned to find Satoshi, wearing his standard Kamiyama High School summer uniform and carrying a drawstring bag, getting off his mountain bike with a smile. I waved my hand in lieu of a greeting.

"You're heading to school as well today?"

He nodded and raised his brows.

"How rare for Houtarou to come to school of his own will during vacation. You have some business?"

"Am I not allowed to come to school if I don't have any?"

"Not at all. It's just that it's so out of character for you, something must be up."

I bit my tongue. I never thought about this, but it would seem my energy-saving behaviour was just as easy to read as Chitanda's curiosity-driven behaviour.

I had no reason to hide. No, I was thinking of letting them know, which was why I've chosen to meet at the Geology Room in the first place. So I said, "I'm on official imperial business from Irisu. She commanded me to designate a killer for Kaitou's death."

Whether it was on purpose or not, Satoshi went stiff for three whole seconds upon hearing that. For some reason, he then revealed a very cheerful face as he said with a raised voice, "Wow! Who would have thought? You were the last person in my mind who would accept such an errand."

"Oreki Houtarou's righteousness and compassion know no bounds."

"Nice quip there, Houtarou."

"I'm in a hurry."

Satoshi started walking alongside me as he pushed his mountain bike. As the road wasn't wide, I ended up leaning towards the side of the road.

"That's some change of heart from you. I wonder if it could have something to do with that? Want me to tell you what 'that' is?"

He prodded me, to which I remained silent.

"It's for Chitanda-san's sake, isn't it?"

He said something matter-of-factly. To begin with, it was a conclusion made in light of the results of the past few months. Nearly all the troublesome incidents which the Classics Club got entangled in were started by Chitanda. A pattern developed where she would coerce me to be deeply involved. Though there was one exception.

This was the second exception. I shook my head and said, "No, it isn't."

Though it was indeed Chitanda who brought the case forward, it was not due to her request that I came to school today.

Satoshi raised his brows at my unexpected response.

"It wasn't Chitanda-san? Then was it a whim? Or you're doing it out of charity... nah, can't be. While you didn't say it out, this is also in line with your motto 'If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick.' right?"

Of course, that was my original intention. As a result of Satoshi being completely frank about it, I got even more displeased. I said bluntly, "Must I explain even that to you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not really. But I didn't want to pretend I wasn't interested in knowing why. Should I apologize?"

I smiled and let the matter rest.

We walked silently together for a brief while. As there was nothing else to say, Satoshi moved to get on his bike in an attempt to ride on ahead. While I found no need to stop him, I still called out to him.

"Satoshi,"

"Hmm?"

Though I called him, I didn't have anything in particular to say. Realizing this, I tried to be frank about the predicament I was in.

"...Do you think, do you think there's some things that only you could do?"

It was an ambiguous question. He tilted his head and replied cautiously, "I'm not sure why you're asking, but... amongst every person that ever lived in this world past, present and future, I do think that there's one thing that only I could do."

Could he, even in such conditions?

"And that is?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's the 'passing on the genes of Fukube Satoshi'," he said and smiled. He didn't sound like he was joking. It was his way of poking fun at his own Average Joe inadequacies.

"My bad. Allow me to rephrase,"

I thought for a little while.

"Within Kamiyama High School, is there a talent in which you consider yourself to be second-to-none?"

He replied at once, "Nope."

I was at a loss for words at how fast and precise his answer was.

Satoshi said with a carefree tone, "I told you before, Fukube Satoshi possesses no talents whatsoever. Take my passion to become a Holmesian, for example: there's no way I can become one. I do not have what it takes to enter an endless maze of knowledge just to pursue it. If Mayaka were to take up an interest in Sherlock Holmes, I can guarantee you that she would overtake my knowledge in three months' time. I'm the sort that only takes a peek at the entrances and takes a pamphlet or two to read. I wouldn't call myself second-to-none on anything."

I never thought I would hear Satoshi say such things. Yet Satoshi said it calmly as though he were talking about the weather. As I remained speechless, he smiled mischievously.

"Now I get it, the reason why Houtarou wants to try and solve the movie mystery."

"....."

"Irisu-sempai has recognized your abilities as a 'detective', hasn't she? She must have said you were the only one who could solve this, and you ended up agreeing, right?"

Damn, was he a telepath or what? So I nodded.

"But this sure is some risky business, to lend your skills based on the words of 'the Empress' concerning your knowledge."

"But you aren't suspicious of it yourself."

"Maybe... Anyway, I'll be going ahead and setting up the video player."

Satoshi got on his mountain bike and proceeded to ride off. As he was about to step on his pedal, I noticed I had something I wanted to say. It would feel bad if I ended up not saying anything.

"Satoshi,"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know what you'll think of it, but I think you're worth more than that. I think there'll come a day when you'll be one of the best Holmesians in Japan."

Satoshi blinked his eyes, but soon returned to his default smiling expression.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to say to me, "Rather than a Holmesian, I'm just very fascinated by Sherlock Holmes, that's all.

Besides..."

"?"

"...Besides, I now feel it was worth it for me to give that answer to you just now."

The movie was coming near to its climax.

The six members each took one key and went on separate ways. We awaited the tragedy that was to come, where Kaitou's mutilated body was to be discovered.

Using the dust-filled television in the Geology Room, I watched the still-nameless movie. The screen showed Kaitou's body being discovered.

Sitting some distance from me, Ibara said in admiration, "They've done quite a great job with that arm of Kaitou-sempai's. They made good use of the dim lighting to convince the audience that it's a real arm."

When she found out I had come to school for no particular reason, her reaction was one of surprise. When she heard my declaration to challenge the mystery left behind by Hongou, her eyes widened. Speaking of which, she came because she couldn't stand the thought of being left hanging by Irisu-sempai and decided to try to seek out the truth once and for all. She too could be quite a formidable person to deal with.

Satoshi added with a smile, "Now if only their acting was a bit better. In the end, it was the props division that performed the best."

And so I ended up watching the video, for the second time. While I'd heard that a crime scene must be visited at least a hundred times, I wasn't going to watch this thing that many times. Neither would Satoshi or Ibara, who merely came along just to watch the movie. And thank goodness for that.

As Katsuta ran towards the Left Stage, only to discover that the path was completely blocked, he was astounded and said,

*"No way..."*

The scene faded to black.

And the video ended.

Never tiring of menial tasks, Ibara stood up right away to rewind the video as well as turn off the TV.

To be honest, I had thought Chitanda would have come as well before I finished watching the video, as she does have amazing powers of observation and good memory. Though indeed she was unable to use her observation and memory to good analytical use, I was thinking of borrowing those talents of hers today.

However, she never came, so I asked Ibara, "Ibara, what's happened to Chitanda?"

Upon being asked, she gave a difficult expression. It was a smile mixed with some regret.

"Chi-chan's still sleeping."

"How come? She got a summer cold again?"

"No,"

She paused for a bit,

"...Hangover."

.....

"Now that's... rare..."

I nodded in agreement with Satoshi's excellent remark.

"Anyway,"

Trying to get back on topic, Satoshi shifted in his seat.

"Watching this again, I still don't see anything complicated about it. And it more or less shoots down any remaining bits of those three people's theories."

I agreed totally. After three days of revision, I realized that the mystery left behind by Hongou was not easy to solve, yet upon watching this video, I had only a light impression of it.

"It's hard to find something easy in something that's hard." I muttered alone.

Though having heard me, Ibara looked at me as though seeing a fool, puffed her chest out and said, "You're wrong, the mystery was filmed in too easy a manner."

"Really? How so?"

"Here's what I think: as a movie, it's filmed in quite a boring way that makes it hard to get the audience excited, which makes the mystery uninteresting. I thought if they put some effort into the acting and camerawork, they might have made this into a more interesting sealed room mystery."

Was that so? I didn't think one's impression of a literary work would change depending on its technical issues. Just as I was disagreeing, Satoshi suddenly smiled as though he'd found a soul mate.

"A wise observation. It's true that when I first watched this and discovered this was a sealed room mystery, it didn't feel like one at all. If only they could put more effort into their acting... But was the camerawork really that bad?"

Ibara nodded.

"It was *bad*."

"How would you have filmed it then?"

"Me? Let's see... Take the first scene showing the Narakubo area, for example. If the cameraman had stood further away, then he'd be able to film the actors together with the ruins for better effect. Besides, hmm, though I didn't think of this at first, in the part where the rest of the members gathered after splitting up, Sugimura-sempai's face could be seen from the equipment room, right? I think it'd be easier for the audience to understand if that scene was shot from Sugimura-sempai's point-of-view looking down towards the lobby. Oh yes, and if that was done, we would be able to see Sugimura-sempai watch where the two members on the second floor went as well, and then switch the point-of-view to either one of those two. Besides..."

She went on and on. Ibara really does like watching detective movies, so it was just as appropriate that Satoshi motioned to stop her with a smile. If he hadn't done that, we probably wouldn't have heard the end of it from her.

I sighed and said, "We won't get anywhere if all we do is moan about how shoddily the movie was made,"

"True. In the end, the problem lies with the methods. How about we have a look at those? Maybe not all possibilities have been shot down. Though we may have a time limit, this should be fun."

As Satoshi finished, an intruder had arrived.

The door to the Geology Room was opened loudly by someone I didn't know. The mark on his collar indicated he was a first-year.

Moving his eyes away from me, he found the person he was looking for and shouted, "There you are, Fukube!"

Upon seeing him, a bitter expression appeared on Satoshi's face. Though I could hear him click his tongue, he quickly reverted to his smiling face.

"Why, if it isn't Yamauchi-kun? You here to join the Classics Club?"

The guy called Yamauchi disregarded Satoshi's wise-talk and moved towards him, grabbing him by the collar.

"H-hey! There's no need to be so violent!"

"Oh, don't give me this! I'm doing this for your sake! Omichi's serious! What're you gonna do if you end up repeating a year?"

The name Omichi rang a bell in my mind. He was the strict maths teacher. Now I see. I crossed my arms and smiled at Satoshi.

"Satoshi, you really should take your revision classes, you know? Weren't you saying you'd be busy studying for your exams?"

Yamauchi, whom I presumed to be one of Satoshi's friends, instantly grabbed him from his chair.

Even so, Satoshi didn't lose his composure as he pleaded, "That's the spirit, Houtarou! Keep it up and you'll be solving Hongou-sempai's mystery in no time!"

Seeing as he was unaware of the situation he was in, Yamauchi yelled, "The revision class is about to start, idiot! Hurry up and move along!"

"Noooooooo~!!! What about the sealed room? The sealed roooooom~!!!"

Satoshi disappeared, leaving a trail of screams behind.

*Sigh.* Now how should I comment on this? If I have to put it in one sentence: Was he an idiot? ...Just as I was thinking that, he ran back here. Taking his notebook out from his drawstring bag, he shoved it towards me.

"Regrettably, things are out of my control. As it's come to this, I leave the rest in your hands... See ya!"

He ran off again. Well, good luck. Here's wishing Satoshi gets promoted to second year.

As soon as the storm-like event had passed, Ibara too stood up.

"Well, I should be going as well."

"Really?"

"What's with those eyes? Irisu-sempai didn't ask me to help you, after all... I'm on librarian duty at eleven. If I had known what you were doing today, I would have changed my shift in advance, so it's all your fault for deciding on such short notice," she said harshly as she picked up her bag and proceeded to leave the Geology Room.

Standing by the door, she turned and said in her usual apologetic way,  
"But... I'm sorry, Oreki."

I waved my hand to send her off.

I was now left alone in the classroom. I sighed, stretched my back, scratched my head, crossed my arms, and closed my eyes and I began thinking.

If I slowly recalled the movie I just re-watched, and the facts I deduced these past three days... I attempted to link them together. If it were me, I would...

...And finally I came to a conclusion.

As it was a hard to believe conclusion, I reviewed it myself many times over. Yet I could find no flaws with it. So it had to be this one.

I muttered, "This, is Hongou's true intention."

I glanced at my wristwatch. The time had gone way past twelve and was fast approaching one without me noticing it. I quickly took out a rice ball from my bag to fill my empty stomach.

After finishing that, I gulped down a can of green tea, which was simply nowhere near the glass of iced tea I had yesterday, when someone knocked at the door.

"Come in."

The one who entered was none other than "the Empress", Irisu Fuyumi, who was in her school uniform today. Whether she was in her casual wear or uniform, she never left any openings. I stood up out of courtesy and motioned her to sit in the seat before me. Upon her taking her seat, I too sat down.

Irisu skipped the formalities and went straight for the main topic.

"First, I would like to hear whether you have come to a conclusion or not."

I gulped a bit, and nodded in lieu of answering.

Irisu raised her brow just a little bit.

"...I see," she said while not particularly revealing much emotion, as expected of her.

"Then, let's hear it."

"Okay."

My lips were still wet from the can of green tea that now lies standing on the table.

I had already decided where to start, so I went straight for the answer at the end.

"The key to this mystery is needless to say a sealed room, the room where Kaitou... sorry, Kaitou-sempai died. No one is able to enter or leave that room."

Maybe it was my imagination, for I just saw Irisu loosen her mouth. Realizing it herself, she said as though trying to smooth things out, "Oh,

you may speak as you normally would and dispense with the honourifics."

A most grateful permission. It was quite bothersome to have to consciously speak in a formal manner and add honourifics to everything.

I nodded and went straight for the core of the topic.

"...As I have discussed the composition of this sealed room just yesterday, I may be repeating some of what I've said, so please bear with me.

As the sealed room is in the Right Stage, and considering that the window was not filmed being opened from the outside without damaging it, the only way the killer could enter was via the door. But how? The movie did not reveal whether there was any physical trick used to open that door. Then we should surmise that the killer simply used the master key obtained from the theatre office. I think Satoshi calls this way of thinking Occam's razor.[\[1\]](#)

"However, the killer was not able to enter the right corridor, which was the only way to get to the Right Stage. That is because Sugimura was constantly watching from above. If one was to obtain the master key and enter via the right corridor, then it could not have been one of the six people there.

"In that case, what does it all mean?"

I stopped there. I wouldn't say the following wasn't interesting, as I didn't think that myself. It's just a waste to be so plain about it, that's all.

"If the killer was not amongst the six, then there can only be one explanation... There was a seventh person present."

That was my conclusion.

Irisu looked at me with stern eyes, as though I'd just uttered some idle gossip.

"A seventh person? Like what Sawakiguchi suggested?"

"Under certain conditions, that is. It did sound quite ridiculous when I first thought about it, as it was Sawakiguchi that said Hongou was looking for a seventh actor. When I thought about that, I was certain that there was a seventh person present."

Without saying a word, Irisu urged me to go on. Even if she had any objections, she was probably waiting for me to finish first. That makes things easier for me.

"Yet you told me Hongou intends to give the audience a fair chance at solving the mystery. So I won't say that this was the work of some slasher that suddenly appears. By the way, I only just noticed this when re-watching the video, but a lot of strange things were observed. Fortunately, Satoshi had them all written down in this notebook; let me read it out to you.

"...Kounosu sees map, A light was turned on. Probably a hand torch...

"They went to the remaining room to look for Kaitou.

"...The corridor was dark and poorly illuminated. The torch was turned on...

"Did you notice something?"

Irisu replied instantly, "The torch?"

"Exactly."

I licked my lips, as this was most important.

"As a result, it was never revealed who was using the torch. One should be able to figure out who it was in scenes right after the torch was turned on; for example, when the scene of the crime was discovered. Though there may have been time for the person to hide the torch, it would be too unreasonable for that to happen."

Irisu gave a suspicious look. As I knew she was not satisfied after thinking it through, I voiced out her reservations.

"I understand that you're thinking that's just the illumination. But first, let's leave that aside for now,"

I could not tell whether she was convinced or not. I continued anyway.

"One more thing, no offense to those who love making movies, but this movie was pretty boring, whether it was the acting or the camerawork. Yet here was a hint. I don't watch a lot of movies, but even I could tell it was a boring movie. Especially the camerawork; you may not realize it, but it's as though not much effort was being put into it. But what if there was actually a reason for that?

"What did I mean when I said no effort was put into the camerawork? To put it in the simplest terms, didn't you find the position of the cameraman awkward for most of the scenes? For the majority of the movie, the cameraman was basically following the six members... Now do you see what I'm getting at?"

Though her demeanor was still calm, I noticed Irisu's eyes slowly widening. As expected for "the Empress" to realize so quickly. Yet even Irisu Fuyumi would not be able to foresee this deduction. The seventh person that I suggested was...

"...Are you saying that the seventh person is actually the cameraman?"

I nodded. I realized I was getting cheeky about it.

"There were seven people in total. It was those seven that decided on and went to Narakubo. The screen only showed six people, while the seventh was the one holding the camera. The other six only spoke appropriately upon being told to look into the camera to give their thoughts, meaning they were conscious of the presence of a cameraman. Rather than call him the 'cameraman', we should call him 'the seventh person'.

"This seventh person was also the one turning the torch on and off. No matter how you see it, the way the torch was turned on and off just looked too deliberate. But if you think from the angle of someone carrying the torch, then it wasn't unnatural at all. The shoddy camerawork was due to

him following everyone else around; it would make more sense if you consider the cameraman as a character."

As I went on, I realized Irisu was getting more and more interested.

"And then, this is the most important part, after everyone had split up, the camera was left in the lobby without anyone holding it. The scene then faded to black; in other words, the camera was momentarily turned off, before being turned on again by one of the members that returned to the lobby.

"Thus it was easy to guess how the crime was committed. The seventh person waited till everyone was scattered across the theatre, put down his camera, and took the master key from the theatre office. After killing Kaitou, he locked the door behind him and returned to the lobby to wait for everyone else to return.

"That sums up my deduction. If Hongou hasn't found a seventh actor yet, I suggest you hurry up and do so."

I finished everything in one go and proceeded to sip my can of green tea.

That was my deduction.

Irisu quietly evaluated my case before inquiring, "Two questions.

"First, if what you said is true, wouldn't it be too unnatural for nobody to interact and speak with him?"

I had already prepared an answer for that.

"Perhaps Hongou had intended for that. In other words, as the seventh person was totally ignored by the other six, there was no room for him to speak."

"Second, if that's true, then the characters themselves would have deduced it themselves, for the most suspicious person would be the one who left the lobby last and returned first. Furthermore, this seventh person did not circumvent the 'second sealed room' which you mentioned, as his

movement should also be noticed by the other people. In that case, there would be no mystery to speak of."

I purposely smiled.

"Well, to quote from Sawakiguchi... Does it really matter whether it's a mystery?"

"....."

"The main purpose of this movie was to satisfy the movie-makers themselves rather than the audience. It is not something for the characters to worry about. As Nakajou had remarked before, it's fine as long as the audience considers it a mystery; it didn't matter whether the characters themselves thought otherwise... Think about it, wasn't this why no one was designated as the detective for this movie? Because the characters had already guessed who the killer was without even deducing."

A minute's silence ensued. Irisu remained quiet and looked down without glancing at me. Was she troubled by such a bold suggestion?

Yet I was hardly panicking, as this deduction was fine as it is. No matter how long Irisu evaluated it, the result was inevitable.

And finally, Irisu whispered, "Congratulations,"

"Huh?"

She raised her head, and unlike her usual meagre expression, gave a very cheerful smile as she said, "Congratulations, Oreki Houtarou. You have solved Hongou's mystery. It was a surprising and bold deduction, but all the facts line up, so it has to be the truth. Thank you as well, as we are now able to complete the movie."

She stretched out her right hand.

I blushed.

And shook her hand.

It was a firm handshake. Irisu then patted my shoulder with her left hand.

"I was indeed right with my judgment. You have the skills, which no one else possessed that could never be replaced."

...I see.

Irisu went on with her cheerful expression, "How about this? To commemorate your hard work, I'll let you set the title for the movie,"

A title, huh? I didn't think about that.

Yet, it was not bad to leave a name to commemorate the rare occasion of me believing in my abilities. I thought for a while and said what came to my mind.

"Alright, considering the contents... How about 'The Blind Spot of 10,000 People'?"

"Hmm,"

Irisu nodded many times.

"A fine title. It's decided then."

With the title of the unnamed movie decided, this bothersome business that has taken up four whole days of my summer vacation has finally been resolved. While I gained nothing material in return, I did not feel the least bit worse off.

The fact that I played the role of the "detective" gave me a sense of fulfillment.

# **Translator's notes and references**

1. ↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s\\_razor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s_razor)

## 7 - Do Not End the Show

For the next three days, I didn't do much besides recollecting what I've done.

As entrusting three fools was inappropriate since they could not produce any results, in the end, it was an outsider like me that accomplished what they couldn't. Though it was true that as an observer, I was able to glean facts from each of their statements, I was the one that had solved it; Irisu's words had prompted me to believe that. This made me realize I had abilities which I could speak of. As a result, I was now immersed in a sense of satisfaction as though intoxicated by too many whiskey bonbons.

To put it in an unassuming way, it was a refreshing feeling.

Ever having Hongou's mystery solved on Friday, the script was prepared by Saturday night (according to some first years who'd seen him, the substitute screenwriter who had to write the rest of the script on such short notice was worked till he looked half dead, though I had no way of finding out). And so Class 2-F's filming was finalized by Sunday evening. It was an epic turnaround from a seemingly desperate situation. I received a phone call on Sunday night from Irisu giving me her gratitude, to which I offered her my heartfelt congratulations.

And so came Monday, three days after the solving of the mystery, when the Kamiyama High School summer vacation came to an end.

As the Classics Club did not meet up during that weekend, until today I was not able to inform Chitanda of what had happened so far. After lessons had

ended, as I was running a bit late due to some other errands, I rushed towards the club room. I wasn't interested in showing off my achievements, but I just thought it would be better to let her know as I climbed up the steps of the Special Block. I don't deny my footsteps felt rather light as I walked.

Upon arriving at the doorstep of the Geology Room, I sensed a strange atmosphere. The classroom looked dark, as though the curtains had been drawn. I silently opened the door and noticed the TV was taken out and was playing the movie "The Blind Spot of 10,000 People". Chitanda, Ibara and Satoshi were all watching the TV with their backs toward me.

Though by the time I entered, the movie had already gone into the credits, the names of the cast and crew in a gothic font flowed upwards on a dark background. As filming was only done yesterday along with the editing, this credit roll was probably prepared in advance.

Ibara stood up to stop the video and noticed me.

"Oh, Oreki,"

Chitanda and Satoshi both turned around. Satoshi pointed to the TV.

"Hey, Houtarou. We saw it."

"Class 2-F's?"

"Yup. Eba-sempai came just now to give this to us. So this ending was solved by Houtarou, huh?"

As Satoshi was always showing such a smiling face, I had no way of finding out what he really thought of the movie.

Still, I asked, "So how was it?"

"Not bad. Or rather, it was interesting. To think it was the cameraman of all people."

Pushing the rewind button on the tape player, Ibara said in a criticizing tone, "You'd already thought of that back then, hadn't you? You really hide too

many things in your mind."

"I hadn't thought of it when I was with you guys. I'm not that mischievous as to toy around with people until they panic," I said as I placed my shoulder bag on the table and stretched my waist.

Truth be told, this felt like an anticlimax, as these guys were not as surprised as I thought they would be. As I was feeling quite satisfied with how surprising the conclusion was, I was kind of expecting them to look astonished with it. I should have expected nothing less from these fools; it was perhaps good that Satoshi and Ibara were hardly naïve.

Then, what about the naïve Chitanda?

Our eyes met. Chitanda then turned her head to face me.

"Oreki-san,"

"Yeah?"

"I was surprised."

An honest opinion.

She then turned her head back and looked into the distance as she said cautiously, "Besides, I..."

She then noticed something and smiled.

"Umm, maybe later."

A peculiar reaction. Now how should I put this? I couldn't tell whether she was appraising or criticizing.

Clapping his hands, Satoshi said, "Anyway, you did well, Houtarou. 'The Empress' is satisfied, the movie is completed. The audience will also be glad about such a surprising development. The day is fast approaching when Kami High's name spreads far and wide due to the detective Oreki Houtarou. We should raise a toast for this occasion."

And he promptly took out four bottles of Yakult<sup>[1]</sup> from his drawstring bag. He's got all sorts of ridiculous items in that bag. Ibara stood up to put a leash on Satoshi's celebratory mood with a bitter voice.

"Now's not the time to be concerned about other classes' problems, Fukuchan. Ever since that movie preview, we've not made any progress with 'Hyouka'. I'm gonna to check on your page progress starting today, since you did ask me to help you with your manuscript progress, after all."

Satoshi's smile froze. He placed two bottles of Yakult before Ibara. As if that was going to dissuade her. As expected, Ibara proceeded to get things started by opening the curtains. And so Class 2-F's movie was finally put aside as the Classics Club resumed its activity of compiling its anthology.

As sunset approached, the umpteenth meeting regarding the anthology "Hyouka" came to an end. As I gathered the written notes which were scattered around, Satoshi and Chitanda left the Geology Room. Leaving the rare sight of just me and Ibara behind.

Moving the TV back to where it was, Ibara turned to say something she had just thought of.

"Oh yeah, Oreki. Can I ask you something?"

"If it's the manuscript, don't we not need those until next week?"

Ibara shook her head.

"I'm talking about the movie. What was the title again? Something about 10,000 people."

As it was quite embarrassing for me to utter a title which I myself had thought of, I urged Ibara to continue.

"What about it?"

"You came up with the solution, right?"

I nodded.

What was she trying to say? She seemed to be cautious with her words.

"All of it?" she asked.

As I'd not seen the full version, I gave an ambiguous answer with some vigour.

"Most."

Upon answering, she gave me a sharp look. She then spoke in a strong tone that was different from before.

"In that case, what did you think about Haba-sempai's theory, then?  
Regardless of whether the trick he mentioned was interesting or not, it was totally not shown in the movie."

She didn't seem convinced. So I asked her, "What about Haba's theory?"

"Aren't you ignoring the intent?"

She murmured and placed her hands on her waist.

"Never once did the movie show any use for a rope."

Rope... The item that Hongou requested Haba to prepare. She even emphasized its importance. Come to think of it, it was mentioned before.

As I was at a loss at how to respond, Ibara went on.

"Having the cameraman as the seventh person is interesting, as you could feel the intensity of all the characters looking straight into the camera. But, that would leave no room for the rope to make its appearance."

Indeed.

No, that's not it. I countered, with my voice raised a bit.

"The use of a rope is probably confined to specific tricks. Maybe the cameraman would use it to hang himself in the end, wouldn't he?"

Ibara looked at me with exasperated eyes.

"What're you talking about, Oreki? If that's the case, why would Hongou emphasize its use? If they were to shoot such a scene using something as robust as a rope, then they wouldn't need to worry about its safety. Since Hongou-sempai specifically asked for a rope strong enough to support a person... I think something's missing here."

The last sentence probably contained some of Ibara's concerns, but I hadn't noticed it. When she said I had missed something, I didn't think of it that way. It was probably just something trivial...

But why had I forgotten such details?

"Well, anyway, I thought your deduction was interesting. But seeing as how strict you were in dismissing the theories of those three people, I was thinking maybe you had thought of something which they had all missed," Ibara said as she covered the TV with a plastic cover and proceeded to pack up her bag. As she said she'd be returning the key, I decided to leave the room ahead of her.

With Ibara's words still ringing in my head, I descended down the steps of the Special Block. My deduction should have taken into consideration all of the facts. While some of the details like the acting and dialogue may be off a bit, overall, it should reflect Hongou's true intention. Yet I'd somehow forgotten something. Or rather, because it did not match my deduction, I had unconsciously ignored it. It can't be, I was not the sort to twist the facts just to get to a right answer... Or at least that's what I wanted to think.

Looking at my feet alone, I realized I was now on the third floor. Just as I thought I was going to walk down to the second floor while still immersed in my thoughts, a voice called out to me.

"Hey, Houtarou,"

I turned to find nobody. It sounded like Satoshi... No, I wasn't imagining things, I clearly heard him. I waited for a bit, and indeed my name was called out once again.

"Over here, Houtarou,"

A hand emerged from the men's room and beckoned me to come over. If this were night time, it would make a fitting horror scene. I smiled bitterly and walked over there, where Satoshi was waiting.

"What is it, Satoshi? I'm not interested in taking a pee with you."

Very quickly, the smile disappeared from his face as he said quite seriously, "I do not have such interests. This place just happens to be convenient."

"Convenient for what? This place stinks."

"I was just thinking of cleaning up this place... Anyway, it's because no girls can come in here."

Ah, I see. Then it must be that.

"So, what is it you don't want the girls to know? You have some porn collection you want to show me?"

Though I was joking, Satoshi didn't smile.

"You sure know how to put things. If that's what you want, I could prepare something that could get us involved with the police. Anyway, just hear me out."

Alright.

"In other words, it's something Ibara and Chitanda can't know?"

"Something like that. They would just wonder what we were talking about if we discussed it openly."

Satoshi then lowered his voice.

"Houtarou, that movie, did you really figure out Hongou-sempai's intention?"

Even he was telling me this. Though he meant well, I realized I was making a bitter expression.

"Yeah."

Hearing that, Satoshi turned his eyes away from mine.

"I see... Is that really her intention?"

Was he trying to make me feel uneasy? Not sure of what to say, Satoshi didn't continue while avoiding my gaze. So I prodded him.

"Is my guess wrong?"

"Well, sort of."

He nodded ambiguously. He then said with all his heart, "Houtarou, this is bad. You've got Hongou-sempai's intention wrong. While I could not figure out how it's wrong, I can tell you it's not that."

...Quite a blunt opinion. Rather than being shocked or unhappy, I was more dumbfounded. If Satoshi wasn't joking then he must be serious, and right now he was dead serious.

Even then I regained my composure and replied, "What basis do you have for saying that?"

"While I'm not too sure myself, can I say something flimsy?"

"If there's some fatal contradiction in my deduction, you think I wouldn't have noticed it?"

Satoshi shook his head clearly.

"There's no contradiction at all. But that's not what I'm looking at. I really meant it when I said your deduction was well-crafted. But that's not what Hongou-sempai had intended."

"In other words?"

He cleared his throat.

"Houtarou, think about Hongou-sempai's understanding of detective fiction. Starting from a blank slate, what has she been reading in order to prep herself for the script?"

Puzzled at what that had to do with all this, I answered, "Sherlock Holmes."

"Exactly. Now listen, Hongou-sempai's experience with detective fiction is only limited to Sherlock Holmes. Though she said she'd stick to the Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction, she would not have read Ronald Knox's works yet. Besides, the trick that you proposed to Irisu-sempai is a type of literary trick. You hear? A literary trick."

Well, I follow you loud and clear.

"It's a trick made to fool the audience, right? By hiding the seventh person from the view of the camera, it may be considered a literary trick as well."

"Right. Now, I'm going to join the dots here,"

As though speaking very solemnly, Satoshi took a deep breath and said in one go, "Such a literary trick did not exist in Conan Doyle's time."

"....."

"With a few exceptions, such a trick of coming out from behind the stages did not appear until at least Agatha Christie's time, in other words, way into

the 20th Century. I may not know Hongou-sempai well, but I'm quite certain she's not read any of Christie's work!"

At first, I had no idea what Satoshi was trying to say. Upon digesting the meaning of what he'd just said, I began to waver a bit.

Hongou's understanding of detective fiction was still confined to the 19th Century, the gas-lamp filled streets of London where Sherlock Holmes resided. It was probably so. And Satoshi said such a literary trick did not exist in such times.

For a short while, I stood there like an idiot ruminating on what I'd just heard. I could not reject what Satoshi had observed. Upon receiving a strike from an angle which I did not expect, my mind seemed as though it had stopped working.

Satoshi looked at me in such a state and said sympathetically, "Personally, I would give that movie an A grade. I particularly liked the part where the cameraman emerged into the light. But if you were to say that was Hongou-sempai's intention, then my objection is not completely without merit."

"Wait,"

I somehow spoke.

"We have no idea how much Hongou-sempai read. So we can't say that she did not come across such literary tricks outside of Sherlock Holmes, right?"

It was a stubborn response. Satoshi patted me on my shoulder and said briefly, "...Well, if that's what you think, then it's fine with me as well."

After Ibara's and Satoshi's combo attack, the damage I suffered was quite substantial. I didn't think I was that fragile. But it's not like I was well prepared; normally I would have taken it more easily, but now I was not able to find anything to counter their objections. So it was not unreasonable

for me to start doubting whether my deduction was actually wrong. Though of course I wished for it to be right.

Which was why, as I came down the last flight of stairs and saw Chitanda loitering there, my heart skipped a beat. She was clearly waiting for me, yet she lowered her eyes upon seeing me.

"Umm, Oreki-san... I have something to tell you."

Et tu, Chitanda?

As she looked rather apologetic about it, taking into consideration what had just transpired, I had an idea what she was trying to say and sighed in half resignation.

"Something you couldn't say in front of Satoshi and Ibara?"

Chitanda widened her large eyes and looked surprised at me. She then nodded gently.

She led us quietly towards the school gate. Just as I wondered why we couldn't do this in a café, she told me the usual place we went would be too far, while the ones nearby would be frequented by Kami High students. But wouldn't we be surrounded by them as well while we're walking and talking? It's still broad daylight now. I decided to start the conversation.

"You wanted to talk to me about the movie?"

"Yes."

"Something that troubles you?"

"...It would seem so."

Her reply was soft.

Was this how it felt to await a verdict?

Being impatient, I said, "There's no need to hold back. Satoshi and Ibara too thought that that wasn't Hongou's true intention. I... I'm also beginning to think so as well."

Chitanda lifted up her downcast and serious look.

I continued without looking at her, "So what about you?"

"...I, too do not think it is correct."

"Can you tell me why?"

Silence, then Chitanda nodded.

What should I do when she answers? I didn't know as well. The filming's already finished, and any revision would have to wait till after the festivals. When thinking logically, it was a pointless and inefficient action... It seemed some speck of self-respect still remained within me.

"Won't you tell me?"

The traffic light before us turned red, stopping the flow of people, and many Kami High students waited along the traffic crossing as a result. Chitanda was probably hesitant to speak in such a situation as she remained silent. As she turned to look at me, I could see the sorrow within those gentle eyes of hers. It was now that I could notice Chitanda's elegance hidden within her large eyes.

As the signal changed, the wave of people began to move, and Chitanda began to speak slowly.

"Oreki-san, do you understand what it was that bothered me?"

Why'd she have to go in circles? I decided to answer curtly.

"What the ending for Class 2-F's movie was? We already did that."

Yet surprisingly, Chitanda shook her head.

The long hair behind her back flowed to and fro as she did.

"No. For me, it didn't really matter how the movie ended. So I thought Oreki-san's proposal was wonderful."

"Then..."

"I was feeling curious as to what Hongou-san was intending to do."

Saying that, Chitanda glanced at me. I was probably looking like an idiot right now. If she was concerned about Hongou, then it's the same thing as being concerned about the movie's ending.

Sensing my thoughts, Chitanda emphasized, "No matter how we think about it, this whole matter seemed strange. Was it really true that Hongou collapsed due to mental stress? ...It might be, but then, why didn't she entrust it to someone else? Like Eba-san, for example."

She tilted her head. Somehow her meaning was not properly conveyed.

"Aren't you mixing up the subject and object here?"

"Oh... I'm sorry. I mean, why didn't Irisu-san ask one of Hongou-san's close friends, like Eba-san, for example, about whether she had any literary tricks prepared for the story?"

.....

That's a presumptuous question. Since Hongou would need some time to be alone in order to rest, it would be better not to stress her further with stuff concerning the script.

Yet Chitanda went on before I could say anything.

"Hongou-san should have possessed the entire script. Even if she had collapsed, I do not think that she would not at least convey the essence of her ending, in other words, the literary trick, to Irisu-san. But she never did.

"At first, I would have thought that Hongou-san had pushed herself to work so hard till she fell ill. Yet from her classmates, it seemed she was compelled by them to write the script rather than doing it of her own will. It felt as though she was too timid when it would have been better to just refuse them.

"In the end, was it because she lacked the confidence? Was it because she felt so embarrassed at not being able to finish the job that she couldn't bring herself to meet everyone? But surely someone would have visited her and learned the truth?

"...But that is not right. I may not be familiar with mystery stories, but I feel that the people involved in the project weren't used to them themselves. Besides, they all seem like nice people... I do not believe they would have criticized her harshly had she not been able to produce a script."

I don't know about them being "nice people", though their opinions were all over the place.

As though speaking to herself, Chitanda went on further.

"Then, what was it that drove Hongou-san to the wall? We just can't tell no matter how we look at it. I've been curious all this time with this peculiarity."

She slowed down her pace and looked straight at me.

"If Oreki-san's deduction was the truth, then Hongou-san should have already told Irisu-san about it. The same would be true if one of the others' deductions was the right one.

"I think I want to understand Hongou-san's feelings about having to give up on something halfway through, about being frustrated at not being able to continue what she started... But that movie we saw did not answer those questions. So I think that was what has been bothering me."

I murmured. All this time that I, Nakajou, Haba and Sawakiguchi were trying to figure out the truth of the case, Chitanda was trying to figure out

Hongou.

Indeed, that's it. Take Eba, who called Hongou a good friend, for example. If they had wanted to know whether any literary trick was used, all they needed to do was ask Hongou. But what if Hongou were to get seriously stressed out by being asked? ... Yet the way Eba described Hongou being her good friend was too carefree. When Chitanda asked her what kind of person Hongou was, she seemed rather annoyed and wondered what we could ever learn from her telling us this. But this was her good friend that was seriously ill, was that the way to answer a question concerning her?

Perhaps I was treating this script as a mere literary exercise. From the setting, the characters, the murder, the literary trick, the detective, the killer...

All of these should have reflected the mind of Hongou, someone whom I've not even met. Yet I never realized it at all.

...Some "detective" role I've been given!

Thinking that, I sighed deeply.

Wondering if she was mistaken, Chitanda said frantically, "Oh, but, this wasn't meant as a criticism of you, Oreki-san. I was surprised by that resolution scene as well. While Hongou-san would probably not have thought up such a scene, I thought it was a wonderful improvement."

I smiled bitterly.

As this means I've practically been hired as a substitute screenwriter more or less.

That night, I was thinking in my room. Lying on my bed, I stared at the white ceiling.

Somehow it seemed I was mistaken. Though the shock of learning that has since faded.

Compared to Nakajou, Haba and Sawakiguchi, my failure wasn't too bad. I broke a smile. Some special person I am, huh? Irisu sure knows how to flatter. I felt stupid at believing my own hype. In the end, I was only chosen because my story was better than the other three.

I realized where my thoughts were going... Have I really failed?

Of course, it became clear that my proposal did not match Hongou's true intention. But how did Irisu, or even Class 2-F, view this? From their point of view, it would have been the successful completion of a project, a movie, that was in danger of being abandoned. From that perspective, I was successful. The movie "The Blind Spot of 10,000 People" was a movie that even the annoying Ibara had to acknowledge.

To put it further, it could be argued that my deduction would still be a success, regardless of how it was received. In other words, I do have the skills, which no one else possesses, to make this a success.

Even then, would those words have any meaning? The words that Irisu spoke at the tea house Hifumi: "Everyone ought to recognize their own talents." The words which she spoke as though they were the truth of this world and had an effect on me, did they have any meaning at all?

After she told me that, I lost all reckoning of things besides myself. That feeling turned me upside down, and gave me an inflated image of myself. I imagined the scenario where Nakajou's proposal was adopted, where Haba's proposal was adopted, where Sawakiguchi's proposal was adopted. And I vainly thought how good it felt that mine was adopted.

Yet all these illusions had now disappeared.

At the moment when I wondered what I would gain from this, I had completely forgotten about that person. The next thing that appeared in my mind was the fact that I was not doing it to please Chitanda. I was merely

thinking this naturally... In that case, I should give this case a closer look, since I had nothing to lose after all.

Yet, where did I go wrong? Did Irisu know that I'd gotten it wrong?

And then there's the matter which Chitanda was curious about. Why didn't Hongou tell them the true plot? Or could it be that she couldn't? Furthermore, why didn't Irisu inquire about it from Eba?

Lying before me was the data, the stack of papers in my bag which I had forgotten.

... Yet, my thoughts just wouldn't connect. I had no idea whether the flash of inspiration was due to luck or talent, so I decided not to dwell on it any further. I turned around on my bed, shifting my field of vision from the ceiling to the walls of my room.

And my eyes fell upon a strange sight.

I got off my bed and walked towards the bookshelf. While this room was now my room, my sis left some of her stuff in here from back when it was her room. In the corner of that bookshelf was one of her books. As it was full of these strange books, I hadn't taken much notice of it before.

The title of the book was "The Mystery of Tarots". I had no idea my sis was a Kabbalist.

Under the moonlit and streetlamp filled night, I opened the book in amusement. The page I was turning to was of course the chapter covering "The Empress", of which the contents filled up ten pages. I read the first line of it:

### III. The Empress

Motherly. Fertility. Sensuality.

Hmm, reading these alone, Irisu sure doesn't match any of these attributes. No matter how I see it, "the Hermit" would have been a better match for her. To begin with, Irisu's "Empress" nickname had nothing to do with Tarot cards. Satoshi was the one that mentioned Tarots.

Come to think of it, he had matched each member of the Classics Club with a specific Tarot card. If I remember correctly, Ibara should be...

## VIII. Justice

Equality. Justice. Impartiality.

Well, no mistake about that. Satoshi's explanation that "People of the 'Justice' types tend to be stern with themselves" seemed to be spoken specifically with Ibara in mind.

A change in mood wasn't so bad, so I looked up at "The Magician" for Satoshi and "The Fool" for Chitanda.

## I. The Magician

Initiative. Creativity. Focusing.

## No Number. The Fool

Adventurism. Curiosity. Impulsive.

Haha, I see. It was just as the definition had put it. I laughed. Though would a Tarot expert also define "The Fool" as someone who "loves to roam", and "The Magician" as someone who's "sociable"?

Now what about me? Let's see, "Strength", was it?

## XI. Strength

Inner strength. Determination. Kinship.

What is this?

It totally doesn't match. While I might not be aware of my own personality, even I could tell that this was completely off the mark. Satoshi ought to have known from my motto: "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick."

So why did Satoshi choose this card for me then?

Now that I think about it, Satoshi said he meant it as a joke. If it's Satoshi's joke... then there must be some other meaning which I've not gotten.

...I must have too much free time. Or it was simply me not wanting to admit failure. Yet looking at "The Mystery of Tarots", I suddenly understood what Satoshi's joke meant. As there was one line in the annotations below:

"Strength - Illustration of a ferocious lion being subdued (controlled) by a gentle woman"<sup>[2]</sup>

In other words, Satoshi was saying I've always been controlled by women. From my sis, to Chitanda, and now Irisu.

W-Why you, Satoshi, getting all cocky. There's no way I could be controlled by them! At any rate, this was me we're talking about.

I returned to my senses.

Thinking deeper, "Strength" could be right.

Anyway, it's not like it's got any deep meaning. Compared to "Justice", "the Magician" and "the Fool", "Strength" has a different method of interpretation altogether. The interpretation for my card was based not on the card's reading, but on the illustration instead. As expected from a Satoshi-like joke, which had no basis whatsoever.

Well, it was a good distraction, as I felt a sense of satisfaction that I've forgotten about Hongou's case. Guess you could call that energy saving as well, I thought as I headed back to sit on the bed.

.....

...?

I quickly got up.

It was purely a coincidence.

The next day, I met the person that I wanted to meet. And I met her at the most convenient time, in other words, after school.

That person was of course, Irisu Fuyumi. Upon seeing me, a smile appeared on her face as she greeted me.

"Oh, it's Oreki-kun. Thank you for all that you did before. Have you seen the movie yet?"

Unable to hide the stiffness in my expression, I said, "No, not yet."

"I see. I thought it was a good movie. It's something that could not have been done without your help, so you should give it a look... Oh yes, we'll be

having a party to celebrate the completion of the movie this Saturday, and I think you'll be invited as well."

I shook my head, as the show's not over yet.

Sensing something strange with my attitude, Irisu raised her brows a bit, though her tone remained the same.

"I see. It's your choice, after all. Now then,"

As she turned to walk away, I stopped her.

"Irisu-sempai,"

I then said to the Empress who turned back around, "We need to talk."

We met at Hifumi, the same tea house as the other day.

As Irisu wasn't treating today, I decided to pick some Yunnan tea after some careful consideration of the menu. I thought this tea house was only limited to Japanese tea, but it turns out it also serves Chinese tea, red tea and coffee. Irisu was again having green tea like last time.

After waiting for our drinks to arrive, Irisu spoke first.

"You said we needed to talk?"

I was at a loss at where to start. Though the first place to start naturally was here.

"Sempai, in this tea house, you said that I possess a certain skill, that I was special, right?"

"Indeed."

"...May I ask what skill that is?"

Irisu smiled softly,

"You want to be told what it is? Why, the skill of deduction, of course."

So that's her answer, huh?

Feeling neither angry nor indignant, I refuted her answer in an incredibly calm way,

"You're wrong."

"....."

"I'm no expert in detective fiction. Though I'm familiar with this line: 'You're no detective, but you'd make a fine detective writer.' It was spoken by the culprit upon the conclusion of a fantastical deduction."

Irisu remained silent and sipped her tea. I could feel Irisu had discarded her courteous appearance and had reverted to her true self. So I repeated what I said.

"I'm not a detective, but I make a fine detective writer, huh?"

The sound of a teacup being placed loudly on the table was heard.

Indeed, upon being told this, she said in a nonchalant manner, "Where did you get your hint from?"

So she was responsible for it, huh? Irisu Fuyumi had so very easily shattered my wish which I did not really hope would be shattered.

Rather than being surprised, I replied calmly, "Sherlock Holmes."

"...I see."

"Hongou-sempai seemed to have studied detective fiction via Sherlock Holmes. Chitanda borrowed some of her paperbacks the other day, but due

to her getting drunk off those whiskey bonbons, I had completely forgotten about the matter. Only recently have I gone through them."

Irisu smiled. It was a different type of smile from before, more like a smirk.

"And what have you discovered from that?"

"...A connection."

I took out a note from my chest pocket. It was a list from two of the six volumes of Sherlock Holmes short stories (strictly speaking, there are only five volumes, though this is the Nobara translated version we're talking about), namely "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" and "The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes", with each title grouped under "Concentric Circles" or "Crosses".

### Concentric Circles

The Man with the Twisted Lip  
The Adventure of the Blanched Sailor  
The Adventure of the Three Garridebs

### Crosses

A Case of Identity  
The Five Orange Pips  
The Adventure of the Speckled Band  
The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor  
The Adventure of the Three Gables  
The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger

Irisu occasionally looked at me with sharp eyes.

"At first, I thought this was merely Hongou sorting out which ideas to use for her story, but I was mistaken. I asked Satoshi, who told me that 'Red-

'Headed League' and 'Three Garridebs' had the same literary technique, but when I then asked why 'Three Garridebs' was marked with concentric circles while 'Red-Headed League' was marked with a triangle, he was left dumbfounded."

Irisu urged me to continue with her gaze alone.

"I inquired for further details from Satoshi... Irisu-sempai, would you be bothered if you were spoiled on any of the stories of Sherlock Holmes?"

"No, not at all."

"Is that so? But if you do not wish to be spoiled, then please tell me at once, so I can figure out a way to ask you to cover your eyes or ears."

I said that simply as a precaution.

Though it's not like I'm really spoiling anything important.

"First, the concentric circles.

"'Man with Twisted Lip' - Holmes was tasked to find the whereabouts of a man who seemed to have completely vanished. The client was the man's wife.

"'Blanched Sailor' - Holmes tasked by a man to investigate the whereabouts of his friend who had seemingly been quarantined by his family. Though in the end it turns out all was well and the friend didn't need to be quarantined after all.

"'Three Garridebs' - Basically a retelling of 'Red-Headed League', though it was memorable for a scene where the usually calm and reserved Holmes showed signs of distress over Watson getting injured. By the way, Watson was only slightly wounded."

I sipped my Yunnan tea, though the taste was rather bland.

"Now, let's move on to the crosses. As there are more of these here, I'll just pick three to talk about.

"'Five Orange Pips' - A young man seeks the help of Holmes after witnessing many strange deaths around him. Yet Holmes was unable to prevent his death.

"'Speckled Band' - A woman asks Holmes to investigate the strange death of her sister. The killer was none other than her stepfather, who was seeking to obtain the girls' inheritance.

"'Three Gables' - A woman whose son had recently died asks Holmes for advice when she was approached to sell her house and everything in it. The root of the story revolves around the dead man's desire for revenge over the woman who had dumped him."

I stopped and waited for Irisu's reaction.

Irisu waved her front bangs and said, "I see."

"Upon hearing the summaries of these stories, I have a vague idea of what kind of stories Hongou preferred. It was hard to tell that she did not have any prior experience with detective stories from such preferences. Satoshi expressed disbelief upon being told that she put a cross over 'Speckled Band' while marking a circle for 'Blanched Sailor'."

I took a sip.

"Now here's my explanation: perhaps Hongou prefers happy endings over tragic endings. She didn't seem to like any ending where anyone died."

Irisu didn't respond.

Probably a sign of admittance.

"If we think along those lines, then many questions can be answered. Firstly, little fake blood was required. And then there's the results of the questionnaire."

"The results of the questionnaire?"

From my shoulder bag, I took out the notebook which I borrowed from Sawakiguchi, and then opened it and pointed towards the relevant page.

*No. 32 - How many victims should there be?*

- *1 person* -- 6

- *2 people* -- 10

- *3 people* -- 3

- *Others:*

*4 people* -- 1

*Everyone* -- 2

*About 100* -- 1

- *Invalid vote* -- 1

*2 people recommended (Hongou retains the right to veto)*

Upon one glance at the note, and it was only a momentary glance, Irisu said with a sharp look, "...How did you get this?"

"I borrowed it a while ago. Anyway, take a look at this question.

"This was merely asking how many victims there would be, but what does this 'invalid vote' mean? In other questions, if someone was undecided and abstained, it would be marked as 'abstain'. Besides, someone had even voted to have 'about 100' dead, which was more than the number of actors. In that case, what's with this 'invalid vote' then?"

As though amused, Irisu picked up where I left off.

"The vote probably voted for no victims as there was not enough fake blood, and was declared invalid as a result?"

I looked seriously at Irisu, who looked back at me calmly.

I said in a low voice, my conclusion, which was, "Hongou's script contains no victims whatsoever."

Irisu raised her upper lip slightly, or so I thought.

"As expected."

Irisu sure was a calm person, as she sipped her green tea without looking the slightest bit shaken. How could she remain so calm? Could it be she could read my thoughts?

Quietly, she placed her teacup down.

"If you understand that much, then that saves me from having to explain further. It is as you say, Hongou's script has no victims. She said she was unable to think of any mystery that involves death. That's the sort of girl she is."

I continued, "Nevertheless, your classmates did not think of that and continued with their ad-libs in the movie. Even though Hongou did not join in for the shooting of the movie, she would have been informed by Nakajou. Above all, the script never once mentioned Kaitou being dead. He merely suffered a serious injury and collapsed to the point of not being able to respond, which was what we saw in the movie."

"Ibara praised the work put into the fake severed arm, meaning that part was included in the original script."

"And yet Kaitou was suddenly killed off. Without Hongou knowing, the story had turned from a brutal assault into one of murder."

Irisu nodded.

Yet I felt no satisfaction, and my words slowly became frantic.

"This is purely my speculation without any basis whatsoever. Yet, I must say it regardless.

"Hongou did not tell her classmates that the movie had made a serious flaw which deviated from the script. She couldn't bring herself to tell them to abandon the film which they had shot, nor tell the props division to throw away the prop which they had worked so hard to make, since she's a timid and serious person, after all. I think even Hongou herself realized afterwards how illogical it was to have a mystery where no one dies.

"And this is where you come in, Irisu-sempai."

Irisu looked at me without any expression, or rather, she was smiling softly.

I was hardly feeling excited, yet my voice was slightly raised as I said, "This would make it Hongou's fault, as it meant she would have to abandon her script and make drastic changes. And so you arranged for her to 'get sick', thus making the script 'incomplete'. This would lessen the damage considerably. You gathered your classmates, and started a deduction competition."

And I concluded, "And so, you held what was basically a scenario contest. By telling them the script was incomplete, anyone would want to try completing it. That way, you get to preserve Hongou's dignity while they do the deducing. Upon seeing that your classmates were not up to the task, you decided to bring us into this as well. Nobody, including myself, had realized we were actually creating something on our own. You merely arbitrated and decided, based on a reference point, on which was the best story.

"Am I right in saying that my creation was used as a measurement to fill in the gaps left by Hongou so that she would not be hurt?"

"From the beginning, I never once said you were wrong."

"So it's true then!?"

I leaned forward slightly.

"That when you said that I possess certain skills, it was all for Hongou's sake? That's some alternate plan you thought up."

"....."

"You persuaded me in this tea house, using a story about a sports club, right? You told me that those with abilities who weren't conscious of it were a pain to watch for those without. Right now I can tell you this: Surely you're joking, Irisu-sempai. So what about one being self-conscious? So what about them being a pain to watch? I don't think someone with a nickname like 'The Empress' can be so sentimental about these things at all.

"You merely wanted the results, that's all."

When Satoshi said he didn't have what it takes to be a Holmesian, I told him that was not so. So who was right? It didn't really matter. If he could, then good for him. If he couldn't, no harm done either. That's all.

Whether it's passion, confidence, self-righteousness or talent, these things mean nothing from an objective point of view. By praising my talents, Irisu was merely making me dance to her tune. It was effective, as I ended up creating a work that satisfied her.

"When you said everyone ought to recognize their own talents, was that a lie!?"

...Despite my strongly worded question, Irisu didn't move one bit. She looked neither timid nor ashamed.

During the moment of silence, without withdrawing, I quietly thought to myself.

She really does suit her nickname of "the Empress". Recalling what Satoshi had told me, she was good at manipulating those around her. And only an Empress could do so without feeling any sense of shame. She was beautiful.

Devoid of any emotion, Irisu replied sternly, "It was not spoken from the bottom of my heart. But it is up to you to decide whether that counts as a

lie."

She then met my gaze.

Silence.

...I realized I was smiling.

I then spoke from the bottom of my heart.

"Hearing you say that, I now feel very relieved."

# Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ A Japanese Yogurt-like drink - [Wikipedia](#)
2. ↑ See [Strength \(Tarot card\)](#) for various illustrations of this card.

## **8 - Credit Roll**

## Log No 00299

**Mayuko:** i'm really, really grateful

**Anonymous:** enough of that already

**Anonymous:** you've been thanking me for a while

**Anonymous:** you even thanked me at school, so there's no need to thank me anymore

**Mayuko:** but still

**Mayuko:** thank you

**Mayuko:** since it was all my fault

**Mayuko:** even though everyone seemed to enjoy the murder scene

**Mayuko:** since it's that sort of script

**Anonymous:** just don't follow up with "i'm sorry"

**Mayuko:** i'm sorry

**Mayuko:** oh

**Anonymous:** everything's been taken care of

**Anonymous:** though it didn't end up as the movie you had hoped for

**Anonymous:** what's important is that it's been completed

**Mayuko:** don't say that

**Anonymous:** which line were you responding to?

**Mayuko:** oh, i meant, the part about it not ending up as i hoped for

**Mayuko:** what i would hope for most

**Mayuko:** would be for everyone to go hurrah in the end

**Anonymous:** really, you're so easy to read

**Mayuko:** hmm?

**Anonymous:** nothing

## Log No 00313

**A.ta.shi♪:** seems like you got things sorted out  
**Anonymous:** all thanks to you, sempai  
**A.ta.shi♪:** why you're welcome. glad to be at your service  
**Anonymous:** though i feel sorry for him  
**Anonymous:** for doing something like that to him  
**A.ta.shi♪:** you really think so?  
**Anonymous:** really what?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** as in you're really sorry towards him  
**Anonymous:** since you're on the other side of the world  
**Anonymous:** i felt like bluffing  
**A.ta.shi♪:** lol, figures  
**A.ta.shi♪:** but you know?  
**Anonymous:** yes?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** you've lied to me as well, haven't you?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** so you keep your trap shut!  
**Anonymous:** i, lied?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** that's right. you shouldn't manipulate people on the other side of the world  
**A.ta.shi♪:** especially me  
**A.ta.shi♪:** just kidding  
**Anonymous:** i wasn't really lying  
**A.ta.shi♪:** you wanted to protect the girl who did the script, which is why you asked me for help, right?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** in other words, the problem lies with the script, right?  
**A.ta.shi♪:** you knew i would reject solving such a hopeless problem  
**A.ta.shi♪:** yet you still wanted to protect her  
**A.ta.shi♪:** you sure know how to help yourself under the pretext of helping someone else

**A.ta.shi♪**: though it seems that idiot still hasn't realized

**Anonymous**: sempai

**Anonymous**: my priority has always been to ensure the success of  
the project

**Anonymous**: sempai?

A.ta.shi♪ has logged out

## Log No 00314

**Houtaru:** will this be fine?

**L:** yes, this is good

**L:** you've got a strange username

**Houtaru:** i misspelled "houtarou", but correcting it is too bothersome, so

**Houtaru:** yet this feels strange

**Houtaru:** my last access time was only just now

**L:** huh?

**L:** oreki-san, is this the first time you've used this?

**L:** used this?

**Houtaru:** maybe

**Houtaru:** oh well

**L:** so what was the script that hongou-san had envisioned?

**L:** oreki-san?

**Houtaru:** no, i'll do it

**Houtaru:** since i didn't ask her, i'll just have to speculate

**Houtaru:** if kaitou didn't die, then there would be no sealed room

**L:** even without the role of the cameraman?

**Houtaru:** you sure can be mean, you know? first, the killer is kounosu, she came in via the window

**L:** eh? but isn't the window?

**Houtaru:** there're two control room windows, either one's fine

**Houtaru:** using a rope, kounosu climbed into one of the control room windows

**Houtaru:** she then stabbed kaitou

**Houtaru:** though it was not enough to kill him

**Houtaru:** she then used the rope to return to the second floor

**Houtaru:** she then walked down the stairs to the lobby as though nothing happened

**Houtaru:** that's it

**Houtaru:** must be quite bitter for haba

**L:** what about the seventh actor hongou-san was looking for?

**Houtaru:** oh that? she wrote that requirement in before she completed the script

**Houtaru:** though i only realized afterwards, but there were 7 people in the movie

**L:** eh? no, there should be 6

**Houtaru:** it's not limited to the actors

**Houtaru:** there's also the narrator, remember? the one introducing the characters

**Houtaru:** even in the credit roll, his name was listed alongside theirs

**L:** oh, now i see!

**L:** but i don't understand, the room where kaitou collapsed

**L:** why is the door locked?

**Houtaru:** kaitou must have locked it himself from the inside

**L:** but why?

**Houtaru:** to run away from the killer, which is pretty common

**Houtaru:** but it's probably not the case here

**L:** i think i know

**Houtaru:** really? that's rare

**L:** since i think i understand a bit of what hongou-san is thinking

**L:** after getting stabbed by kounosu-san

**L:** kaitou said to her

**L:** why did she stab him

**L:** by any chance, maybe she wasn't aiming to kill him

**L:** so kaitou-san decided to cover for kounosu-san

**L:** as kounosu-san returned to the 2nd floor, he returned to the right stage

**L:** huh? but how does that explain the wounds?

**Houtaru:** i was thinking the same thing

**Houtaru:** that could be easily explained. maybe he got hit by the splattered glass

**L:** that's some strange glass

**Houtaru:** i meant "shattered". stop correcting my spelling, are you ibara or what?

**Houtaru:** maybe he was injuring himself so he could use that as an excuse

**Houtaru:** why did kounosu stab kaitou? and why did he forgive her?

**Houtaru:** we may never know the answer unless we ask hongou

**L:** guess it can't be helped

**L:** even though i'm curious about it

**L:** to stab one's own classmate, and to run away from the classmate that stabbed you

**L:** how would hongou-san envision such scenes?

**L:** i'm very curious about it

**Houtaru:** by the way, there's something i'd like to ask

**L:** yes, what is it?

**Houtaru:** this might be my imagination, but

**Houtaru:** didn't you yourself realize one answer from all this?

**L:** eh?

**L:** but i didn't solve anything

**L:** why do you say that?

**Houtaru:** the three from class 2-F plus me

**Houtaru:** you were convinced by none of our deductions

**Houtaru:** this is so unlike you. does that have something to do with your resonance with hongou?

**L:** oh, i see

**L:** let's see, it's because i think hongou-san and i are alike

**Houtaru:** ?

**L:** oh, this is a bit embarrassing

**L:** so please don't laugh

**L:** truth is

**L:** i don't like stories where people die

# Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yonezawa Honobu. As I'm not capable of greeting everyone while doing 32 tasks at the same time, I'll keep things short.

Compared to the previous volume "Hyouka", in some ways this volume was more relevant to the mystery genre. Parts of this story are based on actual events that I have personally experienced, though the characters are entirely fictional. Just saying this in case any of the staff involved back then end up buying this book.

To lovers of mystery, I'm sure you've realized, this story is written as a tribute to Anthony Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*. <sup>[1]</sup> Agatha Christie does not come into this story, though I did contemplate incorporating some elements of her work at one time. The movie-like feel of the case is based on Abiko Takemaru's <sup>[2]</sup> *Tantei Eiga* (Detective Movie). Please do read it if you have the chance.

Now then, there are no particular meanings for the chapter titles in this volume, though the title for chapter 5 is in a slightly different style from the rest. Yet I could not think of any title that could instill a feeling of surprise for that chapter. By the way, I think I'll tell you guys about the sushi incident next time.

Until then, thanks for reading.

Yonezawa Honobu

# Translator's notes and references

1. [↑ The Poisoned Chocolates Case - Wikipedia](#)
2. [↑ Abiko Takemaru - Japanese Wikipedia](#)

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米澤穂信

Honobu Yonezawa

クドリヤフカの  
順番

Welcome to KANYA FESTA!

角川文庫



## 1 - A Sleepless Night

001 - ♥01

As I couldn't sleep, I decided to take a walk outside.

The history of the Chitanda clan can be traced back to the beginning of the Edo period.

The large fields in the north of Kamiyama City used to be a farm village. As the leaders of the village, the Chitanda clan has maintained, farmed and rented out the land around here. As

representatives of the village, they were charged with negotiating the taxes with the feudal lords as well as acting as the local magistrates. They were also involved in projects for improving farming products. And of course, they would represent the village and take part in the annual festivals in spring and autumn.

The land here isn't truly blessed by nature. Though the soil is rich, the area is vulnerable to typhoons as well as blizzards.

After all, this land wasn't really well irrigated until irrigation works were carried out during the Edo period. Just a minor change in the climate would result in crop failure, so it was natural for the previous farmers to fear and worship the gods.

As people of prestigious wealth, the Chitanda clan would represent the mortals in carrying out the rituals during the festivals. As they would be offering their wealth to the gods in the shrine on behalf of everyone else, before the laying of the crops and after harvest, as well as during Obon and New Year, they would go around collecting food and drink from the village folk. It would seem that this was considered a form of payment in lieu of money for renting land from the Chitanda clan. In turn,

the leasing of land would form the basis of their wealth.

After the war, as part of the land reforms, the Chitanda clan, like all other large landowners, were compelled to sell most of the land they held to the government. Yet, Chitanda Shounosuke, the leader of the clan then, saw this as an opportunity to use the money from the land sales to modernize the farming equipment as quickly as possible, and profit from the new farming techniques. As such, Shounosuke was able to slowly buy back the land that was sold off, and by the time my father became head of the clan, the Chitandas had reclaimed nearly half of what was once their land, which was considered to be quite large during the late Showa period.

This may sound like me boasting, but Chitanda Shounosuke was not simply a man with business acumen, he was also a trustworthy man, as well as my grandfather. Though as he died early on, I do not remember much of him.

Anyway, the Chitanda clan had managed to weather the chaos during and after the war and maintained their status. As a result, they are still in charge of representing the local community during the festivals.

To begin with, contrary to what Fukube-san had said, the Chitanda clan aren't exactly so rich as to tower above everyone else. As a result, the annual festivities were reduced from four times a year to just twice, during spring and autumn, and the symbolic "payment" these days was merely a bottle of wine. As such, the ritual was merely an excuse for everyone to gather and have a feast. Though as I can't drink, I can't take part in the feast myself.

The spring and autumn festivals would take place in a small shrine worshiping the "village god", which was a minor deity. There would be the usual rituals of a lion dance and carrying of the mikoshi [1]. A person from the Chitanda clan would act as representative for the shrine pilgrims and pray for a peaceful year during the spring festival, as well as give thanks during the autumn festival.

And I too have been participating in such a festival ever since I was old enough to remember. I often get asked by my friends living nearby as well as visitors to the shrine as to what it is that I do during such a ritual, though I didn't exactly have to do much. There wasn't much to notice besides having to pay attention not to make many sounds until the end of the praying

ceremony. So it's just the usual clapping your hands during a prayer.

As for me, I'm not a particularly religious person. To some degree, I'm not too different from my schoolmates. Maybe it has something to do with my experience in such festivals. Though it may be bothersome, whenever I visit a shrine, I make it a habit to hide what I'm wishing. I'm not sure whether this meant I had faith in the gods, or whether this is just my systematic way of calming myself whenever I'm feeling insecure. From time to time, I feel curious about it, but I have never found an answer. Recently, my wish had been granted during the high school entrance exams. It had also been granted during the "Hyouka Incident", as it was named by Fukube-san.

And once again, tonight I find myself heading towards the shrine.

The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival begins tomorrow. And for our Classics Club, which is just one of the many illustrious arts-based clubs in Kamiyama High School, a troubling situation awaits us, and we can find no solution to it. Though we intend to give it our best... it would seem we still

need luck on our side.

After placing a 100 yen coin into the offering box within the confines of the moon-lit shrine, I clapped my hands together and closed my eyes as my thoughts for my friends in the Classics Club appeared.

Ibara Mayaka-san, Fukube Satoshi-san, Oreki Houtarou-san.

I wonder if Mayaka-san is sleeping well tonight?

Right now, she must be blaming herself for the predicament the Classics Club has found itself in. But that was not the case.

Compared to Mayaka-san, I was totally of no help. If only I had been able to give my all and help out with her work, we could have avoided this altogether. So I too must bear some of the responsibility.

I wonder if Fukube-san is sleeping well tonight?

Sometimes I do suspect whether Fukube-san's hedonistic-like behaviour comes from the bottom of his heart. At the very least, he sure wasn't acting selfishly, as there's no way I could imagine him just laughing away at Mayaka-san's pain.

I wonder if Oreki-san is sleeping well tonight?

...He probably is sleeping well. If he wasn't, I would be very

worried.

From time to time, I often find Oreki-san being able to sharply observe things that are out of the ordinary. I might even say that I was moved by it. But most of the time Oreki-san, how should I put it, tends to be slow in getting things done. So it's hard to determine whether he's a reliable person or not.

I prayed for everyone's well-being.

I prayed for luck to befall us for the next three days. Please let us overcome this "mountain".

As I opened my eyes, I still felt rather uneasy about it, so I took out another 50 yen from my purse.

002 - ♣01

As I couldn't sleep, I took out the pamphlet from underneath my pillow.

#### **Participating Club Comments (By Order of Registration):**

**Kendo Club** Exhibition Match: Kamiyama High School vs Kamiyama Industrial High. Highlights include the showdown between the prefecture's ace captains.

**Breakdancing Club** Leave the Opening Ceremony to us. The quality of our new members is quite high, so please look

forward to it.

**Social Dance Club** Floor dancing in the Gymnasium on Day 2 at 3pm. All are welcome.

**Chorus Club** Performing in the Gymnasium on Day 2 starting at 10am. Seeking new recruits. (lol)

**Drama Club** Original play on Day 3 at 9am, featuring improvised script from the Prefectural Competition version.

**Detective Fiction Study Club** Mystery Lunch on Day 1 at 11:30am.

**Fashion Study Club** Fashion show at the Fashion Room every day from 1am to 2pm. Recruiting models.

**Manga Study Club** Selling anthology in Preparation Room No. 1. Review of 100 manga, old and new. Do come visit.

**Chemistry Club** Behold the power of sodium. Dangerous, so we will not be responsible for injuries caused. Chemistry Room.

**Class 2-F Movie** *The Blind Spot of 10,000 People*. Can you guess its surprise ending? Airing schedules on separate page.

**Cheering Club and Cheerleading Club** Combined performance on the School Grounds on Day 1 at 2pm.

**Tea Ceremony Club** The traditional Kanya Festival open air tea ceremony will be held as usual at Shiroyama Park!

**Art Club** Prefectural Art Exhibition winner *The Eulogy of Blue* now on display in the Art Room. Please do come have a look!

**Marching Band** Floor Drill in the Gymnasium on Day 3 at 2pm.

**Ink Painting Club** Exhibition held together with the Art Club in the rt Room.

**Charms Association** In the Class 2-E classroom. We do all sorts of charms. Freebies available!

**Literature Club** Anthology *Kodama* on sale in Preparation Room No. 3. 200yen per volume.

**Hyakunin Isshu Club[2]** P, please..... Won't anyone play with us.....

**Occult Studies Club** Exhibition in the Class 1-F classroom. This is serious research, so please think twice if you're merely coming out of interest.

**Quiz Study Club** Quiz Contest on the School Grounds on Day 1 at 1pm. We await your participation. Prizes available.

**Astronomy Club** The Kanya Festival is only held during the daytime, man. We can't see no stars, man. So we ended up

doing models of the Solar System instead.

**Class 1-C** Theatrical play *Happy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen* on the Gymnasium Stage on Day 1 at 2pm.

**Broadcast Club** Introducing the latest happenings in the Kanya Festival every day from 12:30pm via the school's PA broadcast. You'll have to hear it even if you don't want to.

**Abacus Club** Featuring speed abacus calculations as seen on TV in Preparation Room No. 4, Special Block.

**Debate Club** English debate competition from Day 1, 11am to Day 3, 2pm in the Class 3-B classroom.

**Koto Club[3]** Recital performances held twice every morning and once every afternoon. More detailed schedules posted in front of the Japanese-style Room.

**Rakugo Study Club[4]** Performance on the Stage from Day 1 at 9am. Just when we thought we were the first to perform, the Breakdancing Club had... (T\_T)

**Calligraphy Club** Exhibition in the Calligraphy Room.

**Kado Club[5]** Exhibition in the 1st floor corridor. Please stop by to have a look.....

**Biology Club** Model of natural habitat of Kamiyama. As a self-made diorama, this is a bit too grandiose that people can't tell

which club it came from.

**Shogi Club** Kanya Cup tournament. Waiting time per player is 30 minutes. Grand prizes await. In Class 1-G.

**Miniature Club** Exhibition in the Physics Lecture Room. Featuring the battleship USS Enterprise. We also sell cute replicas.

**Film Studies Club** Self-made movie *Completion*. In the Audio-Visual Room. Schedules on separate page.

**Photography Club** Exhibition in Class 3-G classroom. Also featuring demonstration of old-fashioned flash-powder photography.

**Movie Study Club** Showing of movie *Cinema Paradiso*[\[6\]](#) (1989 Italy) in the Audio-Visual Room.

**Sci-Fi Studies Club** Featuring last year's Seiun Award[\[7\]](#) Best Media Winner in the Audio-Visual Room. Title is...

**Physics Club** We made a robot. A bipedal one. Though he can only push a baby pram.

**Global Act Club** Exhibition in Class 3-E classroom. Please come visit.

**History Club** Reconstruction of model of Kamaiyama Castle, aka "Shiroyama" (Castle Hill). Come marvel at its defense and

discover how it ultimately fell.

**Handicraft Club** Featuring the Mandala carpet. Though this may come from me, it does seem to emit some sort of divine ambiance.

**Confectionery Studies Club** We will be selling confectionery "within the confines of the school rules concerning club activities" in the home economics room. Please do come!

**Light Music Club** Though we're more of a band, this time we'll be registering as the Light Music Club. All day in the Martial Arts Dojo.

**Go Club** Beginners Seminar in Preparation Room No. 2. There will of course be tutorial matches as well.

**A Capella Club** Stationed at Class 3-C. Will be performing in the School Courtyard on Day 1 at 11am. Please come listen!

**Wall Newspaper Club** Special Edition published every two hours during Kanya Festival. Featuring the latest and hottest topics being discussed.

**The Cooking Club** Cooking battle "Wild Fire" on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants.

**Gardening Club** Cooking harvested sweet potatoes..... But

this isn't gardening, it's farming! Are you sure this is okay, prez?

**Brass Band Club** Performing a different song everyday from 1pm in the Gymnasium.

**Magic Club** Stall at 2-D classroom. Stage performance Day 1 at 11:30am. Please look forward to it.

**Fortune Telling Association** Next to the stairs on the 3rd floor.

**Classics Club** Why is the Kami High Cultural Festival called the "Kanya Festival"? The answer is in our anthology *Hyouka*. 200yen per volume in the Geology Lecture Room.

### **Organizing Committee**

**Kugayama Muneyoshi (Student Council President, Kanya**

**Festival Executive Committee President)** You guys are overdoing this. That's all I'll say.

**Yazaki Keita (Student Council Vice President)** The Organizing Committee can be found in the Student Council Room. Do visit us if there's anything you wish to discuss.

**Shoukawa Harumi (Student Council Vice President)** At last a job well done... I get that feeling a lot. Guys, let's see this through without regrets.

**Funabashi Masaharu (Cultural Committee President)** On top of the Kanya Prize Awards, we'll be adding a Best Club Award this year. Compete with all you've got, young ones!

**Tanabe Jirou (General Committee President)** We've prepared plenty of rubbish and recycle bins, but please make sure you put everything in the right bins.

After reading them in one go, I placed them back on my pillow satisfactorily. On the cover of the pamphlet were big words in Gothic font that read *Kanya Festival Guide*, and underneath it a smaller caption which read "The 42nd Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival". This was created by the Council General Committee, of which I, Fukube Satoshi, was a member.

By the way, besides being a member of the General Committee, I'm also a member of the dexterous Handicraft Club as well as the prestigious Classics Club. As to which club was the busiest for me... I guess it'd have to be the Classics Club.

When I was drafted by the Committee President into the making of the festival pamphlet, I thought it would have been a simple job of merely copying last year's pamphlet format. But on the contrary, it was a rather difficult task. Though it was hard work,

it is quite interesting when one puts in the effort to work on it. As something of a reward, one of the privileges of dealing with such a difficult task was that I got to decide what materials to use, which was pretty interesting to say the least. As a result, I decided to play a little prank with the last section of this pamphlet, "Participating Club Comments".

For last year's pamphlet, the clubs were ordered according to the Japanese hiragana spelling, but I decided to change it into the order in which the clubs registered with us. When I made the proposal to the Committee President, saying that "For an official guidebook, it's not really fair that the A Capella Club always gets to start every year in such a conspicuous starting position", my motive was quite simple, really. At the very least, I would arrange to have the comments of one of my clubs, the Classics Club, placed in a noticeable position. Though the Committee President was doubtful to begin with, he soon agreed and the motion was passed unanimously. Under the official pretext of "registration order", the Kendo Club was the first to register, so there was no way I could move that from the starting position. But in turn, I get to mix up the order at the end. After all, it's

much more noticeable if you're standing out "right in the middle".

Well, it's not exactly a grand PR effort. So rather than being pleased for advertising for the Classics Club, I was more pleased at my superiority in making such minor manipulation of the materials.

And so, to quote from Vice President Shoukawa, "At last a job well done". Besides work in the General Committee, work in the Handicraft Club was tough too. Just who was it that proposed making a Mandala carpet to begin with? Though as it was enjoyable, I guess I can't complain too much, but it was tiring for the eyes, sewing that stuff. With so much time spent on the General Committee and the Handicraft Club, my time with the Classics Club was brief in contrast. Conclusions cannot be made from databases alone, after all. With so little time left, I do wonder sometimes how on earth I wrote such an interesting essay for the anthology.

I Wonder where I should go tomorrow. At any rate, the Quiz Contest is a must. As it's held by the Quiz Study Club, their members can't participate in the competition, so that's got my

attention. As for Day 2, the Cooking Contest looked quite interesting. I've decided on making a seafood fried rice dish, as I won't lose to anyone in that department.

I'm more worried about Mayaka being depressed about it. Well, she's a strong girl. Objectively speaking, her responsibility was relatively light. Though Chitanda-san may be quite worried, I'm pretty optimistic about it. We may not be able to do anything now, but somehow we'll get by.

Oh, I'm so looking forward to this Cultural Festival. And thus, the Classics Club will attempt to claw back from the jaws of failure.

How fantastic to have to face such a challenge which we have to climb through!

Anyway, I'd better get some sleep and prepare for tomorrow. It would be a serious blunder for Fukube Satoshi if he were to run out of energy for such an event.

003 - ♪01

As the owls outside kept on hooting, I ended up not feeling sleepy at all.

I was thinking about whether I should read a book, but I couldn't

find anything that interested me on the bookshelf. So I went down to the living room, picking up the remote control to see what was on TV, but there wasn't anything interesting on. With no other choice left, I went to the dust-covered desktop PC in the corner of the room and turned it on.

This PC used to belong to my sis. Now it's become the Oreki family's common web hub. In practice I'm the only one that ever uses it, even though I'm not really that interested in spending time on the net. This machine was no old model, and was equipped with the ability to do calculations and store memory that I could never emulate, yet all I ever used it for was to check the web once or twice a week for any news. In other words, it was quite a pitiful machine.

The search engine website popped up. At first I thought of clicking on the news... but I changed my mind and entered "Kamiyama High School" in the search box. A number of links appeared, and I duly entered my school's website. This wasn't the first time I've visited the site, as besides the usual stuff about the origins of the school and description of its activities, it's also got a chatroom for current students, which was where I went

before.

As for what I was looking for, it was of course the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. There's bound to be something about it found on the net. And as I expected, on the top of the website was a banner written in large typeface font "1 Day Remaining till Kanya Festival". At the side of the screen was an animation of a pair of male and female Kamiyama High students in uniform carrying stuff around. Other stuff on the page included the festival schedule, participating groups, traffic access, notice to visitors, and web store.

I have no idea how many groups have participated, but the site sure listed quite a lot. The page was full of photos, illustrations and handmade maps with loads of information on them, making navigation pretty easy. After seeing all of these in one glance, I decided to have a look at my own club, the Classics Club, but it was at this moment that the connection went off. I don't know where the problem came from, but from time to time, this PC just seems to have quite an unstable connection. Ah well, as I decided to go back to sleep, I heard someone coming down the stairs. As the footsteps were quite soft, I knew it was my sis

right away. As it's quite bothersome to have to squeeze past each other in a narrow staircase, I decided to sit on the chair and wait for her to come down.

The footsteps entered the kitchen nearby, and the fridge door could be heard being opened, as well as the sound of glasses being taken out.

As I was about to make my way to my room, a voice called out, "Houtarou,"

My guess of who the footsteps belonged to was spot on. It was my sister's voice, which sounded half asleep.

"You have a Cultural Festival tomorrow, right?"

I turned my face towards the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"Better get to sleep soon."

"Wha?"

I made an idiotic exclamation. I sure didn't want to have her tell me to go to sleep the same way she would nag at me about eating with my mouth closed or remind to bring my tissues when I go out. Though I didn't want to say it out loud, because if I did, it would just lead to more trouble.

For some reason, she didn't seem to care as she poured something into her glass and drank it in one gulp and said, "...You seem to be having some problem anyway."

I didn't answer.

Once again, she poured a bit more of what she was drinking into her glass.

"I can tell what you're thinking just from your reaction. Anyway, the Classics Club is bound to encounter some trouble during the Cultural Festival. Think of it as something of a tradition."

Hmph, a curse huh?

"You sure have entered some troublesome club, really."

"Really?"

I so felt like retorting her right away, as she was the one who asked me to enter the Classics Club in the first place.

Upon enrolling in Kamiyama High School this year, I received a request from my sis, who was an alumnus of the Classics Club, to keep the club alive even if it meant just filling my name in. I originally expected to fully enjoy being the sole member of a club that does nothing, but it was not to be, as a girl called Chitanda joined the Classics Club for a purpose. Upon solving

that "purpose" of hers, the Classics Club had ended up with four members. That chain of bothersome events was named the "Hyouka Incident" by Satoshi, and I ended up having to write an anthology essay about it.

By the way, I still don't know what the Classics Club does exactly. Normally one would expect a club called the Classics Club to involve the study of classic literature, but none of its current members seem to be that sort of people. As we have no seniors to tell us what kind of club it used to be, we've somehow lost our *raison d'être*. But personally speaking, I'm thankful it's ended up that way.

So, besides filling in the members' names, in order for a club to continue its existence, club activities must be held. As one of the officially recognized school clubs, we have a meagre club activity budget allocated to us for the purpose of "Anthology Compilation". And making use of these funds, we ended up publishing the essay anthology *Hyouka*. There were many twists and turns along the way, but we've finally completed it. And we will be selling them during the Cultural Festival, which starts tomorrow.

...Well, it was here that we encountered some problem. So my sis was totally spot on when she said "You seem to be having some problem anyway."

By the way, since it's my sis, she's bound to know what kind of activities the Classics Club is involved in. Yet lately she's been away from the country until just a while ago. By the time she returned, it didn't really matter anymore whether I asked her what kind of club the Classics Club was.

Anyway, subjectively speaking, I didn't particularly hate this club that I had joined. So instead of retorting to my sis, I said, "If there is such a cursed tradition, why don't you give me some charm or something, sis?"

"Are you trying to extort me?"

After being speechless for a while, I felt something flying towards me from behind. Just when I thought was she really handing some sort of charm to me, the thing I caught didn't have anything divine about it. It was a fountain pen. Though it wasn't divine, it sure had style, being deep black in colour with a dull silver lining along its sides. It's probably not cheap.

"You can take that."

"...Should I say thanks?"

"By the way, it's out of ink, and the nib's broken."

Stop throwing garbage around! After hearing her place something back in the fridge, her footsteps left the kitchen and went into the corridor, where she said, "...I'll come over to visit if I have time!"

"No, don't," I replied immediately.

Even if we're going to have loads of cases, having her come would just make things unbearable. I heard no reply from her as she walked up the stairs.

I lay on my bed.

Since I was waiting to fall asleep, I wasn't particularly thinking anything. Before long I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

Today, or to be more precise, yesterday, we wasted a whole day preparing for the Cultural Festival. Currently the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival officially spans four days, but as the first day was basically preparations, it was really only open for three days. The real thing starts tomorrow.

Satoshi seemed intent on having fun. That was to be expected, so it's not surprising. However, "enjoying the Cultural Festival"

was definitely not something that "I have to do". I would have simply taken a nap in some corner of the school until the whole thing was over. So, even though I won't say something uncooperative like "This Cultural Festival business is boring", I would still stay true to my creed and utter my motto: "If I don't have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick". I did not participate much anyway.

To be frank, even if I did nothing, it would still be counted as me having "participated". Since all we'll be doing is sitting there all day and selling the anthologies which we worked so hard writing. That was the original plan anyway.

Naturally, when the problem arose, we did not blame anyone. If there was someone to blame, then all of us were to blame. So as it's partly my fault, in order to cover my own ass, it became something that "I have to do".

The problem was, would I be able to "do it quickly"?

That said, even if the problem was not solved, it could be said that it was mere small potatoes. It was not something that must be undone. So Chitanda's worrying too much about this. She ought to think more like a happy energy-saver.

Neither pessimistic nor optimistic, like *Que Sera, Sera*, I was calmly facing come what may as I waited to fall asleep.

004 - ♦01

I woke up in the middle of the night and got to thinking.

Oreki may have guessed incorrectly, but I'm not a perfectionist.

While failure is to be expected if one does not prepare or research enough, but failure also occurs even when one has made every preparation possible. So while it's possible for other people to fail, naturally it's also possible for me to fail as well.

So if I am to forgive others for their errors, I shouldn't be so unforgiving to myself. Yet I'm feeling angry. Even if everyone has forgiven me, sometimes I can't forgive myself. I can do nothing but be angry at my own failure. But why?

A while ago, Fuku-chan told me this: "Well, Mayaka, if you think calmly about it, it's no big matter. So you shouldn't worry too much."

"I'm not worrying. And it's not like I want to hear such common reasoning."

Fuku-chan crossed his arms and looked down while grunting deeply. Even though he was doing it on purpose, I didn't dislike

that part of him.

"...From how I see it, I don't think you've ever been this angry regardless of whether you succeeded or failed, as well as whether you're a perfectionist or not."

"Really?"

Feeling interested, I stretched myself forward and asked, "Then why am I angry?"

"It's hard for me to explain. Though I may have a rich vocabulary, my knowledge of useful words is rather limited."

"So you know a lot of useless terms?"

"Well, there's 'tank desant' [8] and 'dumb luck'... No, that's not the point. For example, you know Houtarou's 'energy-saving' creed, right?"

I nodded honestly.

"That's what he calls it anyway. When Oreki is doing something, it's hard to tell whether he's doing it to 'save energy'."

"Even though you've known him for so long?"

"As if I would observe him all the time."

Fuku-chan smiled bitterly.

"Anyway, leaving Houtarou aside, in some way, if that creed were applied to you, then you're neither 'correct' nor 'perfect'.

Now I'm not saying this to incur your wrath, as I mean something else altogether."

So that's what he's going on about, I thought to myself. To begin with, I never liked conversations involving myself, and so the conversation shifted to something else altogether.

Anyway, what's important now is that I could not sleep since I'm still feeling quite pissed off. Seriously, even though I've double-checked so many times, how on earth could I have neglected something so basic? And why didn't I notice the error being made after it had happened?

What was even more infuriating was that I would be unable to help out in rectifying the mistake come the Cultural Festival, as there was no way I could leave my activities with the Manga Study Club aside. Even though Fuku-chan did say "It's not really a big mistake, so don't think too much about it."

Argh, this pisses me off. I'm so angry at my own carelessness. But, as infuriating as it may sound, Oreki was absolutely right when he said, in that buoyant manner of his, while avoiding my gaze when we were alone, "This isn't something you should fuss over. If you keep fussing over it, then not only Satoshi, but even

Chitanda will have to fuss over it for you, right?"

It was just as he had put it. Even though I was the one being careless, when Chi-chan came, her face went pale as though it were her own responsibility. At the very least, I don't want to see Chi-chan spend the entire Cultural Festival with such a face. So, for just a little bit, I tried to forgive myself. Try as I may, upon being reminded of that scene, I just couldn't calm myself down!

Guess I have no choice.

I must be so personally involved with the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival that I've become too stressed out. Yet it was not good for me to lose sleep like this.

I got out of my futon and took out the bottle of sleeping pills from the first aid box, though I didn't really like taking those. I took out one pill and cut it in half, and swallowed that piece of white medicine.

### **Translator's notes and references**

1.

- A small, portable Shinto shrine - [Wikipedia](#)
- • A traditional Japanese style of poetry anthology of 100

waka poems where each contributor writes one poem -

## [Wikipedia](#)

- • A traditional Japanese string instrument - [Wikipedia](#)
  - • A traditional Japanese storytelling style where the storyteller sits seiza style on the stage with a paper fan and tells a story that is usually long and comical - [Wikipedia](#)
  - • Japanese flower arranging - [Wikipedia](#)
  - • An Italian film - [Wikipedia](#)
  - • An award for the best sci-fi literature published in the preceding year - [Wikipedia](#)
8. • [Tank desant](#) - [Wikipedia](#)

## • 2 - The Cases That Keep Piling Up

### 2-1 Has Something Happened With the Classics Club?

005 - ♠02

Saying "I enjoyed this a lot" may sound easy, but is actually a pretty difficult task. Rather than the possibility of the difference in one's level of understanding, a more important factor would be the difference in one's level of interest. When watching a magic performance, a dense person would not even understand even a hundredth of what was going on. On the other hand, if

one had the ability to see through a magician's trick, then no matter how much entertainment he may see, while he may try to enjoy to his heart's content, there's no way he could have enjoyed it sufficiently.

It was morning, and I was walking to school earlier than usual, as the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival starts today.

Seeing Fukube Satoshi constantly repeating "Ohh, I'm so looking forward to enjoying this," I felt compelled to mischievously tell him the above, to which Satoshi responded with a frightful smile and slowly shook his head.

"An excellent idea, was what I wanted to say, but you're too naive, Houtarou,"

"Oh? How so?"

"For a person like you who was raised on nothing but boorishness to even think of lecturing me on my enjoyment, you're too naive," he said as he raised his index finger and swung it left and right as though acting.

"Of course I already knew that it was useless to try to enjoy myself deep down, within the marrow of my bones. The most important aspect of Epicureanism is to be able to separate one's

senses. It's just as important as the day when you finally give up your energy-saving ways and actually work hard on a test."

"Like hell that day would arrive. Anyway, what's this about separation of your senses? What does that have to do with you being able to say you'll enjoy yourself?"

"All right, then let me enlighten you. First, I wouldn't think of saying something like "I'm gonna enjoy a lot," as I'm a fairly easy to please person. You know what I'm good at resigning myself to? Just from the point of view of Houtarou the Boorish."

*Do you know?* Satoshi gestured as he finished his sentence. Fleeting a glimpse at him, as I had no intention of bursting his bubble, I said nothing. Sensing I had no intention to answer, he lowered his voice as though informing me of a secret and said, "Even if I'm not good at enjoying myself....."

"....."

He gave a broad smile.

"I could still look forward to people giving me their enjoyment!"

Oh boy.

Ignoring my cold expression, Satoshi continued with his talk of how he's still "gonna enjoy this." I could do nothing but keep

quiet and smile bitterly.

Fukube Satoshi. I have been hanging out with this fellow since junior high.

From his appearance, Satoshi was a person with brown eyes and a slim figure that might be mistaken as that of a girl when seen from afar. And while he may seem like a weakling, he has developed some amazing leg muscles due to his penchant for cycling.

Though his real features lie with his mental state. You may have caught a glimpse of that from our conversation just now; he can be pretty forceful in abandoning his studies and social life casually. Already a member of the Handicraft Club and the General Committee, he decided to join the Classics Club as well simply because "it sounded interesting."

He is never seen without his drawstring bag in his hand, though I have no idea of its contents. All I can say is that it contains all sorts of stuff.

In the road ahead, we could see Kamiyama High School appearing. The outer walls weren't painted pink due to the Cultural Festival, and seen from afar, it looked no different from

any other regular high school. However, within its grounds were flourishing all sorts of activities concerning the Cultural Festival. In order to prepare for the festival, classes were suspended since yesterday.

The body of students heading towards school looked different today. While there were many in their uniforms, there were also many from other clubs in their casual wear. And there were many who did not carry any bag with them, as there was no need to bring any scholastic equipment. Due to such discrepancies, even I could feel the expectation that something different from usual was about to start.

Though Kamiyama High School is a school geared towards students entering university, it didn't have that many supplementary classes, neither did it have a particularly high record of students entering famous universities. If you were to ask the students of Kamiyama High School what its specialty was, only one in ten would have said it specializes in university entrance exams. The other nine would answer "It's a school known for its vibrant Arts-related club activities." There are many kinds of arts-related clubs in Kami High, and its activities

too are various. And the highlight of these activities would of course be the Cultural Festival, which was rare amongst high schools for its number of days, with one day for preparation and three whole days for the main event.

Satoshi suddenly raised his voice cheerfully.

"And besides... Why, Houtarou, isn't that Mayaka?"

He pointed to a girl in front of us. She was dressed in casual wear comprising of a red cardigan and white brocade trousers, but I couldn't tell whether she was Ibara Mayaka from behind.

Though I've known her since elementary school, I've rarely seen her in casual wear since junior high. But if Satoshi says it's her, then it has to be.

For many times Ibara had confessed her love to Satoshi, yet while Satoshi was not one to fall into self-loathing, he had chosen to evade her advances time and time again. I couldn't figure out why he's done so even if I wanted to.

"I'll be going on ahead."

He turned and said that before running off towards that girl ahead of us.

As I moved forward, I was certain that it was indeed Mayaka. Though seeking Houtarou out in a crowd was like trying to look for a needle in a haystack, there was no way I could miss Mayaka. I ran up and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Mayaka. Morning!"

Knowing her, she would have stared at me and said "Hey! That hurts!" Which was why I only tapped her softly. Though it seemed Mayaka didn't seem to be in that mood today, as she became stiff and turned her head slowly.

"...Morning."

She muttered only that and turned back forward. *Ahh, I see.* I exclaimed to myself and smiled (which was what I'm good at; I've long forgotten how to make a serious face), and I answered Mayaka's anxiety.

"Your costume suits you."

"R-really?"

"So, who are you cospla..."

I could not finish my sentence, as I could feel a jab into my stomach. Great aim. Due to that hit, my abdominal muscles quickly lost their strength, so its effect was immediate.

Mayaka murmured with a dangerous glimmer in her eyes,  
"Don't use that term in front of normal people."  
Well, I don't think "costume play" would be considered taboo  
nowadays. Though I do get that Mayaka's feeling pretty  
embarrassed about it, so I wouldn't say anything. By the way, I  
already knew that she was planning to cosplay today. Mayaka's  
Manga Studies Club had asked for permission from the General  
Committee to turn up in casual clothing. As there were not  
enough changing rooms at school, the General Committee  
granted that permission.

Mayaka wore off-white brocade trousers and a scarlet cardigan.  
It was a pragmatic costume that was able to withstand the cool  
autumn winds of early October. Some accessories were attached  
to her cardigan, and inside she wore a white collared shirt, and a  
thick looking belt was wrapped around her abdomen. The main  
point would probably be this belt.

I looked at her costume from top to bottom. Hmm, I just don't  
have a clue. Guess I'll ask her again.

"So, what costume is this?"  
Like a rat trying not to alert the cat, I carefully chose the right

words so that Mayaka may accept my question. She quickly looked forward and said in a detached manner, "Frol,"

"Frol? Frolbericheri Frol[1]? You're wearing her costume?"

"Yeah... I also brought this handbag."

I wouldn't get what she was referring to even if she said so.

Well, that's what Mayaka wanted to wear after all. When she learned that her club required her to come in cosplay, being the shy person that she is, she would definitely choose a character that was hard to recognize.

Ibara Mayaka. As I was a guy, she was way shorter than me, but then as a girl she was way shorter than others. If she wasn't dressed in her sailor uniform, she would no doubt be mistaken as an elementary schoolkid. And right now, Mayaka wasn't dressed in her sailor uniform. And it's not just her figure that's small, just observing from the features of her face alone, one could say Mayaka was baby-faced.

Yet it was hard to figure out Mayaka's vigorous sense of justice from her childish expression emanating from her childish face.

For example, when she's angry, she would simply bite her lips.

Naturally, nothing can replace the smile that she was born with.

(On the other hand, from my years of hanging out with him,

Houtarou sure has bad eyes for not being able to notice that.)

I'd better stop looking into someone cosplaying a character she

didn't feel like cosplaying, so I began spinning my drawstring

bag and said, "Well, anyway, good luck with your role. I'll pop

in at the Manga Studies Club later."

Mayaka showed some shyness as she nodded softly.

"You have to contribute articles for the Manga Club as well,

right?"

"Yeah."

"I read it... Must be tough, to hold similar positions in both the

Classics Club and Manga Club."

"It is tough. Since nobody else was willing to contribute."

I was originally planning to congratulate her for her hard work,

but all of a sudden her gaze suddenly became sharp. Oops, looks

like the conversation is headed in the wrong direction. For the

Classics Club manuscript to arrive so late, no matter how one

looks at it, I couldn't offer any excuse. So I decided to change

the topic.

"Ah... so, Mayaka, you'll be with the Manga Studies Club all day then?"

Though she didn't look pleased that the topic was changed, she nodded.

"Will you be stopping by the Classics Club?"

"Nah, it's probably impossible for me to leave the Manga Club in the morning. And besides, it's not worth it for me to just stop by... I really ought to have followed things through."

I deepened my smile and patted Mayaka on the back.

"Try not to think too much about it! It can't be helped once you wake up from it!"

Mayaka gave an ambiguous smile and nodded at my words. No, this doesn't look right. Such a grey-looking smile wouldn't be what makes Mayaka look great.

Even though Mayaka said she's fine with it, there are occasions when Houtarou expresses doubt at my evasion of her advances.

Well, Houtarou was never one to flatter people. I could tell him the reason, but I wasn't sure if he would understand even a tenth of it. To begin with, this is a problem between me and Mayaka alone, so it doesn't matter whether Houtarou understands it or

not.

Before we realized, we had arrived at the school gates. I turned to have a look at the gates, which had huge, colourful flowers hanging over them. This was the hard work of the General Committee, made to welcome visitors to the Cultural Festival. A banner hung from the outside of one of the windows of the school building, which read "The 42nd Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival."

And so it begins.

I wonder if I'm making a face that's trying to enjoy all this. As I was in a trance looking at the school grounds, Mayaka suddenly jabbed her elbow at me.

"Fuku-chan... Try not to do anything silly during the Cultural Festival, okay? While you may not find it embarrassing, it'd be embarrassing enough for me."

Heh, guess I'm not trusted at all, eh?

But that doesn't mean I won't do anything!

007 - ♣03

There's this hard object resting in my pocket, and for some time it's been bothering me.

It was the fountain pen, or to be more precise, the trash known as the unusable fountain pen. The ink had long run out, and I was entrusted by my sis to take care of it. Last night, as I didn't want to just toss it on the floor, I brought it to my room, intending to throw it away there. But it seemed I ended up bringing it along with my handkerchief. While it's pretty much useless now, who knows what role it would play as time goes on.

I toyed with the pen by flipping its cap on and off, making a clicking sound as I walked up the stairs. My destination was the Classics Club room on the fourth floor.

Seen from above, Kamiyama High School appears as an H-shape. On one side was the General Block with its regular classrooms, while on the other side would be the Special Block with its arts and science related classrooms. They are joined in the middle by a connecting corridor. When seen from further above, one would see the corridor from the General Block extending towards the Gymnasium.

The Geology Lecture Room, which is used by the Classics Club as their club room, is located in the Special Block. And it's all

the way in the corner at the end of the corridor. If Kamiyama High School was the whole world, then this would be its periphery. Normally, we'd curse about how far the club room was while also feeling grateful for how serene it was. Yet with the Cultural Festival upon us, we had to consider another factor, the fact that being located in such a remote corner of the school means we're doubtful of getting any visitors.

In every floor, you would see posters, mascots and advertising boards in all different shades of colour, though that's only up to the third floor. In the fourth floor, all you get is a barren landscape. You won't even see any ads for shopping malls or chain stores. To begin with, there aren't many clubs based up here anyway.

Still, we've put up a few posters in some hard to miss spots promoting the Classics Club, but even that was not enough to enliven the mood of this god-forsaken place. Personally, I prefer this sort of tranquility, but it's troublesome for the Classics Club as an organization, particularly for its president, who sees it as something quite worrying.

I slid open the door of the Geology Room. The girl sitting in the

centre of this dreary room stood up upon seeing me enter. "Good morning, Oreki-san," she said and bowed deeply, her long black hair flowing as she did. This was Chitanda, president of the Classics Club. I reckoned she was probably the first to arrive.

Chitanda Eru is a girl with jet black hair extending all the way to her back as well as pupils of the same colour. Gentle in her demeanor, she was rather tall and well-proportioned for a girl. Her calm way of speaking gives one the impression that she's an elegant lady with a prestigious upbringing. In fact, she is the only daughter of the Chitanda clan, known for being the owners of large tracts of farmland.

However, if you ask me, this elegant Japanese lady image is not Chitanda's true nature.

Amongst her mature features, only her large eyes betray her true character. Possessing a sense of curiosity which has exploded many times before and will continue to explode in the future, this was Chitanda Eru. Ever since I entered school, I and the Classics Club have been involved in many bothersome events thanks to her curiosity. My life motto has always been "If I don't

have to do it, I won't. If I have to do it, make it quick." But so far I have been unable to adhere to it, and it's all her fault.

Chitanda lifted her head and made a soft smile. Though she wears her heart on her sleeve, she would rarely express her feelings in an exaggerated way. Rather, she does it in moderation.

"The day has finally arrived."

"So it seems."

"Let's give it our all!"

"Yeah."

I nodded.

Looking at the pile of objects lined up between me and Chitanda, I groaned.

"...You say give it our all, but do you have any idea how we're gonna get this sorted?"

We're talking about none other than the Classics Club essay anthology, "Hyouka." A rather queer name for a title; as for why it had such a queer name, that's a long story. Each volume was bound nicely in a vinyl coating which went through adhesive surface treatment, on its dark brown cover was an illustration of

a dog and rabbit biting each other. This cover design was derived from the first ever volume of "Hyouka," which was made in a water-paint style, though this year Ibara decided to draw it in a cute style. Objectively speaking, it didn't look bad at all.

The people working on this anthology included me and Chitanda, and while Satoshi did contribute, he only participated in writing his part of the manuscript. Of course, even after the manuscript was completed, the anthology wouldn't be finished right away. There would still be work involving confirming the number of pages, choosing the right font and paper type, arranging the manuscripts, placing the page numbers, etc, before submitting to the publisher for printing. All that was left to Ibara, who also worked on the other illustrations as well.

While we were consulted on matters concerning the design of the anthology, we were merely confirming Ibara's choices.

Seeing how troublesome it looked for her to have to work on so many details, both Chitanda and I had offered to help her many times.

Yet Ibara had turned our offers down, saying she's used to doing

such stuff, so it's no big deal to her, and how she can easily handle this amount of work. Besides, she said it would be quite bothersome to teach an amateur from scratch. Hearing her say that, Chitanda decided to relent on helping.

And so, the anthology "Hyouka" is finally complete. In fact, it was a job well done. Very well done, indeed.

Upon seeing the final product, Ibara went speechless.

When she brought them over to us the day before yesterday, we too became speechless.

...The pile of objects lined up between me and Chitanda were the "Hyouka" anthologies. Rather than "pile," "stack" would be a more appropriate description. Even "mountain" would not sound far-fetched.

Before, we had only planned on making an order to print thirty copies of "Hyouka". Taking one for ourselves, as well as one each for our supervisor and one to keep for archiving, it would leave us with twenty-four left to sell, which was how many we expected to sell.

However, the number of copies somehow ended up being more than we expected.

About seven times more.

I learned that even for a thin anthology like this, two hundred copies of them stacked together was enough to form a "mountain."

To ask us to give our all selling all these is an extremely tall task. Upon hearing my grumble, Chitanda became lost for words as her smile went stiff.

"...Umm, while giving our all may not guarantee everything, I'm sure we'll still achieve something!"

The problem would be how much effort we should be giving then, but...

The door behind us opened; it was Satoshi. Lifting his right arm, he greeted us.

"Hi there, I see you're all worried about our excessive stock!"

Well, so are you.

While still at a loss for words to address the predicament we were in, Chitanda still bowed deeply like she had to me.

"G-good morning, Fukube-san... How is Mayaka-san?"

"Oh, she said she'll try and come, but she probably won't make it."

"I see..." she muttered regretfully. That was to be expected.

While Chitanda and I aren't affiliated with any other club save the Classics Club, Satoshi has his hands tied with the General Committee and Handicraft Club, while Ibara spends time as a librarian and with the Manga Studies Club. During the Cultural Festival, Satoshi would be busy patrolling the grounds as a member of the General Committee, while I hear Ibara is required to stay with the Manga Club for some time.

"Then, shall we begin?"

Satoshi and I nodded. Looking at us one by one, Chitanda slowly spoke.

"There's not much time until the Opening Ceremony starts... So does anyone have any ideas on how we could sell this many copies of 'Hyouka'?"

The price of "Hyouka" was set at 200 yen.

This was the price decided by Ibara and Chitanda after much calculation. We originally wanted to sell 30 copies at 400 yen each. As we were expecting to sell them all, the proceeds made along with our own club funding would be just enough to cover the printing costs.

But now we have 200 copies of "Hyouka". It's not exactly an

extremely tragic mistake, and the printing of excessive copies also meant we actually paid far less for each volume as a result. If we were to sell all 200 volumes, then we could lower the price down to 120 yen per copy and still break even.

But it was impractical to expect all of them to be sold, so taking that into consideration, we settled for 200 yen apiece, though we would need to sell 120 copies in order to break even. Chitanda eventually decided on this price, though selling 120 copies still seems rather optimistic... Still, as I kept quiet, I wasn't planning on complaining afterwards anyway. Surely 200 yen is pretty cheap for an anthology sold at a Cultural Festival, after all.

By the way, even if we were to sell them all, we would not be able to profit from it anyway. As the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival expressly forbids clubs from profiteering.

While I've heard of stories where people would occasionally get away with pocketing 1000 yen for themselves, any amount more than that would end up in the national treasury, sorry, I mean the school treasury.

There are about a thousand students in Kamiyama High School, so in order to break even, we would need to sell to 12% of the

student body. In order to sell all copies, we would need to target 20%. This was a pretty difficult task. To use TV ratings as an analogy, even a lay person would know how hard it is for a programme to achieve 20% ratings.

To begin with, our market is not limited to these thousand people. The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival is free for all, so even regular townspeople would come. As the Cultural Festival takes place from Thursday to Saturday, most visitors would opt to visit on Saturday, the third day. But I have no way of guessing how much they would contribute to the sales.

Besides...

"The problem lies with the Classics Club's name recognition and its poor geographical location."

"Yes, I agree this is the biggest obstacle."

I felt the same way with both of their opinions.

I have already mentioned above about how disadvantageous the Geology Room's location was. For the Classics Club's name recognition, it's even worse. Nearly all of the students in Kami High wouldn't even know of the existence of the Classics Club.

In fact, if I hadn't applied to join this year, the club would have

been abolished altogether. Unlike the Tea Ceremony Club, which was known for its open air tea ceremonies, or the A Capella Club renowned for its abilities, who's gonna buy the anthology of a club they've not even heard of?

So there's the location and the name recognition. I spoke up.  
"In other words, we will need to find a more conspicuous place to sell, as well as to advertise our club name."

"Well, obviously," Satoshi said teasingly, as though saying we would sell out if we could achieve both. Of course I know that, but it's because we can't achieve them that we're at a loss for what to do.

Meanwhile, Chitanda nodded in admiration.

"Find a new location to sell... And all this time I've been thinking of how to bring customers all the way here. Oreki-san, that's a really innovative idea."

"Erm, it's not exactly innovative..."

"But, will we be able to get permission to move to a new location right away?"

Who knows? That's Satoshi's department, as he's with the General Committee. But he shook his head.

"I'm not really sure. While it may be possible to just move to any space, it depends on whether the Classics Club could be granted such a privilege. So you're gonna have to ask the General Committee president, or even the Student Council president himself."

"Who's the General Committee president?"

"Tanabe-sempai from second year. The General Committee will be holding meetings in the Conference Room from time to time, so you could try dropping by to have a look."

"Why don't you do it?"

Satoshi bit his lip and nodded ambiguously.

"Well, I could do that... But I'm not really confident in conducting such negotiations. Chitanda-san, it might be better for you to start the conversation with them, and for me to assist you by the side."

I see, that could be a good way of doing it. Yet Chitanda looked somehow uneasy. While she might be a forceful lady, like Satoshi, she probably wouldn't be confident making such an unreasonable request either. Yet she could expect no help from me, for I too am bad at those kinds of things.

The situation at present was nothing to be joyful about. Yet Satoshi looked pretty jolly. Well, that's Fukube Satoshi for you, he might even be relishing such hardship. As though bouncing, he spoke.

"Rather than that, I'd prefer to do the advertising."

"Advertising, huh? So how're you gonna do that?"

"Well, that's a secret."

I have a bad feeling about this. I could not think of any secret plan of Satoshi's that could ever work.

"Huh? Do you have a good idea?"

This got Chitanda interested, to which Satoshi puffed his chest.

"There are many competitions and races held during this Cultural Festival, so I was thinking of joining them under the name of the Classics Club. By achieving a good result, we would increase the club's popularity!"

"T-that's a great idea!"

How's that a great idea anyway? I raised my eyebrows as Chitanda was clearly being fooled. Satoshi basically *wanted* to participate in all these competitions and races himself. To begin with, it'll still be Satoshi participating, it's just that the entry

name will be that of the Classics Club instead.

But still, it's not a bad method, as we haven't got any other way of advertising our club. It was possible it could actually turn out quite well.

I looked at the clock and said, "So it's roughly decided then? Chitanda will go and request a new selling location, and Satoshi will do the advertising."

"Yes, so we had better make our way now. But what will you do, Oreki-san?"

Me?

Actually, I had a plan. A plan to contribute greatly to the selling of "Hyouka," as well as stay true to my creed.

I cleared my throat and said solemnly, "I will..."

"Yes?"

"Stay and watch the stall."

Chitanda blinked her eyes while Satoshi muttered as though realizing something.

"...In-fact, or else there won't be anyone left behind."

"Yes, you're right. We would need someone to watch the stall."

Now how's that? No complaints at all.

"Well, now that things are decided, we should get going. We don't have much time," I said while looking at the clock on the wall.

There were only ten minutes left before the Opening Ceremony begins. Even the Cultural Festival and Sports Day were not exempted from attendance taking, but taking into consideration that students would be scattered in their clubrooms overseeing their exhibits, attendance would be taken during the morning assembly every day. In other words, we'll be counted as late if we don't get to the Opening Ceremony on time.

Nodding greatly, Chitanda cleared her throat. Taking a deep breath, she said in one go, "Then let us proceed with our allotted tasks. We should try to sell as many volumes as possible. Our target is to sell all 200 copies of 'Hyouka'! Let's give it our all!"  
...Well, let's just say I wasn't even thinking of whether we could sell all 200 copies.

## [200 COPIES REMAINING]

008 - ♥02

About a thousand students were packed within the dark gymnasium, which had its windows covered by curtains, and

due to today being a rather hot October day, the gymnasium ended up being stuffy. Inside the gymnasium was a light that shines onto the stage, but even now that light was turned off, so it was pitch black inside. But it only lasted for a moment, for in the next moment a spotlight shone on a male student; it was the Student Council president. He was a rather tall and intrepid looking person who was said to speak eloquently as befitting of a Student Council president.

The president walked towards the mic and looked around the hall as he took a deep breath. He then declared loudly, omitting any prefix altogether, "I declare the 42nd Kanya Festival open!" As the voice from deep within his abdomen flowed out, the thousand Kami High students instantly burst into an uproar. The Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival opening ceremony had begun.

According to the "Kanya Festival Guide" published by the General Committee, the Breakdancing Club will lead the opening ceremony with their performance. I'm ashamed to admit that I've not seen people perform breakdancing before. While I know it has something to do with dancing, I don't exactly know

how dances can be broken. I wonder if it has something to do with the performers breaking something on the stage?

As red, yellow, blue and green lights shone on the stage, the bewildering performance had begun. I looked up wondering where the lights shone from, and saw people busy moving the lighting equipment around in the catwalk above the stage. It probably takes lots of practice to be able to move such lights so quickly in an orderly pattern. If I get the chance, I must inquire how they mastered this pattern.

Smoke was emitted from behind the stage as the rumble briefly quieted down. As the smoke dispersed, two people from each side came flying from left and right, and at the same time booming background music was played. It was a vibrating electronic sound. I wonder if the image it conveys was that of space? In tune with the music, four people began dancing. So this is breakdancing? The dancers looked as though they were turning a key in a doorknob, and they swung their arms and kicked their legs as though swimming in breast stroke. Dancing in a variety of moves, they looked very active indeed. Would it be rude to call them non-human? As their inorganic

dance moves looked really fascinating.

Oh! They jumped!

Oh! They spun!

Oh! They stood on their hands!

This time they begun spinning around while standing on their hands. But would they be fine with all the heat caused by the friction of their heads rubbing against the ground? Wouldn't their hair be scratched off from too much rubbing? I'm curious about it.

The dance then stepped up its tempo, becoming faster and faster; I could no longer tell how they moved their arms and legs. This is amazing. The music also went into full burst... Umm, this loud sound is starting to hurt my ears. I'm not that good with loud sounds.

Before long, as the cocktail of spotlights converged in the centre of the stage, the four dancers stopped in perfect stillness just as the music ended. The crowd gave a loud response; I too gave the Breakdancing Club my overwhelming approval.

The second song began playing, which was in the rhythm of some African-like folk music. It was quite different from the

previous song. I was quite curious as to how they would dance to that tune. Besides, I would also be interested in watching the performance of the Rakugo Club afterwards... No, I mustn't be tempted.

Having come to my senses, I noticed quite a number of students trickling out of the hall. They're probably in charge of watching their stalls or preparing for their club events. Without disturbing the performance of the Breakdancing Club, I too quietly left the hall.

I hurried down the corridor, walking in longer strides than I normally do. I saw some students decorating their classroom door with gold and silver paper while there doesn't seem to be much time left. I wonder what club they're from? They looked so frantic that I feel like helping them. No, I mustn't! The Classics Club itself is in a grave situation.

As I pondered how to say my lines, I reached the Conference Room. According to the "Kanya Festival Guide," the General Committee seems to be based here.

The Conference Room is situated on the second floor of the General Block. As the Gymnasium is directly connected to the

General Block, it wasn't a long walk at all. So before long, here I was before the Conference Room. It was like any other classroom, save that it had a sign pasted on its sliding door that read "General Committee Room." I knocked on the door.

"....."

Huh?

"Is anybody in?"

There was no response. I tried opening the door, but it was locked.

Yes, now that I think about it, as I had left midway through the Opening Ceremony, it was not strange that no one from the General Committee had yet returned. It seems like I came too early.

Somehow, I became a bit anxious as I didn't want to waste any time. In such a situation, I should do some deep breathing. So I inhaled deeply and breathed out slowly. One more time, breathe in, breathe out.

I looked around me, there didn't seem to be anyone from the General Committee coming this way.

On the notice board beside the door was a catchy Cultural

Festival promotion poster. I've seen many other Cultural Festival posters within the school grounds and around the neighbourhood, but this was the first time I'd seen this one. It was drawn in a manga-like style which Mayaka-san might be familiar with. It showed two students, a boy and girl preparing for the Cultural Festival. The characters looked cute while the clothes they wore looked real, one could feel the amazing originality effusing from it.

If there was one complaint to make, it would be its title, "The 42nd Kanya Festival." Its official name ought to be the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, as "Kanya Festival" doesn't really evoke a good meaning. As for why, it's rather difficult to explain. On the corner of the poster were written the words "Student Council Executive Committee." Since it's a poster made by the Executive Committee, I feel they ought to avoid using the name "Kanya Festival."

I moved my eyes away from the poster and looked around me once more, but there still wasn't anyone coming. Oh dear, this doesn't look good. Should I just keep waiting here? But we haven't got much time.

No, in such times, I should calm myself down. I once again took a deep breath, breathe in, breathe out... Okay, one more time...

"...Can I help you?"

"Wah!"

As I had just inhaled a deep breath, I couldn't help but let out a yelp. As I was startled, I couldn't suppress such a strange sound. I tried to wave my arms to explain that I wasn't particularly doing anything suspicious.

I bowed my head to the person that called out to me and said, "Good morning. Are you President Tanabe of the General Committee?"

I've seen this person before in the Wall Newspaper Club's "Kami High Monthly," so he was definitely President Tanabe of the General Committee. Wearing small framed glasses on his oval face, his short and neatly cut hair gave the image of an earnest-looking person. Tanabe-san looked a bit taken aback before politely greeting me in return.

"Oh, good morning. Yes, I'm Tanabe... Can I help you?"

"Yes,"

I nodded and uttered the lines that I'd practiced many times

beforehand.

"Please allocate a new stall for the Classics Club."

"...Huh?"

Tanabe-san's eyes went round. Oh no, I neglected my manners.

Paying attention to my manners, I repeated my request.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm the president of the Classics Club, Chitanda Eru of Class 1-A. We have come here with a request; we would like you to please allocate a new stall for the Classics Club."

Tanabe-san raised his eyebrows as his face looked really troubled. Uneasily, he spoke.

"I don't really understand what's going on but..."

He looked as though he was about to say something difficult.

"As we've already decided on how to run most of the stuff during the Kanya Festival, for you to suddenly come and request a new stall would be a bit difficult."

"...So you aren't able to do it?"

"I'm sorry."

I see. It may be troubling, but it can't be helped if it can't be done. I'm very sorry, Mayaka-san, Fukube-san, Oreki-san.

Chitanda Eru was not able to accomplish her task.

*I see, thank you for your information.* I had wanted to give my regards properly, but I ended up speaking those words softly instead. As I proceeded to leave and ponder what to do next, Tanabe-san called out to me.

"No, wait. That's just the normal procedures anyway. If you have some extenuating circumstance, then we could listen to what you have to say, but I can't promise whether we could grant you your request."

Circumstance.

...Now that I think about it, I've completely neglected to explain my situation. Oreki-san has constantly told me off for my bad habit of skipping straight to the main point without explaining myself properly. I never realized this before... but it seemed like it is indeed true. I must be careful next time.

Anyway, I should not put Tanabe-san's good will to waste. I turned around and stood before him.

I then began to explain my story.

In great detail.

We were supposed to make an order to print 30 copies, but

ended up with 200 copies. To begin with, this was not Mayaka-san's fault, as I too had a look at the order sheet, and Mayaka-san also made sure to correctly place the order for 30 copies.

However, at the same time, she also made another request to print 200 copies for her own anthology. As to why she would make such a request, I did not know. But the problem arose when it turned out that the publisher had mixed up the order for "Hyouka" and her own anthology. Mayaka-san blamed herself for not double-checking enough, but nobody could have foreseen such an error.

I told Tanabe-san the entire process as well. I wasn't able to keep the story brief, but all this time Tanabe-san simply stood and listened.

"That sure sounds tough."

After much thought, he said prudently, "200 copies huh? Not even the Manga Club could sell that much. I understand the desire to seek a new stall in order to sell more copies, and I would really like to help... But any other club could have faced such a situation, so it's just not possible for us to give the Classics Club a special dispensation, you know?"

Indeed, it would not be just the Classics Club that would encounter such a situation, I had known that fact beforehand but...

"So, it's not possible?"

Tanabe-san nodded softly... "I'm sorry."

But this time, after giving my regards and turning to leave, Tanabe-san uttered some advice from behind.

"But you know, if you were to entrust other clubs to sell your anthologies on your behalf at their stalls, that we don't really mind."

I- I see, I never knew such a method existed! How could I not have thought of this before? Indeed, if we were to place our anthologies at existing stalls, it would not be counted as the Classics Club receiving special treatment.

"That's a brilliant idea."

Without realizing, I became relieved.

"Thank you very much. I will consider it!"

I said and bowed deeply.

...Come to think of it, back at the Geology Room, Fukube-san had promised to accompany me to the General Committee and

help me out in our request. I wonder whatever happened to him?

009 - ♣03

Hahahahaha.

Oh, oh boy. This is too hilarious, I just can't withhold my laughter. My rationality tells me this joke is rather silly, but I still ended up laughing loudly. I think I could go on all day.

I knew the two fellows on stage, they were from the Rakugo Study Club. (Speaking of which, its name is merely an official front, as rather than the study of Rakugo, the Kamiyama High School Rakugo Study Club was more focused on Manza*i[2]*, and stand-up comedy. I have no idea if there are any clubs that actually studied the art of Rakugo.

"Wow, it's sure been a long time since we've had a sushi dinner in a tatami room. We've spent quite some time there, we'd better get home quick, or we'll be late.

"Kay."

"By the way, I don't mind giving you a ride, but when are you gonna to get off? Ever since I started driving, you've been giggling while looking at me all this time."

"You know, you've got quite a huge *johnny*..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, look I'm really worried about you. We'd better

get you home quick... What're you grinning at?"

"Heh heh, and then?"

"You know, you were sobbing and giggling while saying 'My leg's gone limp, you think I'm able to step on the brakes?' It'd be dangerous for you to drive, no?"

"I guess."

"Oh dear, I've stepped on the accelerator by mistake."

" *You're* the one driving dangerously!"

Hahahahaha.

010 - ♦02

I left the gymnasium as soon as the Opening Ceremony entered into intermission once the breakdancing performance was over.

Before exiting, I turned to look back at the dark and stuffy gymnasium, and saw only half the students had remained behind.

To be honest, I feel like joining up with the others at the Classics Club. It was a failure for me to not double check with the publisher, so I feel like I have to take responsibility. On the other hand, I also realized it was also partly due to me not wanting to go to the Manga club.

It's not like I dislike the Manga Club. Though my expectations of the Manga Studies Club were different from before I entered school, I like the Manga Club the way it is now. Since manga is something you ought to like from the bottom of your heart.

However, just because people with the same interest are gathered together does not mean there will be no friction between them.

...This heavy feeling I've been having since the start isn't so good. I'm probably the glass half-empty type of person. I'm supposed to be enjoying the privilege granted to me by the Cultural Festival of wearing this cardigan and brocade trousers within the school premises.

The Manga Club room is located in Preparation Room No. 1 on the second floor of the General Block. Compared to the Geology Room of the Classics Club, its location was a blessing as it's right next to the regular classrooms. Outside on the corridor was a non-flashy signboard that read "Manga Study Club". It was designed by our president Yuasa Naoko-sempai.

The sliding door was left open as we were soon to expect customers coming in to visit our stall.

"Good morning."

Not wanting to sound too much like Chi-chan's polite way of greeting people, I tend to pronounce it as "Good MORNING." It's not exactly special or anything like that, only that I've yet to see anyone pronounce it that way in mangas and novels.

"Oh, Ibara, you came."

Greeting me open-heartedly was Kouchi Ayako-sempai from second year. Not only is she very active and knowledgeable, her works are also of a high level, thus making her a central figure within the Manga Club. It was she who suggested that the Manga Club should randomly pick members to cosplay. Since she was the one who proposed it, she too was cosplaying today. Her Chinese-style costume was probably self-made. It was neither a cheongsam[3] nor a Mao suit[4], but more like that of a Taoist priest. She wore fluffy-looking purple trousers and a gown with long yellow sleeves flowing all the way down to the floor. The sleeves were cut from the sides, allowing the arms to come out from within. The gown she wore was generally red in colour, though the colour around the chest area was slightly different. An original Chinese gown like that would have been more fluffy, so this was simply an imitation. On her head was a

wide hat, from which a talisman hung in front, covering her right eye. Wrapped around her body was a yellow sash, though it's probably made of a large ribbon. As Kouchi-sempai had short-hair to begin with, her sharp gaze and average build means she looked just right for this character.

"Is that a Jiangshi[5]?"

"Officially, it should be called a Chinese Ghost."

Kouchi-sempai examined my costume from top to bottom, and upon seeing my feet clad in the usual indoor shoes used within the school premises said, "You need to put more effort into the shoes."

And suddenly the conversation shifted towards me. Though I didn't intend to wear this costume just to look nice, I didn't want her of all people to tell me that. For a moment, the atmosphere became tense... Since I was the only one who resisted doing any cosplay towards the bitter end.

"Oh, good morning," a voice called out from beside us; it was President Yuasa.

Rather than a costume, the president was dressed in Kamiyama High School's sailor school uniform. It was only intended for the

five members in charge of the clubroom stall to cosplay to begin with, and the president was not one of them. Even though I was the only one who didn't cosplay properly, I could sense President Yuasa's generosity due to her being an open-minded person. To put it another way, from time to time she could be an easy to read person, a bit like watching a cat sitting on a porch. On her soft face were two big eyes with double-eyelids. Taking a look at my costume, she said, "Did you spend a lot making that?"

"No, I only paid for the belt, that's all."

"Do make sure to send us the receipt so you can claim your expense."

"Oh, it's okay, I'm fine with it."

Our president laughed gently, but I just could not bring myself to use the club's funds. While it was much more than what the Classics Club had, it wasn't exactly abundant.

Actually there was still some time before customers would arrive. I was looking around the First Preparation Room, in which the desks were lined up in a C-shape. The Manga Club's showpiece is "Zeamis[6]," the manga review anthology of 100

manga titles past and present. As for why it's called "Zeamis," I was told it was because last year it was called "Kanamis[7]". As for why it was called "Kanamis" last year, I didn't bother to ask as it sounded too silly. Besides that, members can bring their own published work, which will be distributed for free here to be sold as well. If they're going to sell these for money, they should have just set up a doujinshi stall to be with.

"Hey."

"Mornin'."

As time passed, more and more Manga Club members showed up.

It seems there were some members who were cosplaying despite not being required to help out. As we had twenty or so members, it was natural that cliques would be formed.

The first would be the boys. I don't know about the other clubs, but the boys actually form a minority in the Kami High Manga Club. As a result, they would gravitate towards people who were like them in order to figure out what they should be doing.

They're generally harmless.

The other group was centred around Kouchi-sempai. While not particularly numerous, their outspokenness means they're

considered the mainstream faction. The cosplaying members gathered around Kouchi-sempai, the proponent of the idea, to discuss how to greet the customers, and sometimes, the sound of some war cry could be heard.

"Alright! Let's get this going!"

Something like that.

And then there's the third group, which somehow could not bring themselves to follow Kouchi-sempai. It may be because they aren't fond of her boisterous nature, or they felt her actions don't match her words. And for some reason, this group...

"Hey, Mayaka, what's with that costume?"

"Mayaka, do I just leave the change here?"

"...Man, wonder when this will end?"

Was centred around me.

As for why, it was because it seemed like I was the only one who had spoken out against Kouchi-sempai.

The atmosphere was not exactly strained, neither was it explosive. Everyone is here due to their love of manga. Yet, in all this time, I didn't feel like coming to the Manga Club. The least I could do for the Classics Club was to at least request that

the Manga Club sell "Hyouka" on behalf of the Classics Club. If "Hyouka" could be sold at the Manga Club, then considering the Manga Club's name recognition, we might sell around 20 copies.

Right now it's a bit hard due to the atmosphere, so I was hoping the mood would change for the better, as soon as possible.

I wonder what Fuku-chan and the others at the Classics Club are doing now? I wonder who's watching the stall?

...Argh, I didn't even think about who should watch the stall!

No one would want to buy from such a neglectful club.

"Umm, are you guys open?"

A voice called out. Standing at the open entrance were two male students. Making a business-like smile, I stood up diligently and said with excessive enthusiasm, "Yes, welcome!"

Congratulations on becoming our first customer!"

011 - ♠04

It was just as I had expected, there was nobody coming to the Geology Room.

It's so quiet, so peaceful, so idle. All that could be heard was the remnant of some sort of commotion emanating from the central courtyard towards the General Block. This is excellent, long live

being the stall keeper.

..... I shut my eyes and open them again, and saw a brownish "mountain" before me. This must be an illusion. In order to maintain the tranquility within my heart, I thought it best to keep my eyes shut again.

Of course, I had no intention of having to personally clear this mountain away. Within "Hyouka" was a manuscript written by me. For some reason, as it was none other than me that managed to compile all the clues with regards to the "Hyouka" incident, it was decided that I would contribute the bulk of the column space concerning that.

As a result of no one knowing exactly what the Classics Club does, the contents of "Hyouka" ended up being quite disorderly. You don't even need to open it to figure out what's inside.

Chitanda and I contributed to writing about the "Hyouka" incident, Ibara wrote something about some manga that she respected, while Satoshi's column was about some joke concerning a classical paradox.

As it was something that had to be done, it was natural for me to want to finish it quickly, but it doesn't exactly mean I haven't got

any attachment for the anthology that I wrote. If possible, I'd rather not want to throw all these 200 copies away as some bothersome trash once the Cultural Festival ends.

Even if I were to ignore my attachment, upon looking at the mountain of eccentric anthologies I thought of how Chitanda and Ibara would react if they saw those turn to trash, I couldn't help but feel depressed about it.

That's why I have expectations for Chitanda and Satoshi on their endeavors. If they could somehow think up of some amazing publicity campaign which I could not think of, I wouldn't exactly begrudge them if it meant the chaotic inflow of customers disrupting my peaceful task of watching over the stall as a result.

Which was why I decided to indulge in my moment of peace for the time being. I allowed my body to relax, feeling at ease as I shut my eyes and bob my head as I give in to my drowsiness and bent myself over the table.

The sound of music could be heard.

It was a rich harmonious tune.

Compared to the techno and tribal music of the Breakdancing

Club, I much prefer this A Capella music. This means the music was being sung by the A Capella Club at the central courtyard. I gently sat upright and leaned towards the window. Perhaps they were used to singing like that, as their first harmony was enough to attract students coming to watch from various windows around the school building.

There were five students in uniform lined up in a row. One of them stepped forward and looked around the central courtyard, bowing towards us who have come to watch them from our windows. This was followed by the sound of people clapping their hands as he returned to the column and resumed singing. So that was just a rehearsal just now, huh? When I first heard their music, it felt quite soothing to the year, enough to "make a lion sleep".

Yawn.

..... Man, as expected of them with their amazing singing. My already sleepy body was slowly being hypnotized by their gentle music, which sounded like a lullaby.....

Leaning by the window sill, I struggled to stay awake, just when I thought it wouldn't be bad to just fall asleep here, the song had

ended. Another round of applause emanated from the General and Special Blocks. I opened my eyes and clapped my hands as well. One of the A Capella Club members came forward to bow again before joining his club members towards a cooler box besides them, which was opened by another member. I couldn't see quite clearly from here, but it looked like they were drinking some bottled drinks. No doubt they were refreshing themselves between each song.

".....?"

Hmm?

Some sort of commotion was stirring amongst the A Capella Club members. They were pointing at the cooler box and shouting something repeatedly. They shook their heads and looked into the cooler box suspiciously. Has something happened?

At any rate, looks like they wouldn't be singing their second song anytime soon, it was pointless to look any further. So I moved away from the window and back towards my seat, yawning as I began waiting for visitors again.

Amidst my yawning, I could feel my jaw aching.

Someone appeared outside the opened door. Whoa, now that's some visitor we have here. He wore a tattered shirt which was held together by safety pins and had silver accessories all over his fingers and head. It was a punk. For some reason his eyes looked hesitant, I wonder what he came here for.

As I looked on suspiciously, the punk asked reservedly, "Umm, so what's being set up here?"

"This? ...Oh, we're selling an anthology."

"Anthology?"

The punk moved his eyes towards the mountain of "Hyouka." It was only now that he noticed this brownish mountain of anthologies stacked up.

"Sure is some amazing amount you're selling here."

"...It's a long story, we didn't exactly plan on selling this many."

"I'll have one then."

Whoa, a customer! My manners, I'd better put up some manners.

"That'll be 200 yen please."

Darn, I'm not looking courteous at all. This is asking too much of me.

The punk didn't seem to mind that though, and took out his

wallet. For some reason he lowered his head as though looking apologetic as he received the copy of "Hyouka" from me.

Maybe he was just killing time walking around? Just when I was thinking that, he suddenly changed his demeanor.

"Hey, w-what is this!?"

Huh? Wha-? Is there a cockroach inside your "Hyouka"?

Instead, the punk was looking at the piece of trash I placed beside the mountain of "Hyouka" copies, the broken fountain pen. As though finding a piece of treasure, he picked it up and looked at it reverently.

"Yes, this! This should do!"

He suddenly became delighted, while I could only look on with indifference.

Forgetting my attempt to look polite, I asked him bluntly, "Is something special about that piece of trash?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry."

The punk returned to his senses.

"I'm with the Fashion Study Club, so we do fashion design, you see? And I've sort of forgotten to bring some chest pocket accessory for my formal costume. While a white handkerchief

would normally suffice, it'll just look too normal. But I'm running out of time, so I was walking around wondering what to do. So, here, what do you think of sticking it in my chest pocket? Looks good, doesn't it?"

The punk grinned while fondling and examining the fountain pen. Well, if he likes it so much, this piece of trash perhaps does have its use after all.

"You can have it."

"R-really?"

As he said this, he searched for something in his pockets.

"Then, here, you can have this in return."

He took out a badge from his pocket. Rather than a badge, it looked more like a plastic numbered tag with a safety pin behind it. A simple design.

While I was wondering what this was, the punk pointed to it and said, "That's a VIP badge for our fashion show. Just bring that and come to the Fashion Room if you're interested. Don't worry, we'll take care of coordinating your costume. Though we call it a fashion show, you don't need to do any special catwalk moves. So anyway, see ya."

He said it as though he was escaping. Even if you didn't say it so frantically, I wasn't planning on replying. Then again, even if he's in such a hurry, would that costume of his even be considered formal?

I held the badge in my hand and put together what the punk had said so far. Basically, if I take this and go to the Fashion Study Club's stage, they'll make me into a model.

Nope, not interested. I placed it on the middle of the table.

...Anyway, he was our cherished first customer after all. In light of events, each of us Classics Club members took two copies each, plus one copy for our supervising teacher and one copy to preserve, which makes ten copies. So this means we now have 189 copies remaining.

Some progress that was. Feeling satisfied, I opened my mouth and yawned again as the A Capella Club resumed singing again. This time they were singing some up-tempo pop song. Hmm, this time it won't be a lullaby, huh?

**[189 COPIES REMAINING]**

012 - ♥03

No matter which of the six songs they sang, the A Capella Club

was just amazing. They were so good that I clapped my hands so hard that they were hurting.

There was no doubt that choosing to sing in the central courtyard allowed their wonderful voices to reverberate across the school grounds. Perhaps they were rehearsing in different places beforehand to find out which place had the best acoustics? I feel a bit curious about it.

Feeling satisfied, I moved away from the window. It was then that I realized something and looked at my wristwatch.

...Eh?

Oh no, is it this late already? It's nearly noon! How did time pass so quickly? I must really stop getting distracted by whatever thing attracts my interest, or I won't be able to finish my task.

Hardening my resolve, I walked away from the window.

Looking back towards the corridor, I saw a strange sign curtain for the Charms Association, the signboard for the Handicraft Club which Fukube-san had put some effort into making, and a rather interesting poster of a composite photo by the Photography Club.....

Are there any glasses which would allow me to only see what's

ahead and not get distracted!?

## Translator's notes and references

1.

• [Wikipedia - They Were Eleven](#)

• • [Wikipedia - Manzai](#)

• • [Wikipedia - Cheongsam](#)

• • [Wikipedia - Mao Suit](#)

• • [Wikipedia - Jiang Shi](#)

• • [Wikipedia - Zeami Motokiyo](#)

7. • [Wikipedia - Kanami](#)

## 2-2 Quiz Trial

013 - ♣04

The Quiz Trial held by the Kamiyama High School Quiz Study Club... That's like the biggest quiz tournament in Kamiyama City!

This is because I've yet to hear of any other quiz tournament being held elsewhere in this city.

To me, this Quiz Trial would be the highlight for Day 1. There's nothing bigger than this, no one else's database is more real than mine!

But I'm still surprised by this, as I never expected this many people to turn up; there's like 200 people here. While I could see quite a few outsiders amongst the participants, the majority were still Kami High students. So that's nearly 20% of the student body! Man, I'm envious, if only the Handicraft Club and Classics Club could each summon 100 people like that, we could have sold the anthology in no time.

In one corner of the school ground before the podium, I could hear all sorts of mutterings.

"...If it's over how about we go see the Brass Band?..."

"...What about the Movie Study Club? You don't need to be a movie buff in order to watch their show, but..."

"...Really? Hahaha, now that's kind of mean..."

"...But don't you think it sounds kind of ridiculous...?"

To begin with, while I had already imagined a lot of people participating, not even I, who had been looking forward to this since last night, could envision 200 people coming. Such was the effect of their publicity campaign.

It was just past 12:30 when the school PA broadcast went on air.

It was the Broadcasting Club's pseudo radio broadcast. With

relaxing pop music being played in the background, the broadcast was used to relay the latest hot topics during the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival to the listeners. About 15 minutes had passed when the broadcast went to interview the president of the Quiz Club, which went as follows:

"This year will be our 7th tournament. As usual we are offering very interesting prizes, but this time we've prepared questions that not just people who are good at quiz shows could answer. Naturally speaking, members of the Quiz Club are forbidden from participating, so we believe this is a golden opportunity for these people. So we welcome all to participate... Basically, we'll be holding a true and false questions preliminary involving participants running between circles with each answer on the school grounds. It'll be some great exercise after lunch, no?"

He sure knows how to stir up the event. By advertising via a radio broadcast, I thought they could achieve a moderate success, but I was mistaken. Not counting the audience, there were already 200 participants. (This was just a guesstimate amount of course, as I have no idea exactly how many there were. Still, it was definitely more than a hundred people.)

And I must also mention that the Quiz Club had also gotten themselves mentioned by the Wall Newspaper Club. During the Cultural Festival, the Wall Newspaper Club publishes a Special Edition every two hours. And within the Day 1 12pm edition it was mentioned that the Quiz Club activity today sounds interesting. By pasting these Special Edition copies around the school's notice board, even a fool would be aware of their activity.

It seems the Classics Club would need the assistance of both the Broadcasting Club and Wall Newspaper Club if it is to achieve its objective. I must inform Chitanda-san of this later. Anyway, that's for me to worry about after the Trial. For now, I must focus on this Quiz Trial, as it's crucial for me to get as high a ranking as possible, since I'm not participating in my favourite event in a personal capacity, but on behalf of the Classics Club. No offense to the others, but the only one in the club capable of winning this would be me. So this would not be an easy task. The Quiz Club president walked up to the podium. It wasn't someone I knew. If it was a Kamiyama High School student that I knew, then he or she would have to be someone really special

or eccentric. In his hand he carried a mic. A short static noise ensued as he tapped the mic and proceeded to speak.

"Welcome to the Quiz Trial. To be honest, we're surprised by the number of participants we have today. This year will be our 7th Quiz Trial, and it is the largest ever held so far..." Blah, blah, blah, followed by, "Now let the tournament begin. First we will have the true and false questions preliminaries. On your left is the true box with a circle, while on your right is the false box with a cross. One of our members will hold up a placard with a question, and you must figure out whether it is true or false, and only those who answer correctly will advance. The preliminaries will continue until only five contestants remain. You have 15 seconds for each question. Now then, may the 7th Quiz Trial begin!"

As he finished, one of the female Quiz Club members stepped up onto the podium and received the mic from the president who stepped down. I was a bit relieved, as this president's words were rather unintelligible to the ears.

The girl took the mic and looked at the cue card in one of her hands and said clearly, "Question 1! If 'diamond' in Japanese is

'kongouseki' (diamond stone), then 'emerald' would be  
'ryokuchuugyoku' (green pillar jade). True or false?"

Hmm, now how should I answer this?

Of course it's true. (Since unlike beryl, the chemical composition of emerald does not contain aquamarine, or it would be called 'ryokuchuuseki' (green pillar stone) instead!)

014 - ♦03

Now that I think about it, this place is quite deserted.

The reason I felt that way was because I knew what a real doujinshi festival was like. This was not a doujinshi festival, but a school cultural festival. We're not going to get people interested in manga and anime flocking here. This reminds me of coming here last year before with Fuku-chan back when we were in junior high... and I certainly don't recall that many people coming then either. When I discovered that treasure, I hardly noticed any people around me.

But it's true that there were many club members here with too much time to spare. So free they were that the atmosphere felt a bit strained... As a result, I have yet to request them to sell our anthologies.

As the current batch of customers left, the room went quiet, and we could hear a speaker blaring out loud from afar. As this room is situated in the General Block while the central courtyard was adjacent to the Special Block, it was hard to hear what was going on over there.

"Mayaka, what's up?" the girl sitting next to me asked.

"Nothing, just wondering what's going on in the courtyard."

"Oh, that's probably the Quiz Club."

It was then that I remembered there was a radio broadcast mentioning about it. A quiz tournament, huh? If that's the case, then Fuku-chan would definitely join in. Listening intently, I could make out the question being asked via the speakers.

"...Next question! The Japanese word "darui" is derived from the English word "dull." True or false?"

Eh?

I didn't even have time to think. Stop asking such silly questions! But if it's true or false questions, then it's probably used to filter out a large number of contestants. So while I was a bit depressed that I didn't know the answer to that question, I guess I was also relieved at not having to answer.

The girl next to me also listened in.

She smiled and asked me, "So, what do you think?"

"Hmm,"

I know "saboru" came from "sabotage," so "darui" is probably the same, as it didn't feel strange to me.

So I said softly, "True, I guess?"

015 - ♣05

As the 15 second time limit passed, a rope was raised surrounding the contestants choosing the "True" and "False" circles. Looking around me, five had chosen "True" while four chose "False." As a preliminary, this would probably be the final round.

"The answer is....."

The announcer held back her voice in order to raise the suspense.

"....."

You're overdoing this already.

".....FALSE! This ends the preliminaries!"

YES! (Actually, I did not really know what the etymology of the word "darui" was, but I do know that if it can be written in kanji 忒い then it's most likely not a foreign loan-word.) The

announcer, who upped her tempo of suspense for every question answered, now waved her arms as though dancing and pointed towards us.

"Congratulations to the four who have chosen 'False' for passing the preliminaries! Please proceed toward the podium for the finals."

Aha, here comes my chance to appeal to the crowd. That's what I'm here for. As I walked toward the podium, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

"Yo, Fukube, so you're through as well, huh?"

The person who said that was...

...Just hang on a minute, I'm trying to remember his name. I know this guy, honest. For the moment being I'll try replying.

"Of course."

"You don't remember who I am, do you?"

"Haha, guess I was too focused on the quizzes."

Who was he? I know he's a classmate though.

He wasn't from the General Committee nor the Handicraft Club, so he could only be from my class. The only person I could think of who could stand out from my class was Juumonji-san.

No, wait, I remember. I'm sure of it. I've not completely forsaken my ability to remember names.

"So, how's the Go Club, Tani-kun?"

Tani Koreyuki, besides being a member of the Go Club, he was also unique in having a hard to spell name. We would occasionally have small chats like these in class, though I wasn't particularly that close to him, so he could be counted as one of my "acquaintances." Now that I see his face again, he had quite a firm jaw and a rather round nose. But as he didn't leave much of an impression on me besides those, it means his actions until now were nothing out of the ordinary.

I have more interest in people who surprise me. Chitanda-san interests me somewhat, and Houtarou has been surprising me a lot ever since we entered Kami High. As for people who aren't surprising, unless they have interesting features or club activities, I would barely struggle to remember their names.

Yet here was Tani-kun passing the Quiz Trial preliminaries. And those weren't easy questions either. I see now, Tani-kun, my impression of you as a normal person may not be correct. He was here due to possessing either a great amount of knowledge

or luck.

Tani-kun showed no attempt to hide his elation.

"The Go Club? I do have something interesting to tell you, wanna hear?"

Something interesting, huh? If it's something that's changed my impression of Tani-kun, it would be that he's never told me something interesting before, as it did not appeal to me.

"Please step forward to the podium!"

The announcer repeated. Oh yes, my chance at making an appeal. I waved the palm of my hand to gesture to Tani-kun to move to the podium.

On the podium were three guys and one girl. I took a quick glance at them; besides Tani-kun, I didn't know any of them.

Had they been the "Empress" Irisu Fuyumi-sempai, President Tanabe Jirou-sempai of the General Committee, or the "New Master of the Library" Juumonji Kaho-san, then I would have to hold my hands up in resignation. While I'm confident that my knowledge is as good as theirs, I just can't feel like beating them. That said, I don't think my database would accept such a fact.

The announcer had interviewed and asked the names for three of the contestants already, including Tani-kun. And now it was my turn. The announcer held up her mic and smiled.

"Okay, our fourth finalist! May we have your class and name please?"

I cleared my throat in order to address the 200 participants as well as the hundreds more listening via the speakers,

"I'm Fukube Satoshi of the Classics Club."

"Huh?"

"The Classics Club, as in classical literature."

The announcer looked confused for a moment. She didn't look the type to know how to deal with unexpected events.

She soon nodded deeply and said, "I see! I never knew we had such a club. Guess we have all sorts of strange clubs, right?"

So far so good. I paid attention not to rush myself and allowed the words to come out naturally. Even without being requested to, I was generally good at saying what I wanted to say.

"Though we call ourselves the Classics Club, we don't exactly cover classic literature like 'Tsurezuregusa[1]' To be honest, not even I knew what it is that we do exactly, so it's kind of strange.

After all, this was a club that came back from the jaws of

abolition as it didn't have any members prior to us joining. You could say we're a club that publishes anthologies. So we've published one, you see. And it's an amazing anthology, since we put a lot of effort into it..."

016 - ♣05

"...we put a lot of effort into it..."

Yeah, sure we have.

In terms of quantity.

### **[185 COPIES REMAINING]**

017 - ♣06

"At any rate, we've managed to solve a great mystery concerning the Kanya Festival."

"Oh, really? And that is?"

Her interest didn't seem to be faked. This was to be expected, as it would be easy to hook them in if I tell them "there's knowledge not even the Quiz Club is aware of." (No, I wasn't intending to make fun of the Quiz Club here. Since I myself am a natural candidate as a Quiz Club member myself, but I just ended up using them as an example.) Feeling confident, I raised my voice.

"And it's none other than the origin of the name of the Kanya Festival. I'll say it here, it is NOT an abbreviation of the 'Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.' The Classics Club have discovered the real answer to that."

"Really? And that is?"

"Well..."

I teased a bit.

"Obviously, that's a secret. However, we'll be in trouble if no one buys our anthology. So for only 200 yen, which is a great bargain, you can discover the 33-year-old secret of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival! It's all recorded in our essay anthology 'Hyouka'! Now on sale at the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block with rave reviews!"

I glared at the crowd while pumping my right fist in the air.

I wonder if I overdid this? For a moment, an uneasiness crept through me...

A roar of applause thundered across the court. Just like how I felt in the Opening Ceremony, everyone was particularly receptive to the festive atmosphere. My gamble had worked, the appeal was a success!

Remaining in my victory pose, I felt like crying.  
It no longer mattered whether I won this quiz tournament  
anymore.

018 - ♥04

"Now on sale at the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the  
Special Block with rave reviews!"

Ehh? We're getting rave reviews already?

I-I didn't even know.

This is fantastic. I have hope for the future.

A roar of excitement could be heard from the direction of the  
courtyard. Thanks to Fukube-san's smooth-speaking, the crowd  
seems to have been moved somewhat by his words. Though it  
sounded like he could have gone on further, before long, the  
quiz tournament had begun as I heard a loud voice announcing  
its commencement. I pray for your success, Fukube-san.

I must do my best as well.

Come to think of it, it does seem effective to entrust someone  
else to sell our anthologies on our behalf. However, just placing  
copies of "Hyouka" at other people's stalls alone will not  
increase its appeal. So while it's important to seek new venues to

sell our anthology, isn't it also important to raise the appeal of "Hyouka" as well?

I went through this thoroughly as I had my lunch. Take my family business for example, we would normally have decided which market to sell our rice to. Though we would like to expand our market, if our quality is below the standards required by the government, nobody is going to buy our rice.

This is because rice isn't a really sensational product, much like our anthology right now, which wasn't exactly a necessary commodity. So the situation the Classics Club is facing is quite similar to this.

In order for rice to be sold in large quantities, it has to be of "very good quality." This "quality" may be based on its "tastiness," its "safety," or its "affordability."

However, "Hyouka" was already a finished product. Though we were extremely diligent in ensuring its quality, there was no way we could further enhance it anymore than it is. The only variable left that we could manipulate would be its "affordability," but we would prefer not to adjust the price so much that it falls below our break-even point.

In order to improve the quality of "Hyouka," I decided to consider it from the standpoint of the public's awareness of it. And so, my eyes fell on the Special Edition of the wall newspaper, the Kami High Monthly. Upon reading some of its details, it seems to be published once every two hours. If "Hyouka" gets a mention on here, then everyone would become aware of it. Fortunately, I am acquainted with the president of the Wall Newspaper Club. Even I at least know that having connections can take you a long way.

Anyway, as lunch time had already been over for some time, I was busy looking for the Wall Newspaper Club president...

"Hey, Chitanda-san, wanna go see that?"

"Ehh? I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

"All right ladies and gentlemen, the second Magic Club performance will begin in five minutes!"

...Oh, yes, I was heading to the Wall Newspaper Club. I heard someone chatting behind me.

"Have you seen the movie made by Class 2-F yet?"

"Yeah, I have. Pretty interesting, wasn't it?"

Ugh.

All these decorations and all this liveliness is just too captivating. It was at this moment that I envied Oreki-san's ability to not get excited by anything.

Before long, I'd come before the Biology Room on the third floor of the Special Block, where the Wall Newspaper Club room was located. Though right now, their members were in the adjacent Preparation Room instead of the Lecture Room, where they had their pens, scissors, glues and instant cameras laying around. Surrounding a table normally used for school experiments were four members, who didn't seem rather busy as they chatted leisurely. One of them, Toogaito Masashi-san, with whom I was acquainted, noticed my presence and stood up. Though I'm quite tall for a girl, even I had to look up when looking at Toogaito-san. His father was well-acquainted with mine, which was how I knew him. Though it wasn't until this July that we spoke for the first time.

With a smile, Toogaito-san greeted me.

"Hello there,"

I bowed my head. Careful not to make the same mistake I made with Tanabe-san, I chose my words carefully.

"Good afternoon, Toogaito-san. Can the Wall Newspaper Club please write a story about the Classics Club?"

However, even Toogaito-san's eyes went wide after what I said. I wonder what it was that I said wrong? Frantically recalling what I had just said, I couldn't find anything disrespectful about it.

Oh no... I just realized, did I forget to explain my situation properly again?

Toogaito-san turned to glance at the other club members before turning back to me and said in a lowered voice, "...What's with this all of a sudden? It's not really possible."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Would it have been better if I had made an appointment first?"

"No, that's not what I meant,"

Toogaito-san rubbed his forehead and said, "I'm no longer with the Wall Newspaper Club."

"Eh?"

"I'm a third year, so I'm retired already."

Oh.

H-how did I not notice that before? This would of course be

natural. It's completely obvious.

"I-I'm sorry."

"No, you don't really have to apologize..."

For a moment, I felt like I was of no help, and was feeling a bit depressed. But soon a fine idea came to my head. If Toogaito-san had retired, then this could work.

"Then, could you introduce me to one of your juniors so that I may make my request to him instead?"

However, Toogaito-san looked even more troubled than before.

"Well, I can introduce you, but I don't think it'll make much of a difference."

"Not much of a difference?"

"Our Special Edition goes up every two hours, so we have to get everything prepared before then. So to ask us to write something about the Classics Club now would be a bit too much, you see."

I see. Indeed, while I thought of the possibility of getting mentioned in a Special Edition every two hours, I totally did not consider the fact that they would need to prepare a draft edition beforehand.

So I said in resignation, "So it's impossible?"

I could hear myself sounding depressed.

"Well, I didn't exactly say it's impossible. As we should still have two more days of news to report, it can be done. However," Toogaito-san said with a tense expression, "We won't publish a story just because we've been asked to. There are over 50 clubs being represented in the Kanya Festival; there's no way we could introduce every one of them, so we have to give priority to those whose activities really stand out. That being said, if you could show us that the Classics Club is engaged in activities that stand out, then we'll write something about it."

It was a strict statement concerning the conditions on having a story written.

"T-then, what about the contents of the activities?"

"The club activities that we cover are all serious in their contents, so if we find a story request that is worthy of our interest like an ad-balloon, then we'll publish it."

But we haven't got any ad-balloons.

A while ago, Fukube-san had clearly emphasized about the origin of the term "Kanya Festival." Yet Toogaito-san said he only covers serious club activities. Yet besides its name, there

wasn't really much in its contents which "Hyouka" could really be called attractive...

I'm sorry, Oreki-san and Fukube-san, I also do not know how to face Mayaka-san as well. Once again, I found myself unable to be of much help.

"...I see. Sorry for taking your time..."

As though trying to cheer me up, Toogaito-san said, "You can come back if you can find anything interesting, I'll see what I can do to help."

I think I nodded, but I wasn't even sure if I had the strength to move.

As things were not making any progress, it seemed my body had also lost its strength. But it would not be nice to trudge just because of that, so I tried my best to walk as I normally would.

Though I wonder if my discouragement would still show on my face. Walking along the decorated corridor, not knowing where to go next, I heard someone calling out to me.

"What's wrong, Eru? You look quite depressed."

Looking up, I saw a small tent set up on top of the staircase. To be more precise, it looked more like a Native American teepee.

The voice came from inside the teepee. The inside of the teepee could be seen from the outside.

"You were drooping your shoulders and looking disappointed. Did something happen?"

Inside of the teepee was a regular classroom desk, and seated on the chair was a person I was familiar with.

I smiled at her and said, "Well, a lot has happened..."

"Hmm?"

She tilted her head and smiled as she caressed an elegant looking crystal ball lying on top of a silk cloth on her des

"Then, how about having your fortune told?"

This person is Juumonji Kaho. Within Kamiyama City is a large and rather old shrine called Arekusu Shrine, and Kaho-san is the daughter of its head priest. While the Chitanda family's annual spring and autumn festival ceremonies aren't held at Arekusu Shrine, as I often meet her a lot, we ended up being well acquainted with each other. She was quite an attractive person, with her silky hair and small glasses. I liked the unique way Kaho-san often looked mature and polite.

Kaho-san had liked visiting the library ever since she was little,

and so she was very knowledgeable in many things which I was unaware of. So I was quite surprised when I learned which club she had joined. Since Kaho-san wasn't quite good with hanging out with other people.

"Having my fortune told? That means..."

"Yes, this is the Fortune Telling Association stall."

"Where are the other members?"

Upon hearing that, Kaho-san made a rather cynical smile.

"Oh, it's just me at the moment."

"Eh, that's unexpected. But isn't it supposed to be popular?"

"That would be the Charms Association. They're the more popular club."

Speaking of which, I do recall seeing such a club being mentioned in the notice board.

"Well, how about it?"

As she spoke, Kaho-san began lining up objects on her table.

"If the crystal ball isn't to your fancy, then how about bamboo stick or card divination? Though these are just imitations.

There's also coffee grounds divination and of course, the standard Tarot cards..."

As she rummaged through the items in a paper bag beside her feet, she suddenly stopped.

"Oh, we can't do Tarot cards today."

"Eh? Why's that?"

Hearing Kaho-san sound troubled for once piqued my interest.

This was due to the Classics Club having once discussed Tarot cards back in the summer holidays, so I was thinking maybe we could have our fortunes told with Tarot cards.

Kaho-san saw my expression and understood right away.

"...Of course, you've always liked stuff like this. Here, have a look at this."

She took out a greeting card from her paper bag. Taking a glance at the card she showed me, I saw everything that was written on it, as it was in a rather large font, which read:

The Fortune Telling Association has lost  
its Wheel of Fortune.

Juumoji

"What's this...?"

"It's quite a quick job if this is the work of one person. I only just left for a bit, and when I came back, someone had taken the

'Wheel of Fortune' card from my Tarot deck and left this."

So it was stolen? But the signature at the end of the card...

"It says 'Juumonji'."

"Indeed, I wonder if it's supposed to be addressed to me?"

The Juumonji family has two children, but right now, only Kaho-san is attending Kami High, and I've not heard of any other person called Juumonji in this city besides them. So Kaho-san is the only Juumonji in Kamiyama High. It would be incredible for a thief to use Kaho-san's name to steal her things.

It's all very strange. I decided to ask her something which I had meant to ask just now.

"Have you found the card yet?"

Kaho-san smiled bitterly.

"I wouldn't have said we couldn't use Tarot cards today if I had found it."

Oh, yes, of course.

"That's very worrying."

"Yes, though it's cheap, it's still a fortune-telling tool. I really wouldn't want to have to go through the trouble of acquiring another set as a result."

While saying that, instead of rummaging through her paper bag, Kaho-san took out a small memo paper from her pocket.

"But I wouldn't worry too much about that. I do wonder what the thief is up to, as this was also left behind,"

It was a memo paper torn from a notebook, on which was scribbled, "It will be returned after the Cultural Festival." ...This was indeed a strange thing for a thief to do. I do find it very odd.

Looking at my expression, Kaho-san smiled.

"You seem to have cheered up a bit."

"Really?"

"Are you curious about this?"

I tilted my head

"...Yes, a bit."

"A bit, huh? Then let me show you one more thing."

From her paper bag, she took out something which I also had, the "Kanya Festival Guide," the official pamphlet for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Looking at it placed beside the crystal ball, I asked, "What's special about it?"

Kaho-san opened the pamphlet.

"The contents are exactly the same as any other. Though when I

found it, it was open with the card placed on the last page of the club comments."

The participating club comments were printed on the last page of the pamphlet. As its name suggests, it displayed a single line

of comment from each participating club mentioned by the pamphlet.

Apart from that, there was nothing strange or special written on the page.

"...I wonder what it all means?"

Kaho-san smiled gently and shrugged her shoulders.

"I wonder. It's the Cultural Festival, someone's bound to come up with some strange ideas, so it's nothing out of the ordinary.

Personally, I couldn't care less as long as the 'Wheel of Fortune' is returned safely."

019 - ♣07

The finals consist of contestants racing each other in pushing the answer button, first to win seven points wins the race.

Though I did say it no longer mattered whether I won this quiz tournament anymore, this is an arena where I can put my database to good use. So it's a waste to just throw it away like that.

The Quiz Club president did mention on the radio broadcast that they'd "prepared questions that not just people who are good at quiz shows could answer," and now I see why he said that.

Besides the usual quiz-show like questions involving show business, sports, social matters and trendy stuff, they've also included local topics as well as high school education related questions. I am of course well-verses in local topics, though the academic questions were a bit... okay, I know what you're thinking. For questions involving mathematical formulas, I was so pathetically hopeless with them that I could not even move my fingers towards the answer button. How on earth did I manage to weather through all these maths tests all these years? Of the four contestants, three had taken six points, including me, Tani-kun and another girl. (While Tani-kun couldn't answer the strange questions, he was rather fast in answering the more generic ones.) The remaining person had five points. This was quite a fascinating battle; the contestants were all rather capable. For the Quiz Club this was no doubt a successful tournament. But now it's time to end this. I'll be taking this last point!

"...Now for the next question. Please name the president of Kamiyama..."

A local question, huh? Concentrate...

"...High School's Student Council..."

I know the answer to this question, but I can't push the button just yet. For she may be asking us to name the president's favourite colour or something like that instead.

"...And give his full name please."

Now! At an instant, a light lit up.

"Yes, Shimizu-san?"

What? It's not me?

Shimizu-san, the girl beside me, answered in a calm voice,  
"Kugayama Muneyoshi."

"....."

Miss Announcer, you don't need to gasp, she's correct.

After a brief pause, the announcer lifted the girl's right arm and declared, "Correct! And the winner of Quiz Trial 7 is Shimizu Noriko-san of Class 3-E!"

Haha. Oh well, too bad.

Only the winner gets to receive the prizes. And as Shimizu Noriko-san (who didn't even bat an eyelid when answering the more odd questions. She's an interesting person, I must try and remember her name) received hers wrapped in paper, I had no idea what it was. Oh well, I didn't feel bad about losing, and I

wasn't interested in the prizes anyway.

As the trophy presentation was finished, the Quiz Club president

gave his greetings and wrapped up the Quiz Trial tournament.

The crowd then began to disperse to all directions of the school

campus. It sure was fun, not only did I raise the Classics Club's

appeal, I also managed to have some fun as well. Now, I wonder

where I should go next. As I was prepared to return with a smile,

someone called out to me.

"Hey, Fukube."

It was Tani-kun. Smiling, I raised my arm to greet him.

"Hey, too bad we didn't win."

"Indeed. Guess it's a draw."

A draw, huh? It's not like I'm competing with Tani-kun... Oh

well, whatever.

"Guess so," I replied.

"Well, you need something?"

"I did say I had something interesting to tell you before we were

interrupted."

Come to think of it, he did say something like that, but I must

have forgotten. As I wasn't really intent on hearing what he

wanted to say then, this must mean it's something Tani-kun wants me to hear. Since it's no big deal, I decided to hear what he had to say.

"Seems to be so, did something happened with the Go Club?"

Tani-kun nodded satisfyingly.

"Yeah, some of our Go stones have been stolen."

"Oh?"

I wasn't exactly thinking "*Is that so?*"

"The stones weren't lost but stolen, you say? But what makes you say that?"

"The thief left a note on the Go stone container,"

Tani-kun smiled as he said, "The note read 'The Go Club has lost its Go stones,' it's all really intriguing, as we have no idea whether any stones were stolen at all. As we don't normally use all the stones in the container, so there's no way of knowing if someone were to take away one or two, or even ten stones."

"Why would someone steal the stones?"

"Maybe he wants to play Gom~~oku~~[\[2\]](#)" Tani-kun said in a rather strange way.

While I didn't find it to be a rather high-class joke, I decided to

laugh along with him. If that's the end of this "interesting" story, then he didn't really need to go out of his way to tell me.

I said bluntly with a smile, "Maybe it's a prank by someone from the Go Club?"

Perhaps not happy that I didn't seem interested with his story, Tani-kun looked a bit depressed.

"Yeah, maybe."

"Well, I'm off for now."

"No, wait."

He called out to me before I could move.

Tani-kun said with a strangely stiff smile, "Fukube, will you be participating in other tournaments as well?"

"...Yeah."

As I nodded, Tani-kun raised his right arm and pointed his finger at me.

"I won't lose to you next time. It's not over since we only drew this time. We'll settle this!"

...I was at a loss for words.

Together with the silence, I could only give him my usual smile as a reply.

Tani-kun looked quite satisfied as he said, "Good. What will you

be participating tomorrow?"

Without giving it much thought, I replied in a normal manner,

"...The tournament held by The Cooking Club tomorrow, I  
guess?"

"Okay, then we'll settle this tomorrow! I'm looking forward to  
this!"

Tani-kun waved his arms and left looking rather excited.

Phew, that sure was a hard to deal with fellow there.

A score to settle, huh? It never even crossed my mind. I was  
hardly concerned with how satisfied Tani-kun would be with the  
outcome anyway.

It's true that I often enjoy myself in many things. Indeed, I  
would have so much fun that Houtarou would end up staring  
coldly at me.

But what's most important is for me to experience this  
personally. I see enjoyment as basically a give-and-take  
relationship between the provider and receiver of the  
entertainment. This is why I could never be as fanatical in my  
interests, be it Sherlock Holmes or herbology, as my best friend  
(whoa, this is quite embarrassing for me to actually utter it, but

his is the first name I could think of) Houtarou or the magnificent Mayaka.

I'm rather naive when it comes to things that I like, find interesting or enjoy. Using a bookshelf as an example, normally a bookshelf would contain reference books or novels used to kill time, but in comparison, my bookshelf is not worth showing to other people. (Though if it's Mayaka, she'd probably want to have a look... But it's unlikely she would ever say it out loud.) Similarly, my relationship with the provider of entertainment is simply to quietly have high expectations and taking it easy as I enjoy myself.

So according to my psuedo-Epicureanism, this talk of "settling scores"...

Well, it's inelegant.

But this is all trivial, as I had no intention of giving it my all. To put it simply, Tani-kun is simply participating in tournaments which I'm participating in out of his own accord.

I meandered to and fro as I left the now rather empty courtyard. By the way, enjoying oneself and worrying about one's friends are totally different matters altogether.

I wonder how Houtarou's doing now?

And I wonder if Mayaka is doing fine?

### **Translator's notes and references**

1. • [Wikipedia - Tsurezuregusa](#)

2. • [Wikipedia - Gomoku](#)

### **2-3 Yet Another Storm**

020 - ♦04

I had originally wanted to just keep a low profile.

I totally did not intend to get into an argument with anyone.

It all began when Kouchi-sempai said to President Yuasa as the flow of customers started to decrease, "Well, turns out it was a mistake to sell such plain stuff after all. Nobody's coming at all. But it's not too late for us to change this and turn it around. We should have an anime character poster outside. Since we're all so free anyway, it wouldn't take us a lot of time to draw one."

I didn't believe the reason there were so few customers was what she said. The anthology was selling pretty well. However, it was indeed true that the stall was far from lively no matter how positively I try to see things. I wasn't particularly against the idea of drawing an anime character poster in order to attract

customers; at least it's better than dressing up in skimpy cosplay to attract the boys.

But what I couldn't stand was Kouchi-sempai trying to bring the president into all of this, seeing as how she was now being surrounded by Kouchi-sempai's followers. It looked as though she was being protested against. Though President Yuasa merely smiled calmly, I wondered how she must have felt.

"You may be right, but this was what we all decided on doing..."

"It may have been decided, but not by majority consent. To begin with, what's with this anthology anyway? A review of a hundred manga titles just sounds so tedious, who on earth is gonna read that? We should have made more parody mangas instead."

Come to think of it, someone had suggested everyone in the Manga Club could try making their own parody manga. Right now, there were a few of them lined up around the stalls. The reason why there were so few of them was mainly because they were either not confident about displaying their works in the Cultural Festival, or they did not want to end up making a loss. But to blame it on the presence of *Zeamis* was just absurd.

Upon being told that no one would bother reading the anthology that I worked so hard on, the atmosphere in the room became delicately tense. To begin with, Kouchi-sempai's group was entirely uncooperative in the making of *Zeamis*. Uncooperative as in shoving the work to other people. Even someone as lazy as Oreki still bothered to take time to write up the manuscript despite constantly complaining about how bothersome it was, but Kouchi-sempai's followers were simply slacking off. Even now, not a single one of them had offered to help sell it. There were quite a few people in the club who found such behaviour revolting.

The only reason such sentiments had not erupted was due to Kouchi-sempai, who had herself diligently worked on her own rather interesting column. She didn't even brag about the fact that she had it completed within the day.

Extending her arms from within her long Taoist priest robes, Kouchi-sempai crossed them and looked up as though preaching some truth.

"Even if we assume that there's no such thing as a boring manga, this would be like reading an interesting manga a hundred times

over. Anyone would get bored doing that. There's simply no meaning to it, right?" she said, seeking approval from those around her. A chorus of barely audible agreement could be heard, muttered by her followers. If you want to be a Yes Men, you could at least be more assertive in your agreements.

But to say that it has no meaning, well...

Some of the members turned their gaze toward the sales booth where I was seated... While I was indeed the only one who disagreed with Kouchi-sempai, I would have preferred they not look at me like this.

Kouchi-sempai went on, "Besides, wouldn't it be better to use an anime character to capture attention? Why does this gloomy anthology of all things have to be the centrepiece? We ought to have something more flashy."

She then turned her gaze to the other members besides her own followers. Even as I sat silently at the sales booth, our eyes met. I didn't know whether it was my imagination, but when Kouchi-sempai looked at me, the corners of her lips were raised.

Was she provoking me? Was that smile of hers just now a provocation?

Would Fuku-chan trust me? The thought flashed by in my head that he wouldn't. But it was true that all this time during the Cultural Festival, I had behaved myself within the Manga Club, as I still had to take care of the Classic Club's anthology. But I was at my limit. I wondered why I ended up that way. Even I myself was surprised at how cold I sounded as I remained seated and said, "What exactly do you mean when you say it's all meaningless, sempai?" Kouchi-sempai looked as though she had expected a response from me. Turning her back to President Yuasa, she smiled and said, "It is meaningless regardless of whether it's interesting or not. Surely you should understand the meaning of that, no?" "I understand the meaning of your words, but I don't understand how you come to such a conclusion. I spent a lot of time working on this anthology, and so have the others. "I'm not asking for recognition for our hard work, but if you're going to declare all that meaningless, then please at least elaborate on your reason for it." On one side was Kouchi-sempai looking rather composed, while I on the other hand probably looked snappy. I would probably

look like an idiot to an outsider.

With a sneering smile, Kouchi-sempai took a step towards me.

"Yeah, maybe I was mistaken in saying it was meaningless.

Sorry about that, Ibara, I was trying to say it was too assertively harmful."

"Whichever it is, I would still like to hear why you think it is so."

"You see, I've been thinking,"

As though demonstrating to those around her, she waved her arms about.

"Not every manga ends up as a classic. Just because you like a title it doesn't make it a classic. Nine hundred ninety nine people out of a thousand could have decided it was crap. Yet, you would disregard such consensus and promote your own bias?"

*That is what I call harmful.*"

For a while I hesitated at how to respond. A member who was standing beside me lashed out.

"How can you be so sure that is bias!?"

While I understood her sentiment, it was not the right moment for her to interject. Yet Kouchi-sempai merely gave her a glance

and ignored her. She could have easily countered the accusation of whether the anthology was biased or not by giving a definition of what the word "bias" means. Still, she had not chosen to do that.

This means she did not intend for the argument to be ambiguous. I took a gulp and said, "Let me get this straight. You're trying to say we were being subjective?"

"Yeah."

"So you find the viewpoint that 'Subjectively, any manga can be a classic, and so it is meaningless to call a manga bad' harmful?"

Kouchi-sempai nodded satisfactorily.

"Yup, that's what I meant."

"But—"

As I was about to respond, I noticed someone's hand moving. Before me, the pile of *Zeamis* copies were being removed by President Yuasa, which I didn't mind.

There was a decisive flaw in Kouchi-sempai's argument, yet I wonder if she has noticed it already? While feeling uneasy, I tried to maintain a calm voice and continued, "In that case, wouldn't it also be harmful to think that 'Subjectively, any

manga can be rubbish, and so it is meaningless to call a manga good"?"

In that way, there was no way she could agree with that. But if she disagrees, then she would have to rephrase her argument.

Despite being confronted with such a contradiction, Kouchi-sempai gave a profound smile and said, "Yeah."

"Wha—"

For a moment, I was lost for words. Even her followers murmured. It was as confusing as falling into nothingness. No one could understand what she was thinking when she made such a response.

Taking advantage of my wavering, Kouchi-sempai spoke cheerfully.

"But it's true, isn't it? Since even you thought so. "Just because a manga is called boring doesn't mean the manga itself is boring. It simply means the person's tolerance antenna is set rather low for the title. So for those cowards who do not want to express themselves clearly would say 'This manga doesn't suit me' rather than just call it boring.

"So it's the same thing. Just because a manga is called

interesting doesn't mean the work itself is interesting. It just means the person has a high tolerance for the interesting aspects of the title. Am I right?"

For some time, I've always found Kouchi-sempai to be rather reckless. Even though she has a lot of admirers as a core member of the Manga Club, I just found myself looking down on those people. Right now, I feel like I know why I felt that way. Kouchi Ayako-sempai was just such a person.

I can't lose to her... I just can't lose.

At first, I was merely lashing out at her for calling the anthology we had worked so hard on meaningless. But now it's become more than that, she was laughing at the basis of my beliefs itself. I wasn't the type to just simply laugh it away and suck it up. The urge to fight back welled up within me, I licked my lips and countered, "...So you're basically saying there are no mangas that are called classics or masterpieces? Other mediums like music, art and novels all have what you call classics and masterpieces. Are you saying that even those don't exist as well? Or are you saying this only applies to manga?"

I, along with many Manga Club members, do not believe that as

an expression medium, there would exist flaws within mangas that cannot be rectified.

Not even Kouchi-sempai could say that just because a work is a manga, it cannot become a classic.

And indeed she said no such thing.

"I never said that there's no such thing as a classic or masterpiece manga."

"But isn't that what you were saying? That a work is rubbish no matter how you look at it?"

"Yeah, it is."

She withdrew her sneering smile and said, "But masterpieces *do* exist.

"After years of being scrutinized by critics and standing the test of time, only those works which contain the highest common factor remain. These are what we'd call 'masterpieces.' If not highest common factor, then the works which receive the most acceptance, which is basically the same thing.

"So I'll say this: it's just foolish for the Manga Club to do something like review manga, where we just go about deciding if this work is great or that work is crap. We're just saying what

comes out of our heads. We should cut that out and just be content to enjoy what we read."

"Then,"

Before I could even think, I fired back, "Do you not recognize the existence of the geniuses that gave birth to such masterpieces? Do you not recognize that the works of such people are wonderful and deserve to be passed down the generations?"

"Don't be so long-winded, Ibara, of course I don't. That's why this is all part of your subjective opinion. I've already said that masterpieces are those that withstand the test of time."

"..."

Kouchi-sempai's gaze was sharper than a while ago. I too was probably glaring back at her. I felt myself breathing heavily. I sensed that now was the time to pull out my trump card.

The treasures I have are something that would have to be shown to her if to repudiate her. If I didn't repudiate her, then I would have to repudiate my treasures. Though I was reluctant to do this, I had no choice. So I slowly said, "You're wrong."

"About what?"

"This has nothing to do with one's subjective opinion. You say such outrageous things only because you've never gone through what I've felt. There's a person whose manga is so terrific that I've yet to meet someone who doesn't think that way."

"Oh, now that's some boast you've got."

Kouchi-sempai spoke with a dark tone while dressed in her Jiangshi outfit. Without feeling daunted, I continued, "Based on what you said, even the manga that I drew would be on the same level as every other manga out there. But that is not true. What I'm saying is there's no way you could say that my manga could line up alongside this person's manga. That work is something which could never be eliminated over time.

"So tell me, sempai, have you read a manga called *Ashes at Dusk*, which was sold at the Cultural Festival last year?"

When I noticed, Kouchi-sempai had lost her usual calm demeanor. With an expression as though she was trying to strangle me, she replied briefly,

"...No,"

"In that case,"

If it doesn't work, then it can't be helped. If she does not

recognize my treasure, then I'll just have to raise the white flag.

"I'll bring it tomorrow. If after reading it you still feel the same, then I'll have nothing to say."

*Phew* I sighed. In order for the truth to be spoken, such an outcome was inevitable. As a result, I sighed again, as this meant that I'd lost my chance to ask the Manga Club to help sell *Hyouka*.

It was then that I realized, and said, "What's going on here?" The room was suddenly filled with people. A while ago there were only Manga Club members, and now the room was full of customers. Huh? Why? When did they come in? Could it be that they've been watching me argue all this time?

As I looked at the customers, they all avoided my gaze, and as though apologetic, began lining up to buy copies of *Zeamis*. Each stack contained ten copies. Already I saw two stacks of *Zeamis* copies being sold and President Yuasa bringing in a new stack to replace them.

Erm, I...

Taking a deep breath, I put on a smile and said, "Welcome."

The bystanders who were glancing at me quickly turned their

backs around. Perhaps I had spoken in a rough tone, and maybe they thought I was dangerous?

If this was a manga, then veins would have popped up in my forehead already.

021 - ♥05

Now Featuring:

The Battle of the Maidens!

in Manga Theory Debate

(The Jiangshi vs The Hermaphrodite)

...I wonder what this poster could be about? It was written in very huge and trendy letters.

As I happened to be passing by, I had decided to drop by the Manga Studies Club and pay Mayaka-san a visit, but I ended up being distracted by this strange poster outside.

Is this Battle of the Maidens currently going on right now? As I was about to take a peek inside, a female student emerged from the door. I recognized that person; it was the president of the Manga Studies Club, Yuasa Naoko-san.

"Um, what is this?" I pointed to the poster and asked.

Yuasa-san gave a gentle smile as she proceeded to slowly tear

the poster down, she then turned toward a bewildered me and replied, "Oh, we're just finished with that. We'll be holding another at 1pm tomorrow, so please do come visit again. The Manga Studies Club wishes you a good day today."

I see.

Umm.

...The Classics Club also wishes you a good day today.

022 - ♠06

The clock hand shows that it will be approaching five soon. The first day was coming to an end.

The Classics Club members who were scattered around the campus were now gathered back inside the Geology Room. Though Chitanda and Satoshi had popped by many times during the day, this was Ibara's first time showing her face back here since this morning.

As I had a lot of free time, I took the time to pack the extra copies of *Hyouka* into the boxes and kept them hidden from view. As the person in charge of running the stall, it wouldn't look nice if the customers were to see us struggling with our sales, after all.

"Well, what do you think? My sales appeal worked a bit, didn't it?" Satoshi asked.

As I'm not as optimistic as him, I replied indifferently, "Sort of." "Eh, really?"

I nodded. Truth be told, as soon as Satoshi made his speech, a few customers did appear. As a sales pitch, it sounded kinda stupid. I don't know what kind of fun he had in that competition, but his effort sure helped give our sales a little push.

Satoshi made a victory pose.

"All right! We shall do our best tomorrow as well. We'll be participating in The Cooking Club's cooking tournament tomorrow morning."

Ibara asked nonchalantly to his merry expression, "The one where you need three people to form a team?"

"Huh?"

Satoshi's smile stiffened.

"Three people? Really?" He said as he frantically took out the pamphlet. It's no good for someone from the General Committee to be unaware of what the events are about, after all.

Meanwhile, Chitanda looked kind of depressed.

"I'm sorry, I... I didn't do my best..."

"Don't worry too much about it."

To be honest, I hadn't expected much from her. Rather than having no expectation from her abilities, it was more to do with having no expectation that we would receive special permission to make changes to an event that had already been decided. As she looked down toward the ground, she seemed to have thought of something and looked up.

"Oh, but, I did come across something curious though."

Something, curious?

I felt myself shuddering at the mention of that word. Whenever this lady utters "I'm really curious about it," it means that things cannot go back to the way they were. For someone with such a burning sense of curiosity, it is impossible not to satiate Chitanda in her search for the answers.

Every time she says "I'm really curious about it," she has given me... I mean, us, quite a lot of commotion... These memories began flashing in my head.

However, this was simply not the time of the day for her to do that. Once she got things started, it would be impossible to suppress her curiosity, but this did not mean that Chitanda

would allow herself to run around in a rampage. She's not the sort to brashly go about in search of the answers under the banner of curiosity. Similarly, if there were other things that needed to be done, she would not prioritize her curiosity over those.

As though realizing how dangerous she could become, she turned her gaze towards the box containing the *Hyouka* copies.

"...Oh, nothing. It's not really curious," she said.

That was a relief.

Finally, there was Ibara, who seemed quite sullen. Though she's usually like that, even though she wouldn't admit it herself, she always seemed like she wanted to say what was on her mind, but then gave up doing so. Though she did not make any sound, her lips were moving as though muttering to herself. I couldn't help but notice that.

"Ibara, did something happen at the Manga Club?"

I decided to ask.

"Nothing."

She snapped back looking annoyed. Did I say something wrong?

She didn't look rather angry as her face wasn't red.

"So, Houtarou, how many copies did we sell?"

Upon being asked, I leaned back in my chair and said,

"Thirteen."

This was the best answer I could come up with. Had we printed twenty-four copies as we had intended, such a figure would have been impressive for a first day sale. At any rate, the real battle begins on the third day, Saturday.

Though I did not mention that, as I did not want to suffer from Ibara's sarcasm, and Satoshi would have given a buoyant face and go "Really?"

Two days left... It's not like we were trying to shore up all the support we could get. As if we could expect something explosive to happen anyway. Now was not the time for us to expect miracles.

As the chime rang, the first day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival came to an end.

## [177 COPIES REMAINING]

- 3 - The "Juumoji" Incident

### 3-1 The Morning Landscape

*Ashes at Dusk* was a 30-page manga containing three short stories. Despite its morbid-sounding title, it actually came from Rennyo's [s\[1\]](#), well-known verse: "We may have radiant faces in the morning, but by evening we may turn into white ashes." [\[2\]](#)

The overarching theme across these short stories is its emphasis on the abstract impermanence of life. Taking place in a classically dim Showa-style backdrop, the story describes a rather sad story. That said, the manga doesn't indulge itself in the retro-feel, but actually focuses on the platonic love of high school girls as well, so it was also rich in entertainment.

As a Third Year Junior High student, I was lost for words when I saw and bought this on a whim while visiting the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. Though there was nothing special about the theme, it just felt earnestly vivid to me.

A unique story that develops alongside its rich dialogue, it is supported by sensitive-looking artwork, which looked like something right out of a kabuki theatre. In certain pivotal points of the plot, the art would give a surreal effect. If I have to list a work, regardless of whether it is commercial or not, that leaves an impression on me, then it has to be *Ashes at Dusk*.

And thus, this was a manga that possesses a certain charm which

words alone cannot describe. If I had to give criticism, then I would say the background art looked a bit amateurish, but even that is not enough to make it bad.

There were only two doujinshis that have taken my breath away completely, one was *Ashes at Dusk*, the other was *Body Talk*, a title I found in another doujинshi event unrelated to Kami High. I cherish these two works as my treasures. But if I have to pick one out of these two, I would have to go for *Ashes at Dusk*.

In order to counter Kouchi-sempai's argument that a work can be great to begin with, regardless of what the readers think, I would have to show her a glimpse of this title. Such was my faith in its ability to charm.

I was very glad when I found out I made it into Kamiyama High School. Besides being glad that I've entered high school, I was even more glad that I had entered a school where you could sell any sort of manga freely as though its a soft drink vending machine. That's why I entered the Manga Studies Club as soon as I started school.

Yet I found myself a bit disappointed afterwards.

There was no one in the club that knew anything about the

author of *Ashes at Dusk*.

But as I still had fun with people discussing stuff that we like, I thought that my decision to join the Manga Club was correct.

...That's what I thought anyway.

On the morning of the second day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, I arrived at school with a gloomy expression. I had no choice but to postpone what I intended to do. Prior to going to the attendance ceremony, I first headed towards the Manga Club.

I had intended to arrive early, but I found Kouchi-sempai had arrived even earlier. She was dressed in a classy tuxedo today. She's probably dressed as that Thai boxer. As she isn't particularly tall, yesterday's costume didn't really suit her. Was she trying to dress up as a different game character everyday, or does she simply want to cosplay in varying costumes? While I too am cosplaying as a different character than yesterday, I hadn't devoted as much time and money to my costume as she had to hers.

Kouchi-sempai looked towards me, or rather, the heart-shaped brooch on my chest.

"Going for old-fashioned again, I see?" she said. Today I wore a cardigan over my blouse, and high socks coupled with a flared skirt. The only part that one could really call cosplay was the brooch and the beret hat I was wearing.

"Are you gonna shoot out Jintan[\[3\]](#). candies from that?"

"No, this is just for show."

"If you're going to cosplay as that character, you should at least put some effort into your hair."

Don't be ridiculous. It's already quite embarrassing for me to have such a gravity-defying hairdo, not to mention my hair isn't that long.

I need to get to the main topic right away.

"So, where's your *Ashes at Dusk*?"

It was Kouchi-sempai who started the conversation instead. I was surprised that she could remember the name of a title which she only heard once. I always thought her to be quite a quick-witted person, so it's not like she could really read my mind or anything.

As most of the members had not yet arrived, the Manga Club room was rather quiet. Everyone, including those members who

weren't here yesterday, had known of my spat with Kouchi-sempai.

Even Kouchi-sempai, who had looked rather confident yesterday, now looked at me with a tense expression without even realizing it.

T-this is bad.

But I can't just run away now. Taking a deep breath filling my lungs as much as they could be, and while doing my best not to look abject, I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't bring it today."

"What?"

"I must have taken it to my relatives' house by mistake during the summer holidays."

Yes, for the whole night and until early this morning, I was searching for my copy of *Ashes at Dusk* in my room.

I made sure to search everywhere I could think of. I looked about ten times or more within the bookshelves which contained my favourite books. I did the same for the other bookshelves, as well as opening up the boxes which contained my old mangas.

Yet I could not find my *Ashes at Dusk* anywhere. I do not remember lending it to anyone. It was not a book I would show

Fuku-chan. And I was reading it repeatedly during the first semester...

So instead I brought *Body Talk* as a replacement. But I had already decided to bring *Ashes at Dusk* the day before, so this felt like a cop out. Bringing a book that could not satisfy my intention was just as good as not bringing it at all.

Yet I did not feel like I'd lost the book. As I remembered organizing my books during the summer holiday, and placing the old books in boxes to be sent to the storage warehouse in my grandparent's house. It must have been mixed up during that time. I'd probably find it if I looked there.

However, such a causal mix-up should not have happened, and I became slightly embarrassed because of it, as lately I've been making too many silly mistakes. Even if I reflect on them the deed has already been done. I wish I had not made such mistakes to begin with.

"Ehh??" A short disapproving sound was uttered. Looking around, I saw only President Yuasa with her calm expression; this meant it wasn't her. It must have been someone else.

"Hmm, so you don't have it."

Kouchi-sempai's expression eased. I, in contrast, bit my lips. I felt like a carp on a chopping board right now. Victory has not yet been decided as we may still have arguments to put forward, but having said I would present evidence to support my argument, it couldn't be helped now that I did not bring it.

Hearing Kouchi-sempai's followers snickering just gets on my nerves.

One of them said, "Ibara, weren't you talking big yesterday? And you think you can get away by saying you don't have it?" Another followed, "That's right. Don't you have other ways of apologizing?"

They probably won't be satisfied unless I go down on my knees. I decided to ignore them, as this was a problem between me and Kouchi-sempai alone. If she were to ask me to go down on my knees, I'd gladly do so.

However, Kouchi-sempai, as though losing interest in me, simply waved her hands and said briefly, "Then, help me with drawing a poster."

"P-poster?"

"Draw a moe character... I'm going out for a bit now."

She said that and turned to leave the club room.

As I was being basked in the cold stares of her followers, who had been left behind, I turned to speak with President Yuasa.

"President, do you have tools for drawing a poster?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, we do."

I nodded and looked at my watch. It's almost time to head to the Gymnasium. I pointed to my watch and said, "I'll start drawing once I come back."

If I'm going to draw something, it's better if I put my full effort into it rather than stop midway. I wonder what I should draw for this "moe character" order from the victor?

024 - ♣08

After attendance was taken, I quickly left the gymnasium.

It wasn't because there was something I wanted to see, since I am after all a member of the General Committee, which has the duty of ensuring the smooth running of the Cultural Festival. At the appointed time, I needed to attend the meeting in the Conference Room where the General Committee is based, in order to carry out any orders decided by the Committee executives. Besides security, there's also event organizing to

take care of. Particularly the setting up and taking down of event equipment by the various clubs requires a lot of labour. By the way, if there's no work to be done one gets to be free for the day. Carrying a noble sense of duty within me, I knocked at the door of the Conference Room.

"Fukube reporting. I see I haven't got any work today, I guess I'll take my leave now."

A pity that I wasn't able to help out with the General Committee in the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival. Just as I was about to check out some strange event about to start at the Sci-Fi Studies Club, someone stopped me.

"Wait Fukube, you *do* have work."

Eh~.

President Tanabe was the only person inside, with a white board behind him covered by a timetable. Before long he turned to me and smiled bitterly.

"Hey, what's with the disappointed look you got there?"

"No, actually, this is me looking grateful that I get to contribute my efforts."

Actually, I had plans to be at The Cooking Club at 11:30 today,

so I was only intending to work with the General Committee around those times that were convenient to me. Though I made a playful face, I wasn't exactly unhappy. Opening the door, I entered the room.

I rubbed my hands and asked, "Well, what is it? As long as it ends before 11:30, I'll jump into an inferno or leap into the ocean for you."

"It'll be over soon. There are bags containing visitor slippers in the staff room, you'll need to bring two of these bags to every building entrance. That's about it."

Indeed, this wouldn't take up a lot of time.

President Tanabe sure worked hard in making the pamphlet.

Casually, I began to converse with him.

"Sempai, won't you go sightseeing during the festival?"

"Hmm? Oh."

Facing the whiteboard with its timetable, he turned to me and spoke gently.

"There's a lot of menial stuff to take care of. Still, it requires me to move around the campus, so it's not like I don't get to see anything. Oh yeah, the movie shown by Class 2-F is pretty good,

I hear."

Oh, this was quite some good news for us.

"But you're unable to join in any events yourself, aren't you?"

Tanabe-sempai smiled bitterly.

"I won't be able to attend to the General Committee if I do.

Unlike you, it's not like I'm as talented or have many interests."

Do I look that talented or have many interests to other  
observers?

"Well, what is it? You got something interesting to tell me?"

"Interesting, huh?"

Thinking about it, there is the issue of the Classics Club having  
200 anthology copies, but Mayaka wouldn't be happy if I used  
that as a joke. The Rakugo Club performance at the Opening  
Ceremony was pretty interesting, but that's just my personal  
opinion. I've also heard of other stuff, but they aren't really that  
interesting when mentioned one by one.

Hmm. I didn't particularly find this intriguing, but if I had told  
him there was nothing interesting, the conversation would be too  
dull. So how about this one?

"We seem to have a phantom thief appearing at the Go Club."

"Oh?"

"Some Go stones were stolen from the container, and the thief even left a message behind."

"Really?"

Now this was surprising. This actually piqued President Tanabe's interest.

"I see. The Go Club, huh?"

Just as I was about to say that this could be some prank staged by the Go Club themselves, President Tanabe continued, "I heard from Okano that something similar has happened to the A Capella Club."

"What?"

This time it was my turn to have my interest piqued. Something similar happening to the A Capella Club means that the possibility of this being an inside job by the Go Club has been ruled out.

"They seem to have had one drink bottle taken from the cooler box."

"Was there a message left behind?"

"I'm not sure if it's from the culprit, but they found a strange

memo inside."

Now this looks pretty interesting. At the very least, my interest has now increased beyond the level when I first heard this from Tani-kun. We have a phantom thief lurking in the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival! This is actually quite a fun prank. Hmm hmm, now how should I plan my schedule from here on. ...No wait, now's not the time for that yet.

"What's wrong, Fukube? You're grinning."

"Nope, no~thing really."

It's still too early to indulge in this yet. In order for a phantom thief incident to be established, the phantom thief would need to continue with his prank. If I end up scaring the thief prematurely, it'll just make me look foolish. My experience tells me that it is better to first play with the thief.

Furthermore, not many within the school are aware of this yet.

Even I have only just heard about this. I wasn't really concerned with whether the thief intends to attract much interest or not, but right now, his flute is only vaguely audible.

Since I still had an event to attend, it wouldn't be too late even if I take some rest now and allow the thief to surprise me even

further. So it was better for me to leave this aside for now.

All right, now where's my drawstring bag?

"I guess I'll get to work then."

"Sure, good luck."

Having encouraged me, President Tanabe turned back towards the timetable board.

025 - ♠07

"I'll do my best again today!" Upon saying that, Chitanda left the room.

Now to begin watching over the stall for the day again.

How should I say this? I never thought being in charge of a stall where people hardly ever come would be this boring. I liked being idle and carefree, but certainly not being bored. At any rate, one doesn't require a lot of effort to insert the small change into the coin box repeatedly. Even if I were to take time to go to the bathroom, no one would come. Still, while I had brought a paperback novel to kill time, it was not the right book. It is quite unbecoming for an energy saver like me to actually desire some action just because I'm feeling bored.

Anyway, I should line up the *Hyouka* copies. Ten copies per

stack should be just about right.

As I finished lining them up, a customer arrived. It was a male student I didn't know. The badge on his collar indicated he was a second year.

"You selling?"

Now this is quite a good omen. I'd better use my manners.

"Yeah, we are."

Hmm, maybe I should have said it longer, like "Yeah, we are, man." But that doesn't sound polite, does it? The second year sort of dangled towards the pile of *Hyouka* and looked at the cover.

"So this is the one that explains where Kanya Festival gets its name from?"

Wow, seems like Satoshi's microphone appeal was still having some influence. Or did he hear it from someone else? At any rate, I should be thankful.

As I nodded, the second year asked, "Can I stand and read?"

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Oh come on. It's only 200 yen, isn't it?"

"It may be only 200 yen, but please do buy one. We've got so

many remaining, I feel like crying."

Not that I really would.

The second year laughed and took out his wallet and bought one copy. Upon thanking him and seeing him place his wallet back in his pocket, I noticed, "Sempai, your fly's open."

"What?! No way!"

He frantically placed his hand between his legs. Upon

inspection, he lifted his head and groaned,

"Argh, can't be helped. It's broken!"

Looking closely, I saw black silk dangling from the opening. I

see, now I get what he's saying,

"Your zipper's broken?"

"Yeah, and I've still got a whole day before I can even take time

to fix this."

You have my sympathies. There's nothing I can do.

No wait, that's not true. I still have it with me, haven't I?

Looking in the table drawer, I found it. It was the badge that I obtained earlier today. While I'm not interested in attending a fashion show, the badge does have a safety pin taped behind it, which was easily removed.

"There's only one, but try using this."

I handed the pin out to him. The second year looked grateful as though being blessed by the heavens.

"Whoa, thanks man. Amazing that you actually have one with you."

He proceeded to pin the hole shut... While it looked kind of strange, it should do for now.

The second year certainly looked glad as he muttered, "You're amazing, man, you just helped out big time."

"If you want to show your gratitude then you could buy another copy."

The second year smiled and waved his hand.

"No thanks,"

Though he seemed to have thought of something, and put his hand behind his trousers. Searching his back pocket, he took out a hand gun.

Staring into the muzzle, I asked, "Is this a robbery?"

"Don't be silly. It's a water gun."

The second year placed the gun on the table.

"You can have this as my thanks."

"I see."

I looked at the water gun and then towards him.

"...Is this your hobby?"

Rolling up the *Hyouka* copy in his hand, he whacked my head with it.

"Course not. I'm with the Gardening Club. We're roasting sweet potatoes today."

I still didn't see what this had to do with anything.

The second year continued while looking pleased, "You see, we need fire in order to roast the potatoes. And if there's fire, we'll need some water to put it out. But it would be too boring to just use a bucket, right?"

Ahh, I see. So he's supposed to be a soldier or something... So there are clubs who actually do silly stuff. I looked at the hand gun.

"Don't you need this then?"

"I already have one. This is just a side-arm. My main one's a Kalashnikov."

Fabulous. So they're actually thinking of putting out a fire using a water gun? They should instead be more careful with handling

the fire.

Anyway, what use do I have for a water gun for watching over the Classics Club stall? The same goes for the badge, I seemed to be receiving all sorts of useless stuff. Though I have no reason to refuse him.

"Thanks, man. See ya!"

The second year left the Geology Room looking elated.

I looked at the hand gun he left behind and merely muttered, "...A Glock 17?"

Having an AK as a main weapon and a Glock as a side-arm.

Isn't this rather inconsistent?

### [176 COPIES REMAINING]

026 - ♥06

I'll do my best again today!

I was thinking a lot last night. What Tanabe-san and Toogaito-san said were both correct. I haven't managed to expand our selling spots, nor have I managed to get the Wall Newspaper Club interested in us. However, it is still too early to give up and say nothing could be done.

I heard rumours that the movie made by Class 2-F was quite

popular. A few of my friends had wanted to go and watch, but it seems for the entire first day the Audio Visual Room was packed during airing.

We the Classics Club were slightly involved in the making of that movie by Class 2-F. Upon solving the trouble encountered during the shooting of the movie, Fukube-san duly named it the "Empress Incident." I didn't exactly do much, though Oreki-san's advice seems to have helped them a lot. Thus for me personally, it was a joyous thing to hear that the movie was doing well.

I was acquainted with one of the students from Class 2-F, Irisu Fuyumi-san. Speaking of which, this "Empress Incident" also applies to her as well, since she was involved in overseeing the production of the movie.

If we could arrange for *Hyouka* to be sold alongside a popular movie, there's a chance our sales might increase.

Thus today, I embark on ensuring such a deal could be done. I'll do my best.

The Audio Visual Room was currently airing the movie *The Blind Spot of 10,000 People*. The entrance to the room was left

open, with a black curtain to block outside light from coming in. Looks like its another full house today, but I have no way of knowing as I could not peek into the dark room. Outside was a signboard as tall as myself which read "Now Showing - The Blind Spot of 10,000 People," with its airing times written on a paper taped below it.

There was a table beside the board which seemed to double as a reception counter. Though it's called a reception counter, as the movie is free, it's not going to collect any admission fee. Rather, they seem to be selling pamphlets for the movie. A girl was assigned to watch the counter, but as nobody seems to be coming while the movie was being shown, she's currently talking to someone else.

That someone else was none other than Irisu-san. It must be my lucky day, as I was prepared to look all over the campus for her. Upon waiting for them to finish their conversation, I spoke up.

"Good morning, Irisu-san,"

"Hmm? Oh, it's Chitanda."

Noticing my presence, she quickly ended her conversation with the counter girl. Walking some distance from the Audio Visual

Room entrance, she beckoned me to come over beside the fire emergency exit.

Irisu Fuyumi-san is the daughter of the warden of Rengou Hospital, located right next to Kamiyama High School. She is just as tall as I am, though her figure is much more slender. Just to be safe, this doesn't mean I'm meaty compared to her. Her fine feature gives an impression of one who is very sharp, a resolute person who could solve any problem encountered. She was someone I admire somewhat.

Before I could say anything, Irisu-san pointed towards the Audio Visual Room.

"Thanks to you guys, our movie was a great success, as you can see. And to think we were in danger of not being able to complete the movie on time. You have my deep gratitude."

"Oh, no, there's no need to... Is Hongou-san all right?"

Hongou-san was originally the screenwriter for the movie, but I heard she collapsed due to stress.

"Oh, she's fine now. Would you like to see her?"

"I see... Oh no, not now."

Perhaps sensing my hesitation, Irisu-san lowered her voice.

"Do you need something from me?"

"Yes, rather than you, I have a request for Class 2-F."

I nodded deeply.

I'll need to get to the main point right away.

"Please help the Classics Club sell their anthology."

Irisu-san blinked her eyes twice, before quickly saying, "So you're asking us to sell your anthology where we're showing our movie, right?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"All right. How many copies do you have?"

Eh?

"Y-you're accepting our request?"

As I replied without thinking, Irisu-san raised her brow.

"Why do you look surprised?"

"Oh, no, umm..."

As I was used to being flatly refused right away yesterday, I was at a loss hearing that my request was granted so suddenly now...

Besides, I've once again forgotten to explain the details.

"...Thank you so much!"

"You can thank me once we've sold the copies. So how many

copies you have?"

Irisu-san placed her right hand on her hip and asked as though she might tear the wall down anytime.

"We've printed 200 copies..."

"200?!"

Irisu-san's small eyes widened for an instant.

"That's a lot."

"We ordered more copies than we were supposed to by mistake.

That's why, we're hoping to sell as many as possible. I-I..."

Oh no. Just when I thought I had obtained Irisu-san's help, I became lost for words. I'm still in a conversation, so I gritted my teeth and went on, "I'm sorry. As for the price, we've set it at 200 yen per copy."

Irisu-san nodded gently.

"If you're willing to lower the price to 150 yen per copy, then I can take twenty copies from you."

"Eh? Lower the price?"

"Our pamphlet costs 50 yen each. Together with your anthology, that would make 200 yen per set. Though we'll need to make a few arrangements."

"Umm, but, don't you need to consult with the others from Class 2-F...?"

"Oh, I'll take care of that afterwards."

Incredible. If it's Irisu-san, she would accept any request with no questions asked. Besides, wouldn't it be bothersome for her to receive twenty copies from us? Since we had only intended to sell twenty-four copies over three days.

As though she could read the anxiety on my face, Irisu-san added nonchalantly, "We should be able to sell them all by today. If we do, we may be able to order another batch from you."

"Is that fine with you?"

"It's fine."

...I felt my chest becoming tight again.

Irisu-san stretched out her right hand which she had rested on her hip. Was she trying to shake my hand? Taking out my hand, I placed it on top of hers.

"?"

"Rather than shake my hand, you should be showing me a sample copy instead."

A sample? I shook my head. Irisu-san gave a small sigh. Did I mess things up? She then softly spoke while I remained startled.

"...It's all right since it's me, but if you're really going to ask someone to sell your anthology for you, you should at least bring a sample with you. Or you won't be able to convince anyone."

I-I see. So that's how one gets things done.

"I understand. Thank you so much!"

It was then that I began thinking. Yesterday I hardly achieved anything. Maybe I spent so much time worrying about what to do next that my request would still get turned down. I've spent a lot of effort explaining my situation to both Tanabe-san and Toogaito-san, but if I had asked Irisu-san to come with me back then, I might not have had my requests turned down.

Yes, I must not make the same mistakes as yesterday. I must ensure my success rate is improved from now on.

Having made my mind, I decided to make another request to Irisu-san.

"Irisu-san,"

"W-what is it?"

Oh no, I ended up approaching too near to her. This was a bad habit which Oreki-san has often told me to be careful of. I took one step back.

"Irisu-san, you're good at having other people carry out your requests, right?"

"..."

"Please teach me how you do it!"

"WHA-!?"

Irisu-san made a flustered, out-of-character yelp, though her ruffled state only lasted for a moment before she began chuckling.

"...Heh, I've been called a lot of things, but never 'good at having other people carry out requests' before," she muttered.

Leaning against the emergency exit, Irisu-san gazed at me and spoke slowly.

"Right. You do tend to be too direct in your approaches sometimes. I'll teach you two or three methods which you can remember."

"T-thank you."

"What do you know about role-playing?"

Irisu-san lowered her head and closed her eyes and began thinking. This was the first time I'd ever seen her taking time to think. My body went stiff from the anxiety, "...Right... Well, let's put it this way," she muttered and opened her eyes. She then raised her clenched fist towards me. I instinctively leaned backwards as a result.

"There are two ways to get people to carry out your requests. First, there is one in which you're expected to repay the favour received."

She lifted her index finger.

"The second is where you do not repay any favour."

She then lifted her middle finger. Before long, she withdrew both fingers and placed her hand back on her hip.

"For requests where you're to repay the favour, it means the person you're asking does not trust you."

"Eh?"

Maybe it had something to do with her calm way of speaking, but Irisu-san's serene voice seemed to have blocked out the noise generated by the Cultural Festival around us.

"For situations where you're dealing with strangers which you

would not deal with again after you receive the favour, in nine out of ten cases, they would consider your request a rip-off.

Even if they don't, they would try to minimize the effort they would put into handling your request. So in cases where you're expected to repay the favour, you mustn't just think about what you would expect them to do, but also take into consideration the time they have and the effort they're willing to make. You must also take into consideration that they may not be able to do what you request of them. If you're unwilling to do that, then they too will not be willing to take such a risk for your request.

"While you could use reverse psychology to make them think they're ripping you off instead, that would be too difficult for you. So for the moment being, you're more suited to the second type, where trust would be needed.

"In such a situation, you would need to provide them with mental satisfaction in order to carry out your request. It is easy to cut corners when only a physical reward is available, but not so for a mental reward. The best way to achieve that is to make them feel they're charismatic or popular, but you will find you would not have much opportunity to use those. The next would

be faith and love, but these would require a lot of time to prepare beforehand. By the way, I myself have never relied on these two.

"If possible, you should take advantage of their sense of justice or duty, their professional spirit or their self-esteem, but its difficulty is above intermediate. Though once you get the hang of those, you should be able to apply them to many situations.

"On the other end of the spectrum would be to make them think they're feared or superior to you, but we'll not go into that today.

"For you, as a beginner, you should aim to have expectations of them.

"Listen up, it's basically to make them think that 'Only they could accomplish this request of yours.' To make them think they're your only hope, which is pretty easy to do. It would not be rare for them to even make some sacrifices for you, since you have expectations of them, even if you're just pretending to.

"In addition, do not make them think the problem is huge. Don't let them know that you're desperate for their help. There just aren't many people who would help others solve a major problem with no benefit to themselves. Instead, you should

make it look like the problem is very trivial, that way it'll make them feel exceptional.

"Finally, if possible, make the request where no one else is around to someone of the opposite gender."

For a moment, my head went blurry.

I-I just heard something really amazing. I never even thought about these things before. In order to have a stranger do one's request, one must make them feel loved and trusted, as well as feel superior because you have expectations of them, alone in a place where nobody can see... It's going to be difficult for me to digest all of this at once.

I would need time to slowly understand all of this. At any rate, I would need to thank Irisu-san.

"Um, umm, I..."

Yet Irisu-san merely said, "Hurry up and bring the copies over."

And hurriedly returned to the Audio Visual Room.

I should at least bow deeply in gratitude to her.

Thank you very much! Irisu-san, I will not let your advice go to waste!

The paperback novel I brought turned out to be quite a bore. Though I hadn't exactly wasted my money as I bought it for only 100 yen from a new second-hand bookstore, I still felt like i had been ripped off by them. I just couldn't force myself to continue reading on. Having said that, there's was nothing I could do but yawn. I should have brought a backup novel.

Hearing the A Capella Club singing yesterday sure was a good way to kill time. Wondering if they'd be singing again, I decided to stand up and open the windows... And I smelled a scent of burning leaves, as right below me were some people surrounding a stove. As there seemed to be some sort of armed sentries in that group, that must be the Gardening Club.

Sweet potatoes - just smelling their scent makes one feel famished. Whether its sweet potatoes or not, at the moment I felt like eating anything, since I overslept this morning and decided to skip breakfast. This was really my sis's fault for taking my alarm clock from my room without permission. As a result, I'm feeling a bit hungry. As it was only eleven, it was still too early for lunch.

As I continued to stare at the stove...

"Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

Someone intruded while shouting in strange voices. They sounded like girls, but I have no idea who they are if I can't see their faces. Or rather, there was no way I could see their faces.

There were two intruders, both carrying baskets covered in white cloth and wearing pumpkin masks over their heads...

Pumpkins?

W-what on earth? Pumpkin Heads? Halloween costumes already?

As I continued to look bewildered, "Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

They made the same greeting again while flailing their arms.

Were they trying to dance?

...I needed to calm down. All right, so they're in a Halloween mood. Does that mean I should throw beans at them? Or I should pour sweet tea at them?[?\[4\]](#)

No, wait, I remember now. I looked coldly at the dancing pumpkin heads and said, "If it's candy you want, I haven't got any, so get lost."

One of the pumpkin heads gasped.

"Yikes! How mean!"

"But you are welcome to buy our anthologies."

"Not interested!"

"Who the hell are you guys anyway!?"

It was then the two pumpkin heads walked forward in synchrony and showed me their baskets. As though trained for this, they both spoke at the same time.

"We're doing door-to-door sales for the Confectioneries Studies Club. Would you like some cookies, biscuits and cream puffs?"

...

"What if I said no?"

"...Trick or Treat!"

"Yay!"

OK, I get it. I get it already, so stop dancing, you pushy saleswomen.

But this could be great timing,

"How much is one of your biscuits?"

"Heh heh, it's 100 yen per bag, master!"

They really don't have much consistency with their sales pitches.

I took out one copy of *Hyouka*.

"...What's that?"

Whoa, they reverted to their normal voices.

"It's an anthology by the Classics Club. 200 yen per copy. I can swap two bags of your biscuits with this."

"Not interested."

"Oh, don't say that, I want your biscuits, after all."

"That'll upset the balance between supply and demand~"

It's useless. I decided to take out my wallet.

"Wow! What's that? It's so cool!"

One of the pumpkin heads, who was looking around the room, suddenly raised her voice. In her hand was the Glock 17 pistol.

"Wow, cool! How come you have one of these? Could you be a collector?"

"Hey, you think it would be better for our sales if we carry this around?"

Really? I think you'd scare everybody instead.

Oh well, if they wanted it, "I'll give you that semi-auto along with the anthology for two bags of your biscuits."

"Really? You're giving it to us?"

I nodded. Holding the Glock in her hand, she began dancing again. After spinning one turn, she took out two bags of biscuits from her basket as well as a small yellow paper bag.

"Here's a sign of gratitude from the pumpkins."

"What's that?"

"Yay!"

"Yay!"

Without answering my question, the two pumpkin heads took the glock and a copy of *Hyouka* and left. Those heads look rather large, will they be able to stand properly in those... Just hope they don't trip.

Opening the paper bag, I looked inside.

It's wheat flour. Looking at the description, it says "weak flour."

Once again I've obtained something I have no use for.

From a fountain pen to a badge, from a badge to a Glock, and

now from a Glock to a bag of flour. This somehow feels like the

story of the straw millionaire [5], yet somehow, the items I'm receiving don't seem to be rising in value. Come to think of it,

weren't these people giving me these items simply because they

have no use for them themselves?

Taking out 200 yen from my wallet, I placed them into the

candy box which doubled as a register. Leaning back towards the windowside, I opened one of the bags of biscuits.

## [171 COPIES REMAINING]

028 - ♣09

It's just past eleven. The Cooking Club's tournament will take place at half-past eleven.

This may sound like me bragging, but I do have some confidence when it comes to cooking. Though I have not taken into calculation about having three people as a team. I would have enjoyed it better if I could do this all on my own, but as we're not allowed to participate alone, I guess it can't be helped.

Still, it's not as if I wouldn't enjoy myself, so I've invited Mayaka and Chitanda-san along as well. While it's also interesting to see Houtarou carry a knife, he probably wouldn't come even if I invited him.

Except... On one hand, Mayaka can really cook. I knew that, as she would occasionally bring her own boxed lunch. Though I don't know about Chitanda-san, so she's an unknown factor. When I told her about it, she readily agreed, "Understood. It's to promote our anthology, right?"

That was one of my concerns. Actually, I had two concerns. By the way, should they be called "concerns?" Wouldn't it be better if I describe them as "worries?" Hmm, I must do some research regarding the meanings of these words. Anyway, my other concern was whether Mayaka would make it on time after finishing her duties with the Manga Club.

Deciding to pay her a visit, I headed towards Preparation Room No. 1.

Whoa, there's quite a lot of people here. And Mayaka was saying how the Manga Club was quiet yesterday. It's basically packed today, it's like a carnival here. As I thought that, I noticed a poster pasted on the door:

### Speed Poster Drawing

Featuring two of our best artists! (The Esper vs The Panther)

Watch how their artistic senses shine at unwavering speed!

...I had never heard of such an event before.  
I decided to take a peek.

"...Whoa."

I let out a gasp.

Mayaka, dressed in a cardigan over her blouse and wearing a beret cap, was scribbling her pen across an A3 paper without even moving her eyes away. This was Mayaka in serious mode. I could even hear the pen being tapped on the paper as she drew. I could even see her cheeks reddening as though blood was rushing to her head. I had no idea what she was drawing as I couldn't see it from here.

Next to her, the girl in a tuxedo was just as amazing. Just when I thought there were still a lot of white areas in her drawing, as though receiving some divine inspiration, she began to boldly colour the drawing already.

Again, I had no idea what she was colouring, but within five minutes...

"Done!"

She handed her drawing to the girls waiting before her. At once, many people gathered and placed the drawing on a table for it to dry. It was then I saw what it was, a drawing of a female character from a popular monthly manga series. That is good.

That's Mayaka's drawing, no doubt. So Mayaka does the

drawing while the tuxedo girl does the colouring.

Two of the Manga Studies Club's best artists, huh? I see.

I chuckled and turned back.

If Mayaka ended up not attending the cooking tournament and it resulted in us losing by default as a result of this, I wouldn't have complained.

### **Translator's notes and references**

1. • [Wikipedia - Rennyo](#)
2. • [Read the Source Online](#)
3. • [Wikipedia - Jintan](#)
4. • Oreki is confusing the customs of Halloween and the Japanese holiday Setsubun - [Wikipedia](#)
5. • [Wikipedia - Straw Millionaire](#)

### **3-2 Wild Fire**

029 - ♥07

As my long hair was in the way, I had it tied at the back of my head.

I had always wondered why The Cooking Club has a "The" as a part of its name.

That question was instantly answered by its president.

"Something unfortunate happened with the old Cooking Club, leading to its disbandment. So we re-registered under this new name instead."

They seem like they've been through a lot.

Having been invited by Fukube-san, I was now participating in The Cooking Club's tournament "Wild Fire." While it has a strange name for a tournament, upon participating, one would quickly understand why such a name was used. The Wild Fire tournament does not take place in the Home Economics Room, but outside on the track field.

The tables forming the makeshift kitchen counters were quite narrow, and use of water was to be limited. Cooking fire was provided by two-legged stoves on each counter... It is certainly strange in appearance, but on the other hand, it also meant any observer would instantly know what it was.

Besides, as this tournament involves teams of three people...

"Mayaka-san sure is late."

The deadline for accepting entries has finished, and there's only three minutes till 11:30, when the tournament would officially commence. Yet Fukube-san was surprisingly calm.

"Each team member has twenty minutes, so we'll just put Mayaka last. If she still doesn't come in 40 minutes, then guess that's too bad. We're only here to promote ourselves anyway, so it doesn't matter whether we win or not."

While he's quite right, I still continued to glance towards the field entrance.

A male student's voice spoke from behind us.

"Doesn't matter whether you win or not? That's hardly fun at all, Fukube!"

Could he be a friend of Fukube-san? I've not seen him before. Though Fukube-san was usually energetic, perhaps even he was getting exhausted from being so active during the tournament, because he sounded quite indifferent when replying to his friend.

"Nah, we'll be giving our all."

Though his friend did not seem to mind a bit and smiled.

"At any rate, this rule of having three people on a team is great! Even if my cooking isn't up to snuff, I'll still be well covered by the other two teammates. Still, no one person can win it alone, so you gotta plan ahead accordingly."

"Isn't that the same for all team tournaments?"

"Anyway, have you found yourself some good teammates? Just so you know, Team B has got Suhara, who's the son of the chef of Miraku on Main Street."

"Ah, so I've heard."

"And I'm on that team."

Fukube-san gave an ambiguous smile.

"Wow, that's great. May the best team win then."

Just as I thought, something does feel strange. The Fukube-san that I know would have been more sociable. Still, his friend remained in good spirits and returned to his team. I gently called out to Fukube-san.

"Fukube-san... are you feeling all right?"

The person who turned around was the usual Fukube-san,

"How am I feeling? I'm feeling superb! I feel like making some of Fukube's Seafood Fried Rice today!"

Looks like I've been thinking too much into this. I smiled.

"I'll be looking forward to it... I don't know if I'm getting this wrong, but we're only allowed to cook rice from scratch. If you're going to make fried rice, wouldn't you have to cook last in order to properly prepare?"

Fukube-san doesn't look too lively. As expected, perhaps his exhaustion is beginning to show on his face.

An impressive crowd was gathered, about a hundred to two hundred, perhaps even more. To think we're going to cook dishes in front of this many people... This feels a bit embarrassing.

"Um... if Mayaka-san is to cook last, who will cook first then?"

"Hmm? Chitanda-san, I did say we're gonna make rice, so maybe you should cook first."

"But it'll take more than an hour to prepare the rice, that would be too..."

I wasn't able to explain myself properly, but perhaps Fukube-san realized it from my gaze.

He replied, "Fine, I'll cook first. Guess that's it for Fukube's Seafood Fried Rice. I can make that anytime!"

Oh no, you don't really have to say it so clearly.

Beside the makeshift kitchen counters was a podium, where The Cooking Club's president walked on and began to explain the rules. With a loud voice, he began to introduce the participating teams.

"We have a total of five teams who've entered the tournament, but as we only have four counters, only the first four teams to apply get to compete for the Wild Fire Cup.

"And now, the teams themselves. Entry No. 1: Team Ajiyoshi!"

It was a team with three third year male students. I took a glance at them and noticed two of them had quite long fingernails.

Could it be that they rarely cook?

"Entry No. 2: Team Fata Morgana!"

It was the team Fukube-san's friend was in. One of them looked quite calm and reserved. Perhaps he's the chef's son from Miraku.

"Entry No. 3: Team Astronomy Club!"

Huh? It seems there's another club who thinks just like Fukube-san did and participated. One of their members waved both her arms to greet the audience... We've met her before—it was Sawakiguchi-san, who was dressed in her usual chignon hairstyle. Oh, she even threw a kiss to the audience. She seems like a tough opponent.

"Entry No. 4: Team Classics Club!"

Fukube-san pumped his right fist into the air. I was at a loss for

what to do, but still, I decided to bow respectfully to the audience around us.

"The rules have been well explained in advance. Each team is to make three dishes. Ingredients are available in the basket in the centre of the field on a first-come-first-serve basis. We often get cases of participants only getting rice, so please plan what you need beforehand. If the ingredient basket has run out, you are allowed to procure ingredients within the confines of Kami High. We have the Gardening Club cooking sweet potatoes today, you know?"

Oh, I see. As the ingredients are first-come-first-serve, it would be better for the first contestant to prepare the ingredients for his teammates as well. I'm glad that Fukube-san is cooking first, as I would easily get overwhelmed by too many choices.

"And now, first participants, on your positions..."

"Well, I'll be going."

Fukube-san waved his arm and headed towards the tables making up the makeshift counter. The four counters were set up in such a way that they surrounded the ingredients in the centre. The Cooking Club president raised his voice from the podium.

"Wild Fire: START!"

The ingredients Fukube-san procured were three cups of rice, one bag of dried sardines, a bit of frying oil, a bottle of sweet vinegar ginger, four blocks of tofu, half a radish, three spring onions, six potatoes, a bit of black sesame seeds, 200g of sliced pork, one pack of sweet prawns, and a packet of potato starch.

As for seasonings and spices like miso, soy sauce, wasabi, chili pepper, it seems like there is no limit on how much we can use them.

Fukube-san thought deeply for a bit before proceeding to boil a pot of water. Using the time the water takes to boil, he began to cut up the spring onions. Taking one of the three spring onions he'd procured, he began to chop them up into many tiny bits, though not as fast as professionals would chop them. It hardly looked hazardous. He next took out the dried sardines. Ah, so he's preparing miso soup.

Observing from the podium, The Cooking Club president began commentating on behalf of the audience.

"Oh, looks like Team Classics Club sure are thorough! They're slowly taking out the intestines of the sardines one by one! This

is a very important step!"

After taking out the sardines' intestines, he began cutting up the radish into smaller pieces.

Wait, Fu-Fukube-san! There's no problem with how you cut up the radish, but you've forgotten to peel its skin! But team members are not allowed to speak while their teammates are cooking. The radish! The radish! I tried to motion my body in order to let him know... The radish!

After cutting up all the pieces, he finally seems to have noticed and took out a peeler. Oh dear! He's peeling the skin off the small pieces he just cut one by one! But if you do that, they'll become too dry by the time you put them into the hot water!

After peeling off the radish skin, he placed the dried sardines aside... Though as he'd taken care of its innards, it shouldn't smell anymore. Fukube-san next turned his attention to the sliced pork. He walked to the centre to obtain some miso paste. Of the three types of miso: red, white and koji, he had chosen white. By now, even I knew what he was planning to make, and it was not plain miso soup. He now held a miso soup spoon in his left hand and a regular spoon in his right.

Twenty minutes passed and on the stove of our kitchen counter was a pot of pork miso soup.

"Twenty minutes is up! Please swap places now."

Fukube-san ran back towards where we sat, and the first thing he said was, "Didn't go as well as I thought!"

"The peeling of the skin?"

Fukube-san shook his head.

"Yeah that as well, but if I'm to make pork miso soup, I shouldn't have spent so much time taking care of the sardine innards! That took up a lot of time..."

He was right, we cannot afford to waste that much time.

"I-I'm counting on you, Chitanda-san."

I nodded.

Please leave it to me.

030 - ♣10

And just when I was wondering how Chitanda-san's cooking would fare...

She's fast! Not just in her movement, but in how she manages to get the knack of things as well. Despite the narrow space around her, she moves as though she has many limbs. Even the

commentator is astounded.

"What on earth is going on with Team Astronomy Club's second member Sawakiguchi? Just what is she making? ...Whoa! Look at the superb way Team Classics Club's Chitanda is slicing the radish skin!"

Before time, the radish skin has been peeled into what seems like a long thin sheet of paper. She next placed the spring onion on the chopping board while preparing the sweet vinegar ginger. How does Chitanda-san manage to move so swiftly when she's usually quite meek, I mean, gentle?

Using the thin radish pieces, she wrapped them around the spring onions and ginger before placing them on the dish. That's one dish complete. Damn, and it's only been two minutes since she started.

It was then that Chitanda-san suddenly stopped moving, for about ten seconds. Just when I realized what was going on, she began moving frantically again. "Ah yes, the rice." Phew, that's the Chitanda-san I know.

Though she had only started to wash the rice, the way she washed it was incredibly thorough.

"Team Classics Club sure are taking their time to polish their rice... They're generously using up every ounce of the six litres of water allocated to them! In order to bring out the best taste in their rice, the Classics Club are cutting no corners with their resources! Look properly, that's the way you wash your rice, by slowly draining the water with your hands!"

She was gentle, yet fast. Upon deciding on the amount of water to be used, she brought it to boil and then turned her attention elsewhere.

"...Team Ajiyoshi has finished their second dish of miso soup.

Are they planning on making a variety of miso soup?

Meanwhile, it seems Team Fata Morgana's teriyaki is going smoothly!"

Chitanda-san's movement became more and more intense. She wrapped the tofu with a cloth and placed it in a bowl, then sprinkled salt and sugar on it while warming up the frying pan. No, she wasn't simply warming up the pan, she was frying the black sesame seeds with oil. She then placed and spread the tofu evenly across the pan. The commentary went ballistic.

"Oh my, Team Classics Club is making giseyaki! I am so moved

to tears by Team Classics Club's Chitanda!"

Sounds like a dish I've never heard of before...

Chitanda-san next began to peel the potato skin while occasionally turning to tend to the frying pan. After peeling the potato skin, she took the tofu out of the pan. It now had an impressive colour as she placed it on the chopping board.

Cutting up the tofu, she placed it on another dish. That's the second dish completed.

I could already smell the sweet aroma coming from the roasted sugar as well as the fried sesame. I was lost for words, indeed, I felt like eating that myself!

"...A sweet scent is coming from the dish of Team Classics Club! How formidable, for them to impress just by scent alone!" Meanwhile, a sweet smell of roasted soy sauce came from Tani-kun's team.

"Team Fata Morgana has also finished their teriyaki. The colour looks superb. One cannot think of these people as mere students. Just who are they?!"

You're dealing with Lady Chitanda Eru, daughter of the Chitanda farming clan! Remember her name!

There was no time to wash the frying pan. As soon as she filled the pot with water and brought it to boil, without waiting she went straight for the sweet prawns, speedily removing their shells. She then turned the fire down when the rice began to boil. And when the pot of hot water started boiling, she threw in the sweet potatoes. Taking some radish, she began making wasabi sauce. Yup, guess that's the way to prepare sweet prawns.

Meanwhile, she briefly cleaned the bowl that held the tofu a while ago and placed the starch in it. I wonder what she's up to now. Feeling curious, I decided to look on.

Though the potatoes were now boiled, she didn't discard the soup right away. Using a pair of chopsticks and the miso spoon, she skillfully scooped the contents out. After draining them of moisture, she placed them into the bowl holding the starch and began grinding them with a mortar. Was she good at making food that involves grinding stuff? Starch and boiled potatoes, just what was she making? Cooking sure is complicated. People who possess the most surprises are the most interesting after all. I'm very looking forward to this. Taking the white stuff that emerged from the bowl, she wrapped them with a cloth and

began squeezing them into lumps. She then dumped the lumps back into the soup.

"It seems Team Astronomy Club is continuing with their Avant-Garde cooking, I pray for the health of our judges... Whoa, Team Classics Club has just made imo-mochi! This Chitanda is extremely skillful! But, are they going to be okay?"

Imo-mochi, huh? I like that a lot. By the way, how much time do we have left? Looking at my watch, we still have two minutes. But wouldn't the commentator say something about the time if we're short on it?

Looking at the kitchen counter, I see a row of dishes being lined up, as well as a row of utensils, and the dishes now being prepared, and then the ingredients...

"AHH-~!"

I yelled. And instantly,

"Whoa there, Team Classics Club! No talking is allowed."

Damn, this is bad.

That's it, there's still time to let her know! This is really bad.

Chitanda-san has made a grave error. But can it be resolved? I crossed my arms over my head to indicate to her that she's

making a mistake.

Chitanda-san seems to have noticed my gesture, has she realized?

She gave a gentle smile and crossed her arms as well.

"..."

Looks like we're unable to communicate at all.

It's useless. Even if she were to realize, nothing could be done about it.

The imo-mochi began to boil inside the pot. Placing them on a small plate, she applied some soy-sauce over them.

And right on cue, "Forty minutes is up! Please change with your final member now," said the announcement.

"How do you think I did?"

Despite moving so swiftly, Chitanda-san showed no signs of fatigue and smiled. As for me, I smiled back, knowing I could never do what she had accomplished.

"You were amazing, Chitanda-san. I never knew you could cook that well."

Chitanda-san said shyly, "Is that so? I really like cooking."

"Yeah, I can see that. But..."

"But?"

Her expression became clouded.

"...Did something go wrong?"

The Cooking Club president commentated,

"Team Classics Club's final member has yet to appear! And to think they performed so superbly until now..."

"Chitanda-san, this is a three-person team."

"Of course. I'm worried for Mayaka-san."

"No, even if she had come..."

I pointed towards the makeshift kitchen counter that Chitanda-san had just worked vigorously on.

On there was a pot of cooking rice, radish rolls filled with ginger and spring onions, giseyaki, imo-mochi, sweet prawn sashimi and pork miso soup.

Chitanda-san looked lively, as we were looking at her masterpieces. Yet... she first looked right, and then looked left again. Then she covered her mouth.

"...OH!"

Even if it were a joke, it was hardly funny. The only ingredients remaining were a radish with its skin peeled, and a little bit of

spring onion left behind. It was as good as trash.

Hahaha, sorry about that, Mayaka.

031 - ♦06

If I had had more time, I would have drawn it better, but even if this was speed drawing I would still prefer to get it perfect, and so I ended up re-doing the fine details that I wasn't too happy with over and over again. I realized it was past the time I promised to meet up with Fuku-chan, but if I don't fix the shape of this eye over here, it'll look way too unbalanced.

That said, it wasn't easy just deciding where to redo. With all my resolve, I worked on those parts with my pen and eraser, and time flew by before I even realized.

"I'm done!"

Kouchi-sempai raised her eyebrows and looked at the drawing of a smiling girl.

"It doesn't look completely alike, but it's good enough," she muttered.

During these two and a half hours, we've drawn five standing portraits and eight facial portraits. While its not a number to brag about considering our speed, it's still quite a lot. Though I

was mainly in charge of erasing any defects I see as well as completing the unfinished parts of the drawing, I really must go now. I was told I could still make it if I arrive at 12 noon, but it's now been over ten minutes since then.

Rolling up the posters, President Yuasa said, "Thank you Ibara. I'm really sorry to take up your time, even though you had an appointment."

As president, she didn't need to do any drawing, and was mainly involved in handing the completed drawings over to the sales booth to display. I gave the president my respects and duly bolted out of Preparation Room No. 1.

Instantly, I was engulfed by the atmosphere of the Cultural Festival. The whole corridor was covered with advertisements and decorations, as well as students walking about in a relaxed manner. I sped through the gaps that they created, it was in these moments that my small figure came in handy.

While I could not pay attention to the time as I was so busy drawing the posters, like the Quiz Club's tournament yesterday, I could hear what was going on at the track field from the speakers.

"...Team Ajiyoshi has now begun preparing dessert by peeling the apple skins. But is this how you peel apple skins? They're making an interesting shape out of it! Team Classics Club's final member has yet to appear..."

I slid across the corridor to make a turn around the corner, leaping through flights of stairs that were pasted with posters. Having to change into my outdoor shoes by the shoe lockers was bothersome, and I took off at once upon putting on my shoes. At the end of a line of white posters was the dazzling light of the sun. There was a crowd gathered on the grounds, and I caught of glimpse of Chi-chan, who was pointing towards me. This was the first time I've seen her tie her hair behind her head. Just as I was thinking that, the crowd suddenly turned their gaze in unison towards me as the speaker shouted, "Oh! Could that girl in casual clothing be the final Team Classics Club member? Will she make it?"

For some reason, the crowd began to applaud. It was at this moment that I realized what I was wearing. That's right, I was still in my cosplay attire...

I felt my body heating up. I really wanted to grumble. I don't

want to do this dressed up like this! That does it, if it has to be like this, then it can't be helped.

I rushed towards the tournament venue to where Chi-chan was.

Fuku-chan raised his arm and motioned towards a guy on the podium with a mic.

"Judge! As our member is late, we request permission to explain the situation to her!"

The guy looked a bit troubled, but then spoke through his mic.

"Keep it short," he said.

Fuku-chan probably had thought of keeping it organized beforehand as he began to speak quickly.

"There's rice being cooked in the pot on the right, it should be just about ready. There's pork miso soup in the pot on the left, all you need to do is heat it up. As for the ingredients..."

Chi-chan looked as though she was about to cry... Has Fuku-chan been bullying her?

"I'm so sorry, Mayaka-san!"

"....Besides the stuff left in the kitchen, you're only allowed to procure items within the school grounds. I'm really sorry you're always given the short end of the stick, but you'll have to figure

out how to make something out of those. We're counting on you."

He gently pushed me from behind towards the makeshift kitchen.

I first took care of the rice. The fire was set on low, and the pot made a hissing sound due to the lid blocking the steam from getting out. I noticed a cloth nearby, so I stopped the fire, took out the lid and covered the pot with the cloth. This should take care of it for now. Now, what should I make?

"...Eh?"

Ummm.

How should I say this? There's nothing except what you'd call trash. All I had was a radish and small pieces of chopped green onions. Onions and radish... What can I cook with that? Or fry it with?

Surrounded by the four makeshift kitchens was a basket in the centre of the ground. I could see a tube of wasabi in it. I thought maybe there was something useful in it, so I dashed towards it to have a look.

...The only ingredient I could find was a shoddy-looking onion

small enough to fit into the palm of my hand. Besides that was just a few blocks of ice... No matter how you look at it, there wasn't much.

On the other hand, I looked at the dishes we had made, and saw we had made quite a lot of amazing dishes. There's no way Fuku-chan could have made that, so it must have been Chi-chan. Wow. There's no way I could beat her. But the problem now is what dish I should make alongside all these impressive dishes. If I make something strange, Chi-chan's efforts would have gone to waste.

A sliced radish, chopped pieces of green onion, and a shoddy-looking onion... What is this? Some sort of riddle? I remained motionless while staring at the chopping board. I now knew what Fuku-chan meant by me drawing the short-end of the stick. The commentary from the guy in the podium was getting quite irritating.

"Team Classics Club looks like they've come out of the frying pan and into the fire! They've run out of ingredients. If their last member is unable to submit anything, their entire score will be zero. Is this the end for Team Classics Club?"

What should I do?

...Just what can I make?

032 - ♠09

"Team Classics Club looks like they've come out of the frying pan and into the fire! They've run out of ingredients. If their last member is unable to submit anything, their entire score will be zero. Is this the end for Team Classics Club?"

Just what on earth are they doing anyway...

From the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block, I could see what was going on on the ground. Or rather, I could hear what was going on in the Wild Fire tournament.

While I have no idea how a three-person team could manage to use up all their ingredients after the second member's turn, I did know that Team Classic Club's second member was a certain Chitanda Eru, so I was hardly surprised.

I muttered softly, "What're you gonna do?"

Saying that, I did not mean "What is Ibara going to do." Rather, it was whether I was going to swallow my pride and help Ibara out of her predicament, cover for Chitanda's error, and help out on Satoshi's promotion.

The answer was clear from the beginning.

No.

...Anyway, this is them fooling around. Moving from the window, I returned to my seat and began fiddling with the paperback that was so boring I stopped reading halfway.

### [150 COPIES REMAINING]

033 - ♣11

Chitanda-san had undone her hair knot and reverted to her usual long flowing hairdo, and was now constantly whispering while looking at Mayaka.

"What is Mayaka-san going to do with these few ingredients? ...I'm *really* curious about it."

And just whose fault was it anyway?

But as this is Chitanda-san, I was unable to give her a proper retort.

Mayaka remained frozen on the spot. If it were me, I would have just taken the spring onion, radish and onion and fried them all together without giving it a second thought, but Mayaka would probably have none of that. She'd probably be thinking such a strange dish would merely be an eyesore in contrast to Chitanda-

san's dishes.

While I wasn't particularly concerned with how the other teams were doing, I did take a glance at Team Fata Morgana, considering how Tani-kun seems to want to treat the Classics Club as his opponents. Taking the baton from the chef's son, it was now Tani-kun's turn to cook... Omelette rice? That's a pretty hard dish you've chosen, good luck there.

Mayaka simply stood before the makeshift kitchen with her arms crossed. If it were me I would have just raised my hand and surrendered, but Mayaka wasn't the sort to give up. And she's probably exhausted from the work with the Manga Club as well. The commentary boomed.

"It looks like Team Classics Club is out of their ( ...TOSHI! ) wits. Only ten minutes now remain, is counting down the time all they can do now?"

Hmm? I thought I heard something from within the commentary. Was it calling for me?

Just when I thought I was imagining things, Chitanda-san, whose hearing was far superior to mine, began looking around her.

"I think I heard someone call out your name, Fukube-san."

"Huh? You think so too?"

"Team Astronomy Club's dish can no longer be called a dish from this world! As befitting of their name, even their dish seems to come from outer space! By cooking banana within a stew, an indescribable scent is emanating from their pot!"

Banana stew, sounds interesting, but.

"Excuse me, could you be quiet for a moment?"

The Cooking Club president frowned for a bit, but put down his mic and asked what the problem was. It was at this moment I could hear clearly.

"SATOSHI!"

It was Houtarou's voice, and it came from afar. But where?

"There! The club room!"

I turned my head around.

Following the direction Chitanda-san pointed, I saw the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block. And unbelievably, there was Houtarou waving his arms!

For Houtarou to actually bother to shout from out of the window to support us, that's unthinkable, as he would be the last person

to do such a thing. Besides, Houtarou wasn't one to slowly attract the attention of more and more people.

"...What the...?"

"...Who's that?"

The crowd began to mutter.

"He seems to be beckoning you to come over, Fukube-san," Chitanda-san whispered.

Really? Hmm, from the look of it, it does seem like Houtarou is beckoning for me to come over rather than waving at me. He continued to shout.

"Satoshi! Come here! Right below!"

What would prompt the energy-saving Houtarou to go through so much trouble to do this?

Mayaka stared at the fourth floor with her mouth wide-open. For that Houtarou to call out to me, it must be something urgent.

It's a rare sight, but something must be up, so I said to Chitanda-san, "Well, since he called me over, guess I'll go have a look."

A hundred metres separate the makeshift kitchens at the grounds and the Special Block. Dashing towards there, I looked up and cupped my hands over my mouth.

"What's up?"

"Here, catch!"

Houtarou seemed to have something in his hand. Catch? Catch what? Without even time to think, Houtarou tossed something out of the window. Whoa! At least let me prepare...

I managed to catch a glimpse of something falling.

That said, it was difficult to judge the distance of something falling from right above you. As it fell from the fourth floor, it fell right into my arms at quite a considerable speed.

It was pretty heavy, but it was a nice catch, if I do say so myself.

But what's this?

"...T-this is!"

Within my arms was something unbelievable. How on earth did Houtarou get his hands on this?

034 - ♦07

Fuku-chan came running back with a yellowish bag in his arms. And without saying anything, he tossed the bag over, which I instinctively caught. Is this what Oreki threw at him?

Where did Oreki get this? On the bag was written "weak flour."

Looking flustered after running all the way back, Fuku-chan

gave me a thumbs-up gesture. The guy commentating on the podium shouted.

"An incredible development has occurred with Team Classics Club! It's true that you're allowed to procure ingredients within the school grounds, but for them to acquire wheat flour!"

The worrying can come later. Wheat flour, with spring onions, radish and onion, and then...

A completed picture flashed within my head, as well as the steps to get there.

Let's do this.

035 - ♣12

Mayaka began to move.

Pouring the flour into a bowl, she then filled it with water. She took some ice cubes from the basket in the centre and placed them into the bowl as well. She next began heating up the frying pan and poured oil into it. She cut the chopped spring onions into even lengths, as well as chopping up the round onion and shredding the radish with a shredder. She then began to fry something.

"Team Classics Club is now gathering the prawn heads that

Chitanda took off a while ago. What is she planning to do with them?"

Sweet prawn heads... while they aren't exactly inedible, what's that got to do with the flour?

As I tilted my head in puzzlement, Chitanda-san quietly whispered, "...Kakiage."

That's it! Looking at the makeshift kitchen, Mayaka was indeed making kakiage.

Using these seemingly trash-like ingredients, Mayaka was able to make them shine. She had just breathed new life into this "trash" and given it a new name: "kakiage." Mayaka had basically just lectured us on how to never give up! This is not trash! Anyone is capable of shining! Long live Mayaka! In fact, we're all amazing! I felt as giddy as a grade school student.

Dipping the vegetables and prawn heads into the dissolved flour, she heated up the oil. However...

"You have five minutes remaining!"

Can she make it in time?

Mayaka seemed to be searching for something. What is it? She should be pouring oil over the kakiage by now.

After looking around the utensils tray, she glared at the president on the podium and shouted, "Hey, Cooking Club! At least prepare a ladle!"

Oh yeah, there didn't seem to be a ladle. It was really bothersome when I was making the pork miso soup, I had to make do with a spoon. The president frantically instructed one of his female members to go find one at once. The girl began looking around for a ladle. Hurry up! Any ladle would do, there's no time! In the end, she managed to borrow a ladle from another team that wasn't using it and handed it to Mayaka.

Dammit, that's a minute gone!

Mayaka snatched the ladle from the girl and began pouring oil over the kakiage with it. A sizzling sound began to form as she did so. She next moved very swiftly, shredding the radish, heating up the pork soup and mixing the soy sauce with sweet wine before putting them into a bowl of rice... Rice?

"Team Classics Club is catching up really fast! Can they make it? One minute remaining!"

Perhaps feeling anxious because of the commentary, Mayaka kept looking at the pan of oil. The next few seconds were

excruciatingly long and silent. And suddenly, the autumn sun was blocked by a pair of chopsticks, as she placed the kakiage on top of the bowl of rice and sprinkled the shredded radish on it.

"Come on!"

"Time's almost up!"

"You can do it!"

The audience cheered her on. Even they were fired up by Mayaka's persistence.

"Mayaka-san..."

Even Chitanda-san sounded tearful.

As expected of Mayaka. I'm so proud of you.

"Time's--up!"

Placing a final piece of topping, Mayaka had completed her kakiage bowl rice, and right on cue, the Wild Fire tournament came to an end.

I have no regrets. No matter what the result is, I have no regrets.

(Team Classics Club's dishes are as follows.

1st member - Fukube Satoshi: Pork miso soup.

2nd member - Chitanda Eru: Vinegar ginger radish roll,

giseyaki, sweet prawn sashimi, imo-mochi.

3rd member - Ibara Mayaka: Kakiage bowl rice. )

036 - ♥08

Mayaka-san's skills brought us back from the jaws of defeat. Not only was she adept in the use of the knives, but to think of making kakiage at such a desperate situation was simply amazing. I then looked towards the fourth floor at the window of the Geology Room. I don't know how Oreki-san got his hands on the bag of flour, but he is a very perceptive person. Perhaps he is able to foresee events before they even happen. While I could not see him at the window, I still bowed towards his direction in gratitude.

Within the thunderous applause, Mayaka-san returned to her seat. The cute-looking beret hat on her head and the heart shaped brooch on her chest attracted a lot of attention. Yet despite her adorable appearance, Mayaka-san didn't seem too pleased. Reminded of my own mistake, I felt like I should at least apologize to her, yet the first thing that came out of her mouth was, "It wasn't fried enough!"

"Well, it's not like we had the time to. It was still great, though."

Fukube-san tried to console her, but she did not seem satisfied

"There was no ladle! They've got shredders and peelers, so I thought they would also have a ladle. That's a minute wasted. If it wasn't for that, I could have fried it better. I'm such an idiot, I should have thought of using something else in place of a ladle during all that time!"

"I must sincerely apologize for that."

A person said while emerging from the side. It was The Cooking Club's president, who was commentating on the podium a while ago. While he maintained a comical personality on the podium, right now he was sincere as he apologized to Mayaka-san for the oversight.

"We did check to make sure we had all the utensils needed... We even doubled-check just before the tournament."

Fukube-san stood between them and mediated.

"Well, I did find it odd when I was making the pork miso soup. I should have raised this question when it was my turn, as I had more time then."

"...I guess so."

By saying that, it seems Mayaka-san has accepted the president's

apology.

"But it's amazing for you to manage to fry something even under such conditions..." As the president continued the conversation, I decided to have a look at the makeshift kitchen, as I was feeling curious about why a utensil would be missing from the tournament itself.

The judges had begun sampling the dishes, and everyone's attention was on them now. After ingesting the Astronomy Club's greenish brown dish (or perhaps bamboo-coloured), one of the judges closed his eyes and leaned skyward. I don't think I would be curious about what that tasted like. While I do not quite agree with the quote "ignorance is bliss," I decided to be flexible for today at least.

The utensils were placed inside a cloth-covered tray. Inside were utensils which none of us had used neatly lined up next to one another, like bamboo skewers, lemon squeezers and barbecue spatulas. Yet a ladle ought to be one of the most basic kitchen utensils; was it be just a mere error?

It's not like I was expecting something, neither was I looking for any irregularities. I was simply lifting up the tray to have a look

when,

"Oh!"

A greeting card. And under it was an opened copy of the pamphlet "Kanya Festival Guide." Where have I seen this before?

Could it be? Could it be?! I quickly turned around.

"Fukube-san! Mayaka-san!"

And shouted towards them both. By this time, the president had returned to the podium to continue with his duties.

"Hey, Chitanda-san, seems like that president really admires you."

Admire me? No way, but I hardly even know him. This would be troubling. No, more importantly,

"Take a look at this, under the tray."

"What's this?"

Mayaka-san casually picked up the card, yet upon taking a glance, her expression stiffened. Written on it were a series of words which I had expected to see:

The Cooking Club has lost its ladle.

Juumoji

"This is..."

Fukube-san's eyes began to sparkle. I instinctively spoke upon seeing the card.

"The same as the Fortune Telling Association!"

"The same as the Go Club!"

Eh?

My eyes met with Fukube-san's, which had widened. I probably looked just as startled as well.

Only Mayaka-san remained calm. The page which the opened copy of "Kanya Festival Guide" was showing was the page featuring the list of participating clubs, just like the one Kaho-san had shown me. The page which had the following "The Cooking Club - Cooking battle 'Wild Fire' on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants."

Mayaka-san first looked at Fukube-san and then towards me and slowly said, "So, what's this all about?"

She asked what this was all about.

...So what was this all about?

I once again exchanged glances with Fukube-san.

### **3-3 The "Juumoji" Incident**

037 - ♠10

I opened my boxed lunch while listening to the Broadcast Club's live radio broadcast.

What kind of day is it today, you ask? I would say today was one of those days when my sis would decide to make my boxed lunch. I should really be giving my thanks for the food I'm receiving, but what's with this ethnic-looking dish comprised of spicy soybeans and fried chicken covered in yoghurt? The grains of rice in this Nasi Goreng[1] looked bigger than the rice I normally have. Where'd she get this from?

The door was closed during lunch time. This ethnic looking boxed lunch sure looked good. Guess I'll take my time enjoying this.

"Heya."

Opening the door, Satoshi walked in, followed by Chitanda and Ibara.

"Great work you did there, guys," I said, pointing upwards, or rather, towards the radio broadcast from the speakers.

A while ago, they were doing an interview with The Cooking Club.

"That sure was a high quality competition, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. The results were that close. I thought the amberjack teriyaki, the main dish of Team Fata Morgana's second member would be most capable of winning. The same goes for his steamed clams, though as this is a school cultural festival, in place of steaming it with sake, he substituted rice wine, but still the taste was superb. Though he prepared them so early, that by the time the competition was over they became quite cool. This was where Team Classics Club made their comeback. The second member's giseyaki and imo-mochi were properly stored to be re-heated, while you could feel the heat from their third member's kakiage rice bowl so much that it looked as though that the prawn heads were crying. This heat was the difference that decided their victory."

"And what about Team Astronomy Club?"

"They were in a world of their own."

Putting down my chopsticks, I spoke.

"Congratulations on winning."

By the way, something seems to have happened. As representing the winners to receive the prize, Ibara did not promote the Classics Club's name as she was supposed to, and to think

Satoshi went through all this trouble to participate. At any rate, Satoshi was basically enjoying this more than promoting the club.

Despite being complimented, the three members were surprisingly apathetic to the radio broadcast.

"Thank you. It was thanks to Oreki-san's help. By the way, we have something to show you."

Chitanda spoke first. I have a really bad feeling about this.

"A-anyway, let's have lunch."

I prompted them to take their seats, which they duly did and slowly took out their own food... They've all bought bread from the school store. How unambitious.

Opening her bag of green bean paste bread, Chitanda turned around without even taking a bite.

"We have something to show you."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"This," She said and handed something to me. It looked like a greeting card. On it was written "The Cooking Club has lost its ladle." Signed by "Juumoji."

"Hmm."

I took a bite of the spicy beans and said, "The ladles were stolen?"

"Yes... but just ours."

Ibara nodded. As Ibara had made the kakiage rice bowl, she was most affected by the theft. And to think she could have just made dumplings out of the flour I provided... Who would have thought she would fry something with it? She sure is a sensitive person.

"Probably a prank by someone with too much time on their hands."

I returned the greeting card, yet the conversation did not end there.

Munching on his red bean paste bread, Satoshi smiled and said, "It's not just The Cooking Club, the same happened to the Go Club as well. I hear the A Capella Club was also hit."

"The Fortune Telling Association, too. They both found this, um, declaration of crime with the same font."

I see.

"Looks like someone really has a lot of time on their hands."

I tried to downplay the incident, but Chitanda was not one to be

fooled. Disregarding the green bean paste bread in her hands, she held her fists tightly. Chitanda's large black eyes, which betray her normally gentle image, were now widening. I could sense the atmosphere changing.

T-this is bad. Why now? Not even half a day had passed yet. And I was hoping to endure the Cultural Festival without incident. To think Chitanda had restrained herself well yesterday, how did it come to this? Where has it gone wrong? Once she makes her move, nobody could stop her. I knew very well when Chitanda Eru would start getting curious, a dark emotion that could kill cats.

Speaking one word at a time she said, "Just who would do such a thing during the Cultural Festival? Why would Juumoji-san commit such acts with such a name? Why would he steal these items one after another?"

She's about to say that line.

"I'm *really* curious about it."

Ah, she's said it. She has finally gone and said it.  
...No wait, there's no reason to be scared. Ever since enrolling here, I have not been able to suppress her curiosity, but right

now, I have a trump card.

Instead of wasting my time making excuses, I promptly showed my trump card.

"Now is not the time for that. What about our anthologies?"

Yet just as I had finished speaking, Satoshi spoke.

"What about those anthologies indeed. Even if we raise our name recognition by participating in these straightforward events, we're not gonna improve our sales anyway. I was prepared to accept that this was a futile exercise, so I just thought of something better."

"Something better?"

Satoshi's eyes were smiling, but that's his usual self. Though he seems to be serious about what he's about to say.

"This series of thefts, coupled with a signed declaration of crime — it's clear we're looking at a phantom thief incident. It's bound to get reported by the Wall Newspaper Club, and possibly broadcasted by the Broadcast Club tomorrow. If we go along this line of thinking, even if we don't sell out, we'll still be able to look forward to selling up to thirty to forty copies."

...I see. It's not so bad if that's the case. Indeed, this is certainly a

newsworthy topic. Satoshi's mic appeal yesterday yielded some results, so if we could get the two media clubs to work for us, it's possible to sell up to thirty or forty copies. However, "How are we going to improve our sales in the first place anyway? This incident has got nothing to do with the Classics Club."

"Oh, I know,"

Ibara interrupted, "We have Oreki."

"Yup. Just as with the 'Hyouka' incident or the 'Empress' incident, Houtarou certainly performed well in both."

Wait a sec, I know where this conversation is going, but wait a sec.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Chitanda was a bit slow in getting their meaning. Satoshi explained with a mischievous smile.

"In other words, 'To find out how Oreki Houtaou, the Classic Club's super sleuth, manages to bring the harbinger of the Cultural Festival Juumonji to justice, read all about it in this "Hyouka," the Classics Club's anthology!' We could kill two birds with one stone by capturing Juumonji and promoting the

Classic Club's name."

"I-I see! This is an excellent idea! I should hurry up and..."

Argh! I smacked my chopsticks onto the table.

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm not playing along with your games!"

I yelled. How can they toy around with people like that?

Yet, in contrast to my expectations, Satoshi surprisingly nodded in agreement that he was fooling around.

"You're right. I want to improve the sales, but it's probably not good to have Houtarou be our clown."

So you do get it... That I'll be nothing but a circus clown in such a charade.

"Besides, this 'Juumonji' guy is just stealing randomly. What do you want me to say to him if we do catch him?"

"I dunno, I was thinking you'd come up with something."

Don't be ridiculous.

"Why do you think I would be the one to do such a thing... First of all, how many people do you think have entered and left the school grounds during the Cultural Festival? And that's aside from our nearly one thousand students."

The room went silent. I munched another mouthful of ethnic

boxed lunch.

Unwrapping the layers on her bacon roll, Ibara sighed.

"I don't think Fuku-chan's idea was bad. While I think it's a bit mean to have Oreki do something, if we could somehow catch that phantom thief, we could involve the Classics Club in this."

She unwrapped another layer.

"...If only the Classics Club were targeted."

"Yeah."

I nodded. If that were to happen, people would gradually turn their attention to the Classics Club while following the phantom thief incident. But in that case, there was no need to even catch this "Juumonji."

Satoshi muttered, "...We could stage it..."

"REJECTED."

Ibara replied sharply, "It's too risky."

"I was only kidding."

"When Fuku-chan says it, it doesn't sound like you're kidding..."

But, really, what could we do?"

"Try not to think too much about it, your roll's about to become straight."

Despite my quip, Ibara didn't even glare back at me and unwrapped yet another layer on her roll. She twitched her brows hard. Though she had the strongest sense of responsibility amongst us, she was also the one who's contributed the least to the Classics Club during this time. She must have realized this as well.

"Is there a chance the Classics Club would be targeted?"

Holding the green bean paste bread in her hand, Chitanda asked.

"Satoshi, how many participating clubs are there?"

"Fifty-one. Not a small number if you're wishing to be targeted."

"Would the thief calling himself Juumonji-san choose his targets randomly?"

"You think he'd target the Classics Club if he were to choose in such a fashion?"

The possibility would be zero. If it's completely random, the odds of being targeted would be...

"...Which clubs have been targeted again?"

Satoshi replied instantly, "The Go Club, A Capella Club, The Cooking Club, and what was it? Ah, the Fortune Telling Association."

Our odds of being targeted would be forty-seven out of fifty-one. Even if it were completely random, the possibility percentage would be insanely low. As I'm the only person watching the stall for the club, if I were to go out to take a walk or go to the bathroom, it would make it easier for us to be targeted.

...Hmm?

Wait a moment, this sounds strange.

I stopped Chitanda, who looked as though she was about to say something to me, and asked Satoshi, "Sorry, can you repeat which clubs were targeted again?"

"Sure, the Go Club, A Capella Club, Fortune Telling

Association and The Cooking Club."

Hmm, could it be?

"In other words,"

I spoke cautiously, "The A Capella Club, the Go Club, the Fortune Telling Association, and The Cooking Club.

...Who else was targeted?"

Looking puzzled, Satoshi shook his head.

"Dunno, I've not heard of any."

Watching our conversation, Ibara began looking through the "Kanya Festival Guide" in her hands. It seems like she too had realized what I had. Searching via the [gojuuon \[2\]](#).directory for the club names at the front of the guide, she began listing some names.

"Film Club, Gardening Club, Drama Club, Sci-Fi Club."

"Yes, which of those four were hit?"

"Film Club, Gardening Club..."

Taking a deep breath, Satoshi yelled, "A.B.C.!"

"Eh? Eh? What do you mean?"

Chitanda was the only one who didn't get it.

Watching her squeeze her green bean paste bread to smithereens, I explained to her, "It is as you have wondered, he

wouldn't have targeted the clubs randomly. It's all following a pattern, and a very simple one at that. The only reason we didn't realize it earlier was because the order in which we were told which clubs were targeted was mixed up. So, assuming the Film Club was targeted, we have: The A Capella Club, Go Club, Fortune Telling Association, Film Club, and The Cooking Club."

"Ah!"

Chitanda covered her mouth.

"The gojuuon sequence!"

Meanwhile, Satoshi was doing the rounds, calling someone on his cell phone.

"...Yes, just want to know if you've got something stolen... No, it's not me! Honest! ...Hmm? A water gun? I see, thanks."

He hung up the call as the three of us looked on.

Then he said, "It was the Gardening Club. One of their water guns was stolen while they were away from the room."

"Water gun? Why would the Gardening Club have water guns?"

A sensible question from Ibara, which I answered at once.

"They were making sweet potatoes, so they needed to prepare

water to put out the fire, and they decided to use water guns because it looked cool that way."

"O-Oreki! How on earth did you know that!?"

Well, I'm sorry that I have amazing levels of perception. But actually, it was thanks to the Glock 17 that I had obtained earlier on. Ibara continued to mutter.

"But wait a minute. In 'A.B.C.,' it started with a person whose name starts with the letter A murdered in a place also starting with the letter A."

The only person here most likely to have read Agatha Christie's "The A.B.C. Murders" was probably Ibara.

"The Cooking Club had their ladle stolen, right?"

"Just wait a moment."

Stopping Ibara from going frantic, Satoshi took out a notebook and pen from the drawstring bag he always carries with him.

"Chitanda-san, what was it that was stolen from the Fortune Telling Association?"

"It's the 'Wheel of Fortune.'"

"OK!"

He began scribbling with his pen.

\* **A Capella Club ([A]KAPERA BU アカペラ部) - (Drink)**

\* **Go Club ([I]GO BU 囲碁部) - (Go Stones)**

\* **Fortune Telling Association ([U]RANAI KEN 占い研) -**

**Wheel of Fortune ([U]NMEI NO WA 運命の輪)**

\* **Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部) - (Water Gun)**

\* **The Cooking Club ([O] RYOURI KEN お料理研) - Ladle**

**([O]TAMA おたま)**

I see.

"Hmm. I've not seen their declaration of crime cards, but isn't this stretching it a bit?"

Satoshi tilted his head.

Feeling skeptical myself, I said, "Maybe the Gardening Club had their AK ([E]-KEI エーケイ) stolen?"

"AK? What's that?"

"Their water gun, it's shaped like a Kalashnikov rifle."

"Really? I'll have to call the Gardening Club to confirm this."

"In that case, for the Go Club, they would have had their 'stones' ([I]SHI 石) stolen."

Indeed, no one objected to such a hypothesis.

As for the A Capella Club, "The A Capella Club would be..."

"Hmm..... Awamori ([A]WAMORI 泡盛)2[3] Hot sake ([A]TSUKAN 热  
燶)?"

"It wouldn't matter as long as we could confirm the item starts  
with an [A]. We shouldn't think too much on that."

This... Wouldn't this be the excellent chance that the Classics  
Club would wish for? This was not me forsaking my energy-  
saving lifestyle. As usual, if there's something that I don't have  
to do, I won't do it. But if I let this pass, wouldn't it be too much  
of a pity? Even I was feeling a bit excited by the dawn of such  
luck.

"But, how far will this 'Juumonji-san' go with his crimes?"

How can you be so carefree, Chitanda!?

"Yeah, that's a problem."

"It won't be a problem as long as he stops by the Classics Club."

...Do even Satoshi and Ibara not get it as well?

I raised my voice.

"What are you guys talking about? What does the culprit call  
himself again?"

"Eh? Isn't it Juumonji?"

"I don't know why you guys pronounce it as 'Juumonji', when normally you would pronounce it as 'Juumoji.'"

"...Well, that's because I have a friend called Juumonji Kaho..."

"Oh!" Ibara exclaimed.

"That's it! Juumoji (Ten Characters 十文字)! Since Chi-chan and Fuku-chan kept pronouncing it as 'Juumonji,' I didn't see the association! If it's 'Juumoji' (Ten Characters), then that would make The Cooking Club the fifth character."

Exactly.

"And the sixth target would start with [KA], in other words, the tenth and final target would start with [KO]... That's more than enough reason to get people to come visit the Classics Club ([KO]TENBU 古典部), isn't it?"

### [148 COPIES REMAINING]

038 - ♥09

While I believe Fukube-san and Mayaka-san are both wonderful people, there's one thing I don't agree with them about.

They make too much fun of Oreki-san.

He gets called dullish, a slacker, oversleeper, lazy, good-for-nothing, loiterer, too lazy to even loiter, a lion that sleeps all

day, not even a lion even if he sleeps all day, the antithesis of Labour Thanksgiving Day, sluggish, and all other sorts of bad names.

For me, if I see something I don't understand, I would seek out its answer. If I see something that looks out of place, I would spot it. But while I often get praised for being able to answer any problem being asked, I do not find myself matching that description. For some of the incredible things that I have come across, I was not able to find the answer to half of them. This would be like how rice cannot be grown by just merely preparing soil, water and seeds alone, part of being a rice farmer is to oversee how they're grown properly. Oreki-san was able to find the key to the questions that I did not understand, and obtain the answers which I had never thought about. He helped massively in the "Hyouka" incident, as named by Fukube-san, as well as come up with an amazing theory in the "Empress" incident.

He wasn't just a bright person. In contrast to what he himself normally claims, that he couldn't be bothered to help other people if it is too troubling for him, I believe he is actually a

passionate and warm person deep inside.

Then again, I realize I've been relying too much on that warmth of his. That's why I tell myself I shouldn't rely too much on him...

With the new vision and possibilities shown to me by Oreki-san, I now head once again to the Wall Newspaper Club room. Based on the "pattern" that Oreki-san had spoke of, it would certainly attract the attention of the Wall Newspaper Club. Yet, whether I could convey this message to them to get them moving would depend on how I negotiate with them. I am no longer overwhelmed by the colourful decorations of the Cultural Festival, the incessant chattering of the students and the various posters pasted everywhere. Instead, courtesy of Irisu-san's advice, my heart was filled with the confidence that this time I will not fail.

According to Fukube-san, it seems the "Juumoji" incident has yet to receive much attention, which means this story would be extremely newsworthy for the Wall Newspaper Club. This would be the sort of request where, based on Irisu-san's advice, I do not need to repay any favour.

I recalled what was being taught, as my sense of memory is one of the few things that I'm confident of. Important requests, give them expectations, make them think our problem is trivial, and make the request alone to a person of the opposite gender.

As to why these methods would be effective, I'm still at a loss in understanding them... It feels bad for me to use systems which I do not fully understand as mere tools, but I can't afford to be picky.

Making good use of that advice, I rehearsed my lines. To make sure I don't say anything wrong, I repeated them again and again on my own.

I arrived before the Wall Newspaper Club room, the Biology Lecture Room, and knocked on the closed door,  
"Comin~!"

A hoarse voice replied as the door opened startlingly.  
There were six people inside, which was more than yesterday.  
But that was not the only thing that was different. While Toogaito-san was amongst them, the other five people were all speaking on their cell phones. One of them finished speaking and spoke to another male student who was on the phone.

"Cooking Club. Confirm it with their president."

The student who heard the instruction made a circle with his finger. Was it money? ...Oh, he was making an OK sign. The student who just finished speaking on the phone wrote some sort of list before heading out of the room, seemingly not noticing my presence.

It was then that a voice spoke.

"Sorry about that, Chitanda-san. We're a bit busy at the moment."

Before noticing, Toogaito-san had started walking towards me.

After being mesmerized by the passion of the Wall Newspaper Club, I quickly returned to my senses.

"Try coming back some other time."

"Yes, sorry to be troubling you..."

No! I mustn't! I quickly stopped what I was saying. We haven't got much time ourselves. If I give up so soon, I wouldn't be able to face Oreki-san. I should at least convey my message, "...Sorry to be troubling you, but, could you please take a moment? I have something to tell you."

While it's an unreasonable request, Toogaito said with a troubled

expression, "All right, make it quick."

He seems to have accepted the request. I should be bowing to him in gratitude, but as he's in a hurry, I have decided to omit that.

It was then that I remembered. Toogaito-san is a member of the opposite gender. As there were other members present, I gradually took a few steps back away from the Biology Room. Perhaps unconsciously, Toogaito-san stepped forward in tandem towards the corridor. I then inadvertently closed the door.

During the Cultural Festival, there was virtually no one around the Biology Room on the third floor of the Special Block besides us.

I've managed to adhere to one point of Irisu-san's advice now. To ensure I didn't fail, I suppressed my nervousness and spoke, "It's about the Classics Club."

"Like I said, we'll only consider it if it's newsworthy."

"Well, umm, it *is* newsworthy."

Now, to make an expectation out of him. I think I should say it like this:

"It's something that we can only tell the Wall Newspaper Club."

"Hmm?"

Toogaito-san, who had originally wanted the conversation to end quickly, suddenly had a change in his attitude.

"What do you mean?"

"It's like this,"

I took a quick breath.

"We've discovered that during the Cultural Festival, many clubs have had various items stolen."

I had wanted to go on, but Toogaito-san's reaction was vigorous.

"Juumoji!"

"Eh?"

"What do you know about 'Juumoji'!?"

I was at a loss in how to deal with this sudden, unexpected turn of events. Umm, how should I respond? It's a bad habit of mine to suddenly stop speaking in times like these, even Oreki-san had told me about it. I must calm down, in other words, I must try and figure out what's going on so far...

Toogaito-san, or rather the Wall Newspaper Club, has already figured out something about the "Juumoji" incident, and they're extremely interested in it... Rather than a favour that's not

expected to be repaid, this has now become a request where the favour is expected to be repaid.

W-what should I do?

No, this shouldn't change what I should be telling him. I nodded and tried my best to calm down, before compiling my thoughts into words.

I explained everything.

From beginning to end.

Toogaito-san looked very intrigued in what I had said and was extremely pleased.

"I see... The gojuuon sequence, huh? Now it makes sense, The Cooking Club's official name starts with [O]. And the Fortune Telling Association was hit as well... So that's why."

I was a bit curious on what he meant by the end.

"Umm, did you figure something out?"

"Oh."

Toogaito-san had a bitter look on his face.

"This is the Wall Newspaper Club after all,"

"Yes."

I nodded.

Toogaito then repeated again in a different tone, "The Wall  
Newspaper Club ([KA]BESHINBUN BU 壁新聞部), starts  
with a [KA]."

"Oh! So that means,"

"We lost out cutter knife ([KA]TTA-NAIFU カッターナイ  
フ), it happened when we were all out."

"And that's why you're all so busy now?"

Toogaito-san nodded.

"While it's vexing that we had something stolen from us, it's this  
sort of accidental incident that we most look forward to. This is  
way more interesting than the usual stuff that we have to report  
on, isn't it? You've really saved us a lot of trouble. Who would  
have thought this 'Juumoji' would work in such a way?"

He then added a compliment.

"Good work for figuring that out."

"Oh, yes, that was mainly Oreki-san."

Yet, upon mentioning Oreki-san's name, for some reason  
Toogaito-san's smile was a mix between delight and vexation.

"...Ah, of course. Anyway, give him my thanks."

"Okay."

"Well, thanks for the information."

With a cheerful expression, I watched as Toogaito-san returned to the Biology Room.

It was when he was about to shut the door that I remembered Irisu-san's advice - "For situations where you're dealing with strangers which you would not deal with again after you receive the favour, in nine out of ten cases, they would consider your request a rip-off."

*Wait! Please write something about the Classics Club in return!*

I should have shouted that to Toogaito-san... but I couldn't do it. I couldn't make myself say something that sounds like I do not trust Toogaito-san.

"....."

I looked at the hand which I stretched out to call Toogaito-san.

For a moment, I felt depressed at failing once again.

However.

After thinking again calmly, this could turn out for be best.

Irisu-san's advice on that was mainly for strangers whom I won't deal with again. But that's not the case for Toogaito-san. So if I were to build on a trust with Toogaito-san, then what I did

wasn't wrong.

Yes, that's got to be the case.

...For a bit, I felt more resolute in my determination.

039 - ♣13

I first knew of Houtarou's amazing sense of perception in the "Hyouka" incident. Despite spending all that time with him in junior high, I never knew he was capable of such feats.

Knowing Houtarou's special abilities, I was full of expectations during the "Empress" affair, as I could not think of anyone else besides him who could pull it off. The very least I could do was give him my support. Though he was also active in other incidents, these were the two main ones that came to mind.

However, this time, I do not expect anything from Houtarou.

As he is in charge of watching the stall, he is unable to leave the Geology Room. Knowing Houtarou's motto, he would surely enjoy not needing to move around, but it also means he would be unable to solve anything, as much footwork is required for this case. In other words, Houtarou is unsuited for the "Juumoji" incident.

And what happens when I don't have any expectations from

Houtarou?

...That leaves me with no choice but to do the investigation myself.

Using Houtarou's deductions as a basis, and padding it up with information I gleamed from various connections, I've managed to compile the following data.

## Day 1

\* ~11:30am - A Capella Club ([A]KAPERA BU アカペラ部)

- "Aquarius" ([A]KUARIASU アクエリアス) soft drink  
stolen

\* ~12:30pm? - Go Club ([I]GO BU 囲碁部) - Stones ([I]SHI 石)(?) stolen

\* Just after 2:00pm - Fortune Telling Association

([U]RANAI KENKYUU KAI 占い研究会) - Wheel of  
Fortune ([U]NMEI NO WA 運命の輪) stolen

## Day 2

\* ~9:00am - Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部) - AK  
([E]-KEI エーケイ) (Kalashnikov water gun) stolen

\* Just before 11:30am - The Cooking Club ([O]RYOURI

## KENKYUU KAI お料理研究会) - Ladle ([O]TAMA おたま)

### stolen

And from Chitanda-san, who just returned dashing down the corridor, just a moment ago (currently it's 1:58pm), the Wall Newspaper Club ([KA]BESHINBUN BU 壁新聞部) has had their cutter knife ([KA]TTA- NAIFU カッターナイフ) stolen.

The actual time when they were hit should be sometime earlier than this.

Roughly speaking, it would seem "Juumoji" seems to make his move every one and a half hour to two and a half hours.

Considering the Cultural Festival takes place from 8:00am to 5:00pm, it makes sense.

As the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival spans three days, if he were to steal from ten clubs, he would have divided them evenly, stealing from three the first day, three the second day, and four on the final day. However, while he has indeed targeted three clubs in the first day, as people would be preparing to take down their stuff on the final day from around three, it's possible that he could choose to target four clubs today.

Taking out my copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide," I started looking up the clubs whose names begin with [KI]... Heh, looks like the phantom thief is bound by the strange rules he has set for himself, as the only club that starts with [KI] is the Magic Club ([KI]JUTSU BU 奇術部).

Arriving at the Magic Club, there was a poster that read "The next show will begin at 2pm." This is most ideal. If he were to commit the crime, he would have to do so right before everyone's gazes. And even if "Juumoji" manages to pull this off and steal something that starts with [KI], there should still be some clues left behind.

If I stay vigilant, I have a fair chance of victory. "Juumoji"'s defeat lies with his pattern being too easy to read. The only problem with catching "Juumoji" now would mean he's denied the chance to go all the way to [KO], which would be bad for our attempt to promote the Classics Club. Anyway, if we catch him, we still might be able to achieve something out of it.

I'm not like Houtarou. I am unable to untie the knots of a rope, neither am I able to just cut them loose quickly. If I could, even I would be amazed at myself.

However, I am at least able to move my body around, just by walking on my two feet and seeing with my two eyes, I should be able to figure something out.

The Magic Club public performance takes place in Class 2D's classroom. As a regular classroom, it has two entrances. The front door was covered by a curtain, with a cardboard box placed outside that read "Magic Club Backstage. No Trespassers Allowed." Visitors are to enter via the back door. Beside the back door was a table with a white box placed on it. Taking a closer look, it turns out it contains the programme booklets for the show.

As there was nothing else to do while waiting thirty minutes for the show to start, I bought one booklet.

1.

Introduction

2.

Living Dead - Takamura Youichi (1st Year)

3.

The Rainbow Ring - Nagai Kaori (1st

Year)

4.

Vanishing Act - Tayama Kazuya (2nd

Year)

5.

Closeup Card Magic - Takamura

Youichi and Nagai Kaori (1st Year)

6.

Bowls and Balls - Tayama Kazuya (2nd

Year)

7.

Closing

I see.

The first thing I understood was that the Magic Club only has

three members. The Classics Club has four while the Sewing

Club has five. Hey, we have more.

"Living Dead" would be referring to zombies. As this is the

Magic Club, they're no doubt referring to the zombie ball.

"Rainbow Ring" would be linking rings, where they'd be playing

with the illusion of the rings linking and separating. "Vanishing

"Act" probably involves something disappearing and being replaced with something else. "Closeup Card Magic" is like its name suggests, a straightforward performance. Should be interesting as there are two performers. "Bowls and Balls" is probably a variation of the cups and balls trick, where the audience is tricked into thinking the ball entered one cup when it instead ended up in another, this time they seem to be using bowls instead.

There doesn't seem to be anything within sight that starts with [KI]. Though there are the Kings ([KI]NGU キング) from the deck of cards, if they're going to use coins, then gold coins ([KI]NKA 金貨). If diacritics[4] are allowed for the [KI] spelling, then silver coins ([GI]NKA 銀貨) would do as well... But wait, that's technically impossible. (A 1 yen coin is made of aluminum, 5 yen is brass, 10 yen is bronze, and the rest are nickel coins. Oh, there's also the 500 yen coin, which is a mixture of brass and nickel, I guess?)

I wondered if I should take a peek inside, as I placed my hand on the door handle. I'd better not, while it might help in catching the phantom thief Juumoji, it's too unrefined of me to peek into

the Magic Club's backstage. Besides, as long as I just stand here, I would easily see if anyone went in or out.

As I looked at my own notes, I immersed myself in enjoying this unexpected turn of events. While seeking out knowledge at my own pace is also fun in itself, I relish in these kinds of unforeseen incidents. Then again, based on my own experiences, sadly speaking, it would seem my wits, which are required in such a case, are by no means superior to the rest. In essence, I am unable to deal with such sudden situations with a calm head, but this time I have prepared sufficiently in terms of intel, so I should be able to do something about it.

I killed time while going along such thoughts.

"Hmm? Why, if it isn't Fukube," said a surprised sounding voice. It was Tani-kun, with his firm jaw and round nose.  
"You did rather well in the Wild Fire tournament."

That reminds me, we did beat his team during the cooking tournament. Upon discovering the declaration of crime, we'd totally forgotten about our duel.

I smiled and said, "Well, it's thanks to my pork miso soup, after all. My teammates also worked their best as a result, making my

work look rather incomplete though."

"Team competitions sure are tough. I should have stuck with individual tournaments. Those two girls were incredible, even Suhara was amazed."

"Though I don't feel like I've won, as there weren't many participants. We were just lucky."

"By the way..."

Tani-kun turned his gaze towards my hand, which held the list of targeted clubs and items stolen. I subtly hid it away from sight.

"So have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

Tani-kun then turned his sights towards the Magic Club's billboard. I pondered on the possibilities of why I would bump into him here.

Just as I wondered if I should confirm that possibility with him, he began to puff his chest and said, "The guy known as 'Juumoji.'"

Bingo. I nodded and shrugged my shoulders.

"As expected of Tani-kun, no rumour ever escapes your

attention."

I had meant that as a compliment, yet Tani-kun didn't look too pleased.

"Oh, so you do know."

"That's why I'm here."

"Well, it is you guys that discovered the crime note at the Cooking Club, so it's not surprising that you already knew... But how did you end up figuring out it's the Magic Club?"

"It was easy of course, we followed the gojuuon pattern."

With an intrigued smile, Tani-kun said, "...Interesting. I was right to expect something of you."

Why thank you.

Predicting what his next line would be, I decided to move preemptively.

"So, what will our next duel be?"

"Oh, so you're up to it?" Tani-kun said and smiled.

Then he lowered his voice.

"Anyway, to show my fairness... I can tell you that the Wall Newspaper Club has been hit."

I knew that already, you didn't really need to tell me. Though I

shouldn't ridicule him for it, less it complicates things.

However.

"It seems the Wall Newspaper Club's now fired up. Their next edition headline will feature the Juumoji story. Seems like they're doing a manhunt for 'Juumoji' with rewards."

Now I didn't know that, so I said with genuine concern, "Oh? Rewards, eh?"

"Details for the rewards will be included in their Special Edition No. 1... Once this becomes public, it'll attract a great deal of attention."

"You bet."

"Everyone is hungry for something unexpected. At any rate, this will become the main talking point for tomorrow."

For me personally, who prefers to enjoy stuff alone, this was rather bad news. Having Tani-kun involved was already a kill-joy, but main talking point? Give me a break. Yet for the Classics Club, in need of some PR to promote themselves, this was good news. If the "Juumoji" incident were to get more and more exciting, attention would eventually be turned towards the Classics Club. As to which aspect I should place more

importance on... Guess I should prioritize making Mayaka smile once again.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, Tani-kun smiled.

"Well, it's impressive that you were able to get wind of this so quickly. Sorry, but I'll be the one to catch this guy. I may not look it, but I'm quite the mystery fan, you know?"

Oh, really? While that was what I thought, I maintained my smiling expression.

"Do go easy on us,"

I gave him a polite response, to which he nodded.

"Good luck to us both then, Fukube!"

040 - ♦08

While I would prefer to slowly enjoy my lunch as an excuse to stay with the Classics Club as long as possible, I know this can't last. No matter how unpleasant it is, I need to return to the Manga Club soon.

Without noticing, I had already unwrapped and torn my bacon roll into bits, and I now slowly picked them up one by one and fed them to my mouth. I'll go once I'm finished with them all.

Just when I'd decided to do that, Oreki, who was in charge of

watching the stall, opened his mouth.

"Ibara, you said you've read Agatha Christie's novels before, right?"

I was just about to wonder how he knew that when I remembered that I had told him near the end of the summer holidays, during what Fuku-chan called the "Empress" affair. I stopped picking up the bacon roll pieces and said, "I did, but only her most famous works. It's not like I've read all of her works."

"And *The A.B.C. Murders* is one of them?"

"Of course."

Crossing his arms, Oreki sat back deeply into his chair while brazenly staring at the ceiling and said, "This 'Juumonji' incident, Satoshi said it's similar to A.B.C...."

It was only just a while ago that Oreki was telling us off for mispronouncing "Juumoji," and now he's pronouncing it as "Juumonji." Though as a person's name, it is indeed easier to pronounce it as "Juumonji," so I didn't say anything.

"Somehow, it's easy to make the association. Since *The A.B.C. Murders* involve victims being left with an 'A.B.C. list,' then it's

natural that he would make the association with the 'Kanya Festival Guides' that were left at the crime scenes."

"Well, of course. Or there wouldn't be much meaning to it."

"By the way,"

Moving his gaze down from the ceiling, Oreki looked as though he was about to say something bad.

"Just asking, but what's the reason the killer in *A.B.C.* kills his victims in alphabetical order?"

...What a strange question.

"Oreki, have you even read *The A.B.C. Murders*?"

"Nope, just the premise."

"Premise, huh? So, do you intend to read it in the future?"

"...Dunno."

"Are you sure you still want to know even then? It'll spoil the story for you, are you okay with that?"

Thinking for a bit, Oreki met my gaze.

"Sure, go ahead."

Fine then.

Just to be safe, I had a look around. Because if someone were to hear all the plot details of *A.B.C.* before reading it, it would definitely ruin the story for them.

After making sure no one was around, I sighed.

"Well, it's actually quite straightforward. Wouldn't you already be thinking the killer simply wants to kill in alphabetical order?"  
Oreki gave a bitter smile.

"Yeah, I guess."

Jeez. That's the problem with him, he would often change his mind just when he's about to say something. I began to speak harshly.

"In other words, you were thinking 'Juumoji' had simply wanted to steal according to the gojuuon sequence, weren't you?"

"...Yeah."

Oreki answered and sat upright with an unpleasant looking face.  
"I don't know if 'Juumonji' was aware of Christie when he committed his crimes, but what has he stolen? Go stones and ladles, they're nothing but trinkets. Surely he wouldn't really want to steal those.

"But does that mean he's simply a prankster stealing in the gojuuon sequence just for fun?"

"So you're saying there's another meaning to all this?"

I took another piece of bread roll and stuffed it into my mouth.

"When Satoshi and Chitanda both heard that 'Juumonji' works according to the gojuuon sequence, they both ran out looking excited. To be blunt, just by observing the clues, anyone would have figured that out."

"It's true that you were the first to realize, but it's not like it's some big discovery in itself."

"In other words, this was no big deal to 'Juumonji' himself. If instead of the gojuuon sequence, he were to base his sequence on something more cryptic, for example taking the letters from the slogan 'Glory To Kami High,' then he would need to put more effort into it."

"I see. The gojuuon sequence just seems too easy to figure out." I get what Oreki's trying to say. If 'Juumoji's' objective was merely to steal stuff following the gojuuon sequence, then this prankster is a bit weird in the head. But if that's not the case, then the gojuuon sequence is merely a process for him to achieve something else.

I did not realize this until I'd personally participated in the Cultural Festival, but it really is a unique moment. That uniqueness involves a sense of floating around in a carefree

way, and it's not strange to see people getting moved along by strange pranks. But is that all?

...I think I'm becoming strange myself.

"Oreki, do you ever think of catching 'Juumoji' yourself?"

"Me?"

He looked surprised.

"Why would you think I'd do such a thing?"

"You look enthused."

Oreki snorted and went back to leaning on the back of his chair.

"It doesn't matter to me either way. Be it Juumoji (Ten Characters) or The Man with a Thousand Faces. If he wants to steal something from the Classics Club, I'll gladly give it to him as long as it's not my wallet. Though afterwards Chitanda would probably be very curious and would badger me about who 'Juumonji' was."

"Well, you could always just ignore her."

"She's not the sort of person you can just ignore."

Oreki frowned.

Hee hee.

How silly.

Tossing the last bits of bread roll into my mouth, I stood up. As I proceeded to move, I thought I should give my thanks.

"That reminds me. Oreki, thanks for the bag of flour. I was really at a loss back there."

"Oh. Don't mention it."

As though remembering something, Oreki gave an enigmatic smile.

"I got that bag of flour via the straw millionaire protocol."

Straw millionaire protocol?

"What're you talking about?"

"The story of the straw millionaire, you know?"

Oh, I see.

"So you want something in exchange for the bag of flour, is that right?"

"You got something? If you don't, then I don't mind ending my protocol here."

Oh, well.

After thinking for a bit, I took off the brooch on my chest.

"You can have this."

Oreki looked on in surprise.

"...Are you sure? Don't you need it for your cospl—"

"It's not a cosplay, you idiot!"

I threw the brooch at Oreki's face as hard as I could and quickly turned and left the Geology Room.

041 - ♣14

I had intended to keep monitoring any movement near the backstage entrance, but I cannot resist the call of nature. As the show was about to start, I quickly went for the bathroom. When I came back, I asked Tani-kun whether he saw anyone suspicious. Though he admonished me for having the audacity to ask a rival, it helped stroked his ego a bit as he answered kindly.

"Nobody came or went."

As he answered, someone emerged from the Class 2-D classroom. It was a male student, and the badge on his collar indicated he was a second year. That would be the Magic Club president Tayama. (It's not like I knew who he was, I just happened to read it in the programme booklet.) He raised his voice across the corridor filled with flags and lanterns and all sorts of decorations.

"The fifth Magic Club show will commence shortly."

Without saying anything, both Tani-kun and I entered the dark classroom. It seemed like even the windows were draped in black curtains. The classroom itself was partitioned into two parts, with a curtain separating the two sides. The tables were all stacked along the windows while the chairs were lined up in rows. Behind the curtain would be the backstage. Right before the curtain was the podium and teacher's table. That would be the stage. The spacing between the spectators' seating and the stage was quite narrow, which could be a bit tough for the performer but would provide a great view for the spectator. But now's not the time for me to enjoy myself.

I next looked at the people entering the spectators' seating. As this was the fifth performance, most people with an interest in conjuring tricks would have already seen it, so there weren't many people coming in. The first person I saw coming in was someone I didn't expect. When silent, she would exude a cool aura, and when she spoke, it was as regally as an "Empress." I stood up without thinking.

"Oh, hello there, Irisu-sempai."

Irisu Fuyumi-sempai squinted her eyes in the dark to see who was speaking to her.

"...Oh, you're from the Classics Club."

She nodded and greeted me back before sitting on one of the chairs in the last row. It feels a bit strange seeing the extremely rational Irisu-sempai coming to watch a magic show.

The next person to come in was also a girl, who brought another girl with her. At first I thought they were a couple, as one of them was dressed like a man. I remember seeing that tuxedo before... That's right, she's with the Manga Club. She was with Mayaka when they were drawing the posters. In that case, the girl besides her would be the Manga Club president, whom I've seen a few times. Both chatted and pointed to their programme booklets while taking the seats in front.

Next came various people whom I did not know. Though we may study in the same school, I'm familiar with their faces, but it's not like I'm acquainted with them. As for visitors from outside the school, there was a middle-aged couple, even though today was a working day. Wondering what was going on, a grade-school-looking little girl entered as well looking curious.

The girl who entered next was a classmate of mine, though as I don't know her really well, I didn't call out to her. She must've noticed my presence, though she decided not to call out to me either. Come to think of it, her surname happens to be "Juumonji," Juumonji Kaho-san. As a member of the "Four Exponential Clans," I would most like to get to know her, but I find it quite hard to deal with her. (As for what I meant by "getting to know her," it simply means I'd like to ask her about stuff that I've not heard before, that's all. Though I'd get myself in a lot of trouble if Mayaka were to hear me say that.)

While there weren't many people in the beginning, in time the room was now quite packed. The Magic Club should be quite pleased with this attendance. The president from before could be seen taking a peek through the curtain.

Next came a group of guys. Whoa, if it isn't the president of the Executive Committee Tanabe Jirou? And beside him was... Oh my god, it's the Nth President of the Kamiyama High School Student Council, His Excellency Kugayama Munetaka. ("Nth" means I have no idea how many presidents there were before him.) A charismatic figure with a sporty-looking figure and

carefree smile, his moving speech still left an impression in my mind, though I have no idea what the president normally does.

Besides those two, I'm not quite acquainted with the others.

Noticing me, Tanabe-sempai raised his hand to greet me.

While the spectator seating that took up half of the classroom was not quite completely filled, it was still 70% full. A girl, presumably a Magic Club member, closed the door. The partition curtain opened, and a male student walked onto the stage carrying a candle stand in each hand, placing them on the teaching desk. Taking a match from his pocket, he began lighting the candles, which began to illuminate the dark classroom with a gentle light. I see, in order to deal with the confined spacing of the room, they resorted to using dim candle lighting to make the room look bigger. I began to be absorbed by the mood created.

After the guy who lit the candles withdrew, the president emerged. The president, with his hair combed back and wearing a pair of framed spectacles, was a slim figure with skillful-looking hands. He waited till the audience gradually went silent before smiling and bowed courteously like a stage actor.

"Let the show commence. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Magic Club performance. Now feast your eyes upon the wonders that we have worked hard in order to show you."

Applause.

I looked around during the applause. There doesn't seem to be anything out of order so far...

"First, the Magic Club proudly presents Takamura Youichi of Class 1-B, who will be gracing us with his performance of 'The Living Dead.'"

He then withdrew from the stage amidst the applause. The male student that next emerged from the curtains was carrying a ball, as expected, as the El Bimbo[5] began to be played in the background... As a French whisper pop, this kind of music suits the mood well. Takamura-kun seems totally relaxed. Now I know why they were proudly presenting him. Or perhaps it's because this is the fifth time he's performing this?

The zombie ball and linking rings performances went smoothly as expected.

The Magic Club people sure have some skill. While I've seen my fair share of conjuring tricks, this was nothing to be amazed at, but still, it was quite intense seeing the ball float in mid air or

the rings linked together from such a close distance. And while the first guy and the girl that followed had a few awkward moments with their movements, it wasn't so bad as to jeopardize their performance. I applauded their mastery from the bottom of my heart.

The third act, "Vanishing Act," was just as impressive. Tayama-san, the Magic Club president and their sole second year, was certainly more skilled than his two members. He was just as composed during his performance as he was while greeting the audience, making cards and handkerchiefs appear seemingly out of nowhere as the background music played (this time it's some piano sonata, the name of which I've forgotten).

His card and handkerchief apparition acts, while skillful, were nothing to be astonished at, but, I was still a bit surprised when he suddenly made that black handkerchief appear out of his right hand near the end. It caused quite a stir with the audience, and even I was grappling at the edge of my seat.

Whether he was relieved at the success of his performance or pleased with the applause, the previously emotionless president Tayama gave a gentle smile. He then took out a pink candle,

which was already alight. I'm not making this up, normally you wouldn't put a lit candle in your pocket, would you? Raising the candle for all to see, we all applauded in unison.

Seated some distance from me, Tani-kun whispered to me while applauding.

"Looks like he's got the torch."

I don't know why he's calling it a torch. Sure, it has other names like a flambeau, torchlight or rushlight, but wouldn't one normally call those candles? I had an urge to explain to him that torches were different from candles, but I decided not to.

No, wait, I've been so immersed in the show, I'd nearly forgotten I wasn't here to watch the performance. Yet, nothing out of the ordinary had happened with the magic show so far, and there were no strange movements amongst the audience either.

Occasionally the door would open and one or two more visitors would enter or leave mid way, but there was nothing "Juumoji" could have stolen from the outside, as there's nothing but curtains, the billboard, and posters. Hmm, what was it that Juumoji was after again? Something that begins with [KI].

...CANDLE ([KI]YANDORU キヤンドル)!

I gave out a gasp, and turned to look at president Tayama, who was sincerely thanking the audience. The candle in his hand was no longer lit. As it was probably dangerous, upon showing the lit candle to everyone, he had promptly blown it out. But that wasn't the only candle in the room. I turned to look at the candle stands used for illuminating the room.

"...AH!"

"Now, rather than the usual poker cards, this time we'll be playing with Japanese playing cards[6]... Huh?"

Oh crap, I gasped too loudly. As the following card magic involved interacting with the audience, there was no background music, and so Takamura-kun and Nagai-san, who were now performing, turned to look at me. I quickly waved my hands apologetically for interrupting them.

There were originally five candles on each candle stand. While the stand on the right still had five candles, the one on the left only had four!

They've been hit!

But when?! All this time no one had approached the stage, until now.

"And now, would the lady sitting at the back please come forward to the stage?"

Irisu-san, being called upon, walked towards the stage. But before that, only the performers had appeared. Which means the missing candle was never there to begin with.

And all this time I was thinking that "Juumoji" would carry out his act under the gaze of this many people. Yet the act had already been carried out before the show even began.

Dammit, I've been wasting my time all along!

He must have left his declaration of crime somewhere. Come to think of it, the ladle wasn't stolen from The Cooking Club during the Wild Fire tournament itself. It was already gone before the tournament even began. The phantom thief "Juumoji" did not seem to carry out his thefts in a flashy way like most phantom thieves do.

Anyway, if it had come to this, there was no reason for me to stay anymore. If it had already been stolen beforehand, then it rules out the people here as suspects. All that's left is to...

"The card you've chosen is the Maple Deer, right?"

"...That's it!"

I clapped my hands.

I straightened myself up and watched on carefully.

042 - ♦09

Returning to the Manga Club, one of the first years with whom I'm friendly greeted me.

"You're late."

I smiled kindly in response and returned to my seat at the booth.

The posters drawn during the morning had some effect in drawing visitors, as they seem to have increased from yesterday.

I asked the girl sitting beside me in a low voice, "How is it? Compared to yesterday."

She took a look across the room, and it was then that I noticed Kouchi-sempai was here.

Making sure Kouchi-sempai was engaged with her followers and not looking over here, the girl replied in an even lower voice, "Well, there are more visitors."

"Is it because of the posters?"

"I'm not sure, but..."

Well, it's good if it helps sales. It's not like I was against Kouchi-sempai's proposal to draw posters to attract customers in the first

place, but on the other hand, it's not like I'm pleased that my drawings had helped as well. Don't get the wrong idea.

However, while realizing I could be wrong, I still felt something was not right. As we giggled, someone from across the room began speaking to indicate that they heard us.

"See? We should have listened to sempai to begin with."

"Yeah, if it weren't for someone being against it, we would have sold more yesterday."

It's not like these people who've not even contributed to the anthologies have any right to complain, but I kept quiet.

"Oh, don't be so mean to her. To think she worked so hard to draw the posters."

"I guess. Well, good luck."

Though they said one thing, the tones of their voices revealed another meaning. To be more precise, they were saying "Oh, don't be *so* mean to her. To think *she* worked so hard to draw the posters," while throwing a glance at me, as though accusing me of having a victim's complex and saying "Serves you right."

I love manga, and if I had to choose, I would say I like the Manga Club as well. Though I did not wish for this to happen... but it can't be helped. There's three of them, and it's not in my

nature to say anything unnecessary. Not to mention I was unable to present my evidence. So I need to hold back. But with such an atmosphere, there's no way I could ask the club to help sell *Hyouka*.

They continued their persistent whispering. They're really such pesky gossips. Speaking of gossips, this reminds me of a strange conversation I once had with Fuku-chan, when I once said he was like a gossip and he gave me an unbelievable response.

"You mean I'm brave?"

"Eh?"

"As well as being patriotic?"

"What're you talking about?"

"You said I'm like Kossuth[7]."

"...What the hell's that?"

"A Hungarian hero."

Seriously, what the hell's that??

Being reminded of how seriously silly Fuku-chan was then, I giggled. I know I shouldn't be laughing, but I still ended up doing it. As expected, the gossiping group suddenly stopped.

"What's with her?"

"Isn't she being a bit cocky?"

"Weird girl."

Well I'm sorry about that!

This group normally acts in unison, with each member being basically like the others, though this time one of them led the way by speaking louder than before.

"She was bluffing, wasn't she? To say she couldn't find it, as if anyone would believe that. And she was going on about how there are masterpiece mangas out there and was bragging about showing us one of them. Instead, she gives the name of some doujin no one's ever heard of, as though she's some expert on it.

Besides, she..."

For them to go so far, even my patience was incredibly stretched to the point of bursting.

"Enough. You should keep your mouth shut about things you have no knowledge of."

A voice called out from across the room. The gossiping group turned their heads in a direction they never expected the voice would come from. They had no choice but to keep quiet, as the one who spoke was none other than their leader, Kouchi-sempai.

Dressed in her tuxedo, Kouchi-sempai began yawning as though she hadn't even said those words.

I was quite surprised. But not at Kouchi-sempai reprimanding her followers. For Kouchi-sempai, as long as it was funny, it didn't matter whether a manga was fiction or non-fiction, parody or homage, so I thought she would be the sort who wouldn't fuss whether things were fair or not. So I was really astonished when she of all people would tell people to shut up about things they are ignorant about.

The group of followers all cowered like a bunch of dogs who had just been scolded by their master. Though I could still feel their resentful gazes directed towards me.

This feels suffocating.

...Though I had only just arrived, I already felt like I needed a breath of fresh air. So I told the girl sitting next to me I needed to leave for a bit and stood up. I wish I could just flutter away like the wind.

The autumn sun was sinking quickly.

Though it wasn't yet evening, the sunlight was getting weaker and the wind was getting cooler. I stood along the roof of the

connecting corridor, looking down towards the central garden, wondering if this place had been forgotten while the rest of Kamiyama High School has been decorated fully.

Till now, while I still think I wasn't wrong, I wondered if I should have kept silent.

But I didn't regret it, I think. I just couldn't stand by and watch Kouchi-sempai say that whether one thinks a manga is interesting or not was purely subjective. If what she said was true, then anyone can be an expert. While my art wasn't something I was ashamed of showing people, as I did draw the posters a while ago, the manga that I drew were just dull. I wanted to draw something more interesting, much, much more interesting. If I had not encountered *Ashes at Dusk*, I would have still believed myself to be capable of that. For Kouchi-sempai to say it was pointless to strive to improve one's work, it was as though she was describing the effort as walking in the dark. She said without a clear objective or target, no matter how much you've progressed, it still wouldn't make much of a difference. No matter how you brush up your skills, it still wouldn't change anything. If I had accepted those words, then why would I still

be thinking my art isn't good enough?

... Yet I didn't give her those counter-arguments yesterday, as I thought showing her a copy of *Ashes at Dusk* would be good enough. But I didn't consider whether she would be convinced by it, or whatever her followers might say afterwards.

Heh, I'm such an idiot.

... I feel like seeing Fuku-chan. He's probably engaged in some event like a fool somewhere. I too wanted to go investigate the "Juumoji" incident with him. I wonder if he would invite me. As a result of these thoughts, I still had not returned to the Manga Club.

"Ibara,"

A voice suddenly called out to me, so I turned to see who it was.

"I'm sorry that you had to go through all that."

It was President Yuasa, giving a concerned but gentle smile with her fluffy cheeks and double eyelids.

I quickly shook my head.

"Why are you apologizing? You've done nothing wrong, President."

"Well, that's because I've been quiet all this time. I wanted to

stand by your side."

...To come all the way to the roof of the connecting corridor to

tell me that, I wonder what my mind was going through then?

But, that's fine. It's not like I had wanted anybody on my side.

And had she actually stood up for me, it would only worsen my

conflict with Kouchi-sempai and cause turmoil within the

Manga Club. That wouldn't be good. So it's fine.

"...Ayako doesn't really mean what she said," President Yuasa

said as she stood alone.

As I was wondering who Ayako was, I realized she meant

Kouchi-sempai, whose full name was Kouchi Ayako.

"What do you mean by her not meaning what she said? You

mean her saying we should keep quiet about things we have no

knowledge of?"

"No, not that. I meant her argument with you yesterday."

It was a topic I did not want to go further into.

I took a deep sigh and said, "You mean her saying whether a

manga is interesting or not depends on one's acceptance

antenna?"

The president nodded softly.

Was she trying to console me? If she was, she wasn't doing quite a good job at it.

I gave a weak smile and asked, "How could you tell she didn't mean it?"

"Well... it's because Ayako and I are good friends."

"Is that all?"

"Ayako and Haruna are good friends as well."

President Yuasa smiled kindly, as though I would understand by now. I was probably looking dumbfounded like an idiot right now. Who's Haruna? She sure wasn't referring to Kouchi-sempai, and that wasn't President Yuasa's name either. I could not recall anyone I knew with that name. After an awkward pause, I decided to ask.

"Who's that?"

"Who's who?"

"This Haruna."

This time it was President Yuasa's turn to look perplexed. The way she tilted her head reminded me a bit of Chi-chan.

"Eh? But, Ibara, I thought you've read her work."

What work? Seeing I still haven't got a clue, she continued.

"You know, *Ashes at Dusk*?"

Hearing the name of the title I never thought would get mentioned during this conversation, I replied with a stiffened back.

"...Yeah."

"Haruna was its author. Anjou Haruna. Didn't she put her name on it?"

Eh?

I would have most certainly remembered who the author of *Ashes at Dusk* was. But, how should I say this, it was definitely not "Anjou Haruna." The author name for that doujinshi was a quite obscure sounding name, that I certainly remembered.

"I thought the author was someone called Anshinin?"

"Anshinin?"

"'Anshin' as in 'peace of mind,' 'In' as in 'hall.'"

President Yuasa looked a bit surprised, but then slowly shook her head.

"She must have used a pen-name then. But I know the story was penned by Haruna. I have no idea who drew the art, though Haruna should know."

I managed to learn more about the author of a manga I admire in the strangest of occasions.

While I knew that the script and artist were different people, for a moment, I had forgotten the depression that I was having and asked, "Which class is this person in?"

"Oh, Haruna is no longer here. She transferred to another school."

"...I-I see."

I tried to organize what the president had just told me... I didn't really get it, so I sighed softly.

"President, what did you mean when you said this Anjou Haruna was friends with Kouchi-sempai? And how did you realize Kouchi-sempai didn't mean what she said?"

The president looked downwards and went silent.

Could it be that she was quite cautious with her words? As I pondered such a question, she slowly raised her head.

"If you had spoken to Haruna, you might understand as well. I know this is not a good enough answer for you, but, I'm sorry Ibara, while I do know the answer, I'm not able to tell you."

"..."

"Because Ayako is my friend."

Her large eyes with her double eyelids looked lonely as she explained. *I can't tell you, because she's my friend.* If she had told me, she might feel that she was speaking ill of Kouchi-sempai... as well as revealing Kouchi-sempai's secrets.

In any case, as she couldn't tell me, I wouldn't understand. And right now, I realized I was going nowhere thinking about something I do not understand. I slowly shook my head. I feel like being alone. Regardless of whether Kouchi-sempai really meant what she said, I just wanted to indulge in the breeze.

"Let me just enjoy the breeze for a bit before returning."

"Ibara..."

Once again, I said insistently, "I'll be back in just a bit."

So please leave me alone.

043 - ♠11

It was soon five o'clock.

Though everyone had returned just before the final chime, for some reason the mood seemed strange. Satoshi was unusually frowning for once. In contrast, Chitanda looked pleased. Ibara

just looked downright depressed. As she probably doesn't wish for anyone to speak to her, I decided to ignore her for now.

"We've been outfoxed, Houtarou."

As Satoshi spoke, he suddenly stared at my face and asked puzzledly, "What happened to your eye?"

Is it still red?

"Oh, my eye got hit by a heart."

"Huh?"

"Like I said, my eye got hit by a heart."

Satoshi looked dumbfounded, but quickly regained his composure.

"Anyway, we were completely outfoxed. A candle was taken from the Magic Club."

"Isn't that good news?"

I said truthfully, "It wouldn't be good if 'Juumonji' was caught before he reached the Classics Club, would it?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Satoshi nodded grudgingly. Hearing his story, it seemed he had hoped to catch "Juumoji" red handed. Firstly, none of the items from [A] to [KA] had been stolen during events. Secondly,

"Juumoji" wouldn't be so stupid as to pick an inconvenient time like during a performance to carry out his thefts. He would simply do so at a time of his convenience, regardless of whether an event was ongoing or not.

"You could've told me that earlier..."

Satoshi grumbled. Hey, it's not like I knew what you were trying to do before.

"So? Did you find a declaration of crime?"

"Yeah, after looking around, we found it bundled along with a notice for tomorrow's first show at 10am, and sure enough, a copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide* was there as well."

"And you found that in the corridor?"

"Yeah."

This means the culprit could be anyone.

Meanwhile, Chitanda's cheek was twitching. Though she wanted to smile, upon seeing Ibara looking depressed, she obviously couldn't do so. I decided to break the tension.

"Seems like you found something good?"

Chitanda gave a big nod.

"Yes I did!"

"Really?"

"The twenty copies of *Hyouka* that I've given to Irisu-san are selling well."

I guess, since it is that Irisu. While it's something to rejoice about, I couldn't smile for some reason. I just hope she doesn't find use for me this time.

"So they're all sold out?"

"No, there are still a few copies left, but they'll most likely be sold out by tomorrow."

If they're all sold out, should we send another twenty copies over? That was the question.

"And there's more. The *Kami High Monthly Special Edition* that was released at 4pm mentioned the 'Juumoji' incident. It included the gojuuon rule that Oreki-san figured out."

I feel a bit embarrassed at being credited for such a deduction.

As I've mentioned to Ibara, anyone could have figured that out.

Chitanda continued while placing her hand before her chest as though in prayer, "Besides, they've mentioned the Classics Club's name! Right here: *And so, our dear readers, it is speculated that 'Juumoji' will carry out his final crime sometime*

*between noon and 2pm at either the Classics Club or the Miniature Club ([KO]USAKU BU 工作部). "*

"The Miniature Club? I didn't know we had such a club."

Satoshi nodded deeply as he replied, "We do, now that you mention it."

"If he went to that club, then all our plans will be wasted."

"Yes, I'm worried about that as well,"

Chitanda gradually withdrew her delighted expression as she said that. I was wondering why she was so happy just now when I realized it was she who had brought that newspaper from the Wall Newspaper Club over here. So she was happy that she gets to inform us of the news... No, that's not right. This wasn't something that would get her this happy, there must be something else to it. But I shouldn't be prying into the minds of others, especially not that of Chitanda Eru.

"...So, Houtarou, how many copies have we sold?"

Ah, that.

"Excluding the copies we've given Irisu-sempai, that would be sixteen copies."

"Hey, we're actually selling more than yesterday."

Yeah, but only marginally. Though we seem to have done better in our promotion today via the Wild Fire tournament than the Quiz Trial tournament yesterday. So there were more students who had decided to come over to this forsaken corner during their free time. We'll need all the word-of-mouth advertisement we can get.

At the end of the second day, our hope for selling out the remaining three quarters rests with how the "Juumoji" incident plays out...

Well, we'll worry about it then. I took out a bag of biscuits from the table drawer.

"Houtarou, what's that?"

"I bought them from the Confectionery Club. I've not eaten them yet, you can have some if you like."

As I called out, even Ibara had walked over.

The four of us divided up the bag of biscuits. As we munched on the biscuits, the chime signaling the end of the second day began ringing.

**[141 COPIES REMAINING]**

**Translator's notes and references**

1.

- [Wikipedia - Nasi Goreng](#)
- • [Wikipedia - Gojuuon](#)
- • [Wikipedia - Awamori](#)
- • [Wikipedia - Japanese Diacritics](#) (In Japanese, KI becomes GI with the addition of a diacritic mark)
- • [Wikipedia - El Bimbo](#)
- • [Wikipedia - Hanafuda \(Japanese card game\)](#)
- [Wikipedia - Lajos Kossuth](#)

#### **4 Yet Another Sleepless Night**

044 - ♥10

One must not say that one is tired, as that means passing on one's responsibilities to someone else, or so I'm told. If you are feeling tired, then you should say you need to take a rest, and then continue whatever it is you're doing once you've rested enough.

That was what my kind grandmother had taught me.

No, I should not use past tense. My grandmother is still alive and well.

I've never forgotten this piece of advice. But I guess it's fine since I'm whispering to myself alone in my room at night. Right

now, I'm feeling a bit tired.

I've entrusted Irisu-san with helping us sell copies of the anthology, and I've also managed to have the Wall Newspaper Club give the Classics Club a mention in their report. So while it was not in vain, for some reason I felt weighed down by something upon returning to the club room.

I am not the type of person to be lethargic. While I'm not exactly a sporty person, I do have an above average record when it comes to running long distances. And for these last two days I've been walking all over the school grounds, so this was not the reason for my tiredness.

How should I say this... I don't become this tired when taking care of my own problems, but this time, I'm feeling a bit tired just handling this all on my own. During this Cultural Festival, I've been asking other people to help out with our problem, enlisting the help of the Executive Committee, the Wall Newspaper Club and Irisu-san.

I became extremely mindful of the "Juumoji" incident. While I'm curious about how he carries out his theft, I'm also curious as to why he does it as well. Thinking about this, my body becomes

so restless that I can't stay in one spot or stand still.

However, after taking a deep breath and thinking as the president of the Classics Club, I just couldn't view other people as objects to be used, and I couldn't treat making requests to other people as some kind of strategy to be utilized. It's quite unimaginable, to think I could act in such an unconcerned manner.

No, I mustn't become timid. Hasn't Oreki-san been doing his best to help out? We have yet to increase the sales of the anthology.

I must go around making more requests tomorrow. I don't dislike doing such a thing, as it's something I must do, but... I guess I'm just feeling a little bit tired.

045 - ♦10

I had wanted to go to sleep earlier tonight, but I just couldn't for some reason. So I took out a book from the bookshelf, which was my other treasure, *Body Talk*.

As I couldn't read *Ashes at Dusk* since it's not with me, perhaps I may have deified it a bit. For the other that got left behind, *Body Talk* was actually quite interesting once I began reading it. I

should be getting ready to sleep, yet right now my brain's completely invigorated.

Its genre could be classified as slapstick. The protagonist is a young man who is unable to speak due to his deafness, but is able to convey his thoughts telepathically via touching. As he is also able to read other people's thoughts by touching, he is often seen as a troublemaker. Though it discarded realism in favour of an interesting story, the troubles the protagonist encountered still made sense. To put it briefly, there were aliens and zombies. No matter how much destruction was wreaked, a short anthropomorphic cat would appear in a blank panel, signalling the end of the scene in the next page. As a result, the tempo was quite quick, which was unheard of in commercial works. It was more like a comic strip than other mangas. In the end, placing the book on my pillow, I rested on my futon and read it till the end.

By the way, this cat, a Gourdski-like gag character<sup>[1]</sup>, would often appear in all sorts of acrobatic stances at the corners of various panels for no reason whatsoever. It was probably the author's surrogate character. Despite standing upright, it wore no clothes except for a pair of baggy boots. A puss in boots,

essentially.

Despite having a silly plot with a communication discord, it had quite a deep meaning as well. All the characters, including the protagonist, were all acting in self-interest, as they're frequently seeking a favourable outcome for themselves. Yes, this is a good work. But if I were to think of presenting this to Kouchi-sempai, then I'd find that there were a few weak points that stood out, like the story being a bit too random, too many panels with nothing but plain backgrounds, one too many rough sketches in the panels, and the dialogue sometimes not connecting from panel to panel.

...And so, I'm still at a loss on what to show her.

The only light came from the lamp beside my bed, with the bookshelf submerging in the flickering darkness.

*Ashes at Dusk* and *Body Talk* were two non-commercial works which I have a lot of admiration for. Of course, these were not the only books in my room; there were also commercial works which shone just as bright as those two.

There really were many people who could draw interesting works.

Before turning off the lamp, I got out of my futon and took out my own manga from my desk drawer. I saw nothing but tedious white drawings. I would really not want to take this out.

Well, it's not like my drawing is bad. Though the artwork was a bit inconsistent, it's not that despairingly bad. But upon reading one or two pages...

The panels just don't make any sense, and I can no longer understand the dialogue that was written, nor could I feel anything from the story. I have no idea where it begins or ends.

It was pretty much a disharmonious read.

If I were to let someone else read this, they would probably not need sleeping pills anymore.

Yet, I'm reading it right now.

Reading my own manga, it feels more like I've ingested some stimulants rather than sleeping pills. With a somewhat unspeakable feeling, I returned the manuscript of my manga to my desk drawer. It's no good, I shouldn't have read this to make me fall asleep. As staying awake would be troublesome, I decided to take some real sleeping pills and get to sleep.

After saving energy for a long while, I can more or less predict my own patterns. By saving up too much in the day, I ended up with excessive usable energy at night, which was bad for sleep. I couldn't fall asleep even this late at night. The clock had long since passed one o'clock and was now approaching two.

To think I don't even remember what energy it was that I've saved in bulk, though I do know I've not used up any. How ironic that during the period of the rosy high school life known as the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, I could not find an outlet to use any energy.

Waiting to fall asleep, I thought of reading a book, but right now there was only that boring paperback novel. While a boring book could at least substitute for sleeping pills, I instead opted to surf the internet. I was now searching for the official homepage for the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Clicking the link on the search engine site, I twitched at the pain remaining in my right eye.

The top page caption read "KANYA FESTIVAL NOW OPEN! ALL ARE WELCOME." An image of the play taking place in the Gymnasium was posted on it.

Scrolling down the page revealed a list of the participating clubs of each day, a transportation access guide, advice to visitors...

And my eyes landed on a place I did not notice two days ago - the mail order section.

It was a mail order service for all goods related to the Cultural Festival. On sale was of course stuff sold during the Cultural Festival.

The items listed include original T-shirts by the Fashion Study Club, the Literature Club anthology *Kodama*, and the Manga Studies Club anthology *Zeamis*. Is that all? If it's the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, then surely they have more to sell, but it seemed this was all there was.

Now isn't this a bit empty for a shop? Looking further, there was a mail order form with an email address attached. The address shares the same domain name as Kamiyama High School, and the account name was "somuiinkai." Satoshi, surely the Executive Committee should have done better than this. To begin with, I've yet to seriously ask Satoshi what it is that he does in the Executive Committee.

And then there's this email address. They could have at least

used an English name for it. But "somuiinkai?" ...Then again, I have no problem with a name that's at least understandable to a Japanese-speaker like me.

All that remains to be seen on the site are links to other basic external sites, which don't reveal much information. Anyway, I figured it was about time I got to sleep, so I switched off the computer and returned to my room. As to how to fall asleep, I decided to worry about that after I crawl into my bed.

047 - ♣15

I decided to take a walk during the night.

Having just taken a bath not long before, my body was particularly sensitive to the night breeze. As it was late October, I could easily catch a cold if I'm not careful. Hence I wore a jacket just to be safe.

I could just about see the new moon above the skies along with the stars. The weather was just as great today as it was yesterday. As things go it'll probably be fine tomorrow as well, which is good. As a member of the Executive Committee, it's good because it means the events tomorrow will go smoothly under good weather; as a member of the Classics Club, it's good

because it means we can get more visitors coming to school; and for me personally, it's good because I get to participate in as many outdoor events as I like. I get to see the various clubs preparing and performing all sorts of skills which I've only heard of. It would be a pity if their chances to show off their skills were denied by the rain.

For example, the performance of the Magic Club's second year, Tayama-sempai was superb today. While I have the knowledge of how the cup and ball trick actually works in my database, even I would not be able to perform it as well as he did. That was why I applauded from the bottom of my heart. By the way, when I said I am unable to perform, it's not that I do not possess the skills, but it's more to do with me not being confident enough. Just because I wanted to learn the secret to the cup and ball trick doesn't mean I wanted to try it out as well.

You could say I am similar to Houtarou in this aspect.

...However, while Houtarou himself insists that he hadn't done much during his three years at junior high, he wasn't exactly the worthless person he claims to be.

I walked in the dark, under the streetlamps surrounded by

winged insects in the residential district. As I was wearing sneakers, I could not hear my own footsteps. I could hear someone watching their late night TV shows from somewhere. Ever since entering Kamiyama High School and coming into contact with a rare medium called Chitanda Eru, Houtarou has changed. Or I should say, he's revealed his true worth. And since then he has demonstrated his sharpness, his clarity of vision, or perhaps instinct, deductive skills if you will, which I had never known he had before. Ever since that day when Chitanda-san was simply sitting alone in the Geology Room, I have been amazed by him many times. Houtarou was no simple colourless and useless human being. He has become an amazing individual hiding an amazing secret power within him.

There was a saying that a skilled hawk hides its talons[2]. When I discovered Houtarou's hawk side, deep inside, did I truly feel happy for him?

This is why I have decided not to expect Houtarou to solve the "Juumoji" incident, as it's not suitable for a person like him. Instead, I will be the one to do it.

Originally, I would not have been able to seek out the truth using my database alone. However, right now, in order to be

able to look up to my friend's eyes, I decided to mimic him. I am well aware of how shameful this is. All this talk about how this is to "promote the name of the Classics Club," that's all just an excuse.

That I understand very well.

Well, even a grade school student would be able to come up with excuses like that.

Now then.

The potential suspects for the phantom thief "Juumoji" are numerous. As expected from Houtarou's sharp observation, "How many people do you think have entered and left the school grounds during the Cultural Festival? And that's not counting that we have nearly a thousand students."

This kind of scenario is often found not just in detective novels, but also in real life investigations as well. This is true even for a small scale crime. In order to pinpoint the identity of the culprit, we must first narrow down the suspects.

From within the six billion people in this world, suspects would be narrowed down by first investigating into details like travel patterns or personal circumstances. For example, if there were a

murder within a mountain mansion that was surrounded by mountain fire, the killer would no doubt be someone within the mansion (provided no one heard any helicopter taking off). If a rich young lady gets killed in her holiday retreat, then the killer would be someone who went to the retreat with her. Going along these patterns, the culprit could be narrowed down to around a dozen, by which we could begin investigating their alibis.

However, the "Juumoji" incident was different.

The thefts did not occur in any sealed environment. As the A Capella Club had their cooler box outside, anyone could have stolen its contents if they wished; the Go Club did not have a lock in their room; the Fortune Telling Association only had one person, so the culprit only needed to wait within the restroom nearby; the Gardening Club was targeted when they decided to leave the room for a bit; and then there's the Magic Club yesterday. Not knowing when the item was stolen, anybody could be a suspect, hidden within the sea of anonymity.

First, the culprit is no doubt a student of our school. It's difficult to conceive of someone from outside our school planning something like this and carrying it out for two consecutive days.

But this still means there are nearly a thousand suspects. A thousand! It would be a bit silly and pointless to declare "The suspect is amongst these thousand people!" Even a proper law enforcement agency would have their work cut out questioning the alibis of a thousand people.

...The only place that was strange was The Cooking Club. If I were to believe their president who said they had prepared a ladle, then it means the ladle was stolen just before the Wild Fire contest began. As the culprit had the time to prepare a declaration of crime and the *Kanya Festival Guide*, there was a possibility that the culprit had come from within.

However, would members of The Cooking Club want to obstruct the Wild Fire tournament, which requires a lot of meticulous preparation? A ladle is one of the most basic kitchen utensils. What if we had decided to make a stew dish instead? It would have quickly aroused suspicion. Surely it would make more sense for the culprit to pick a less risky target like the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KEN オカルト研) or the "Cheering Club ([O]UENDAN 応援団) and Cheerleading Club Combined."

I decided to discard that possibility.

Then how am I supposed to trim down the number of suspects from these thousand people?

...Then again, a serial killer or serial arsonist would have been difficult to find as the suspect base would be huge. In most detective fiction, they would usually have to wait for the culprit to commit their next act before they could form a database.

Recalling one of my favourite Sherlock Holmes stories, *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons*, no one could figure out who the culprit was when the first Napoleon bust was smashed.

That's it. By waiting for the incidents to accumulate, we can then identify the common link between the victims, and then using this link lure the culprit to commit his next act. (By the way, while this common link could be called the "missing link," I just realized the missing Wheel of Fortune could be called a "missing ring." So which one is correct? To quote Chitanda-san: I'm *really* curious about it!)

The only piece of detective work I can do is to wait at the next scene of crime. That's the only way.

By waiting at the scene, the culprit may commit some errors or

run into misfortune, leaving behind clues which could significantly narrow down the number of suspects. In other words, I'm waiting for him to make a mistake.

Had I realized the culprit had stolen something from the Magic Club before the show had started, but only left his crime declaration after it had ended, I would have stayed behind.

Surely not everyone who had remained in Class 2-D's classroom till the end was only there for the magic performance.

In that case, I need to wake up early tomorrow, and arrive at Kamiyama High School first thing in the morning in order to get to "Juumoji's" next target, a club that starts with [KU]. While I'm not that confident with my own observational skills, I'll definitely find any clues left behind by "Juumoji."

The world must be getting strange for me to find conclusions from my database alone. Perhaps I'm interested in seeing if I could amaze myself.

I made a heel turn under the residential streets lit by the moonlight and streetlamps. As I slapped my cheeks to get myself geared up, I ended up being barked at by a dog.

### **Translator's notes and references**

1. • <http://atomrocks.edublogs.org/hyotantsugi-a-k-a-gourds/>

- You can find more information and an explanation of this proverb [here](#)

- **5 - The Kudryavka Sequence**

### **5-1 Four People, Four Cultural Festivals**

048 - ♣16

#### **WANTED!**

**As the 42nd Kanya Festival draws to its conclusion, the various clubs have held their activities in an orderly manner.**

**However, as our dear readers would no doubt be aware already, that there exists those who would disrupt such order with blatant disregard.**

**Indeed, it is none other than the thief known as "Juumoji".**

**This thief would leave a message behind of the clubs which he has stolen from.**

**Besides that, he (this writer is not yet certain as to the gender of the thief) has also left behind something else, for fear of inspiring copycat crimes, as a socially responsible publication, we have' decided not to disclose what it is.**

**In any case, seven clubs have been targeted to date. As mentioned in our 4pm edition yesterday, the clubs that have been hit include the**

**A Capella Club, the Go Club, and the Magic Club as well as how they were targeted. And as our previous report mentions, "Juumoji" is still on course to stealing ten items.**

**The Wall Newspaper Club would now like to make an appeal to our beloved readers, the students of Kamiyama High School. Are**

**you going to  
sit by and let this "Juumoji" get away  
with his crimes? Can you possibly sit by  
and let him, most likely a student himself,  
think**

**we're inferior to him?**

**This cannot be allowed to happen!**

**The Wall Newspaper Club would thus like  
to seek out detectives willing to catch the  
phantom thief "Juumoji" in his act, and  
reveal his  
true identity to all. We have great  
expectations of such a person, and their  
wisdom in defeating such trickery shall be  
published  
in a special edition for all to see.**

Now that sure was quite a blusterous article, though I don't particularly dislike such style.

I didn't really learn much from the part about how the clubs like the A Capella Club and Go Club were targeted. The A Capella

Club's cooler box had been placed outside the courtyard from the beginning of their performance, while the Go Club left their Go stones inside their club room the day before the Cultural Festival started without locking the door. In other words, the suspect could have been anyone.

I was probably reading the article posted on the billboard by the entrance with a smiling face. While I hardly know the people from the Wall Newspaper Club, I do get a sort of closeness with them by just reading such an article.

Besides, what moved me was the timing of this special edition. As they were supposed to release a special edition once every two hours (come to think of it, that coincides with the time taken for "Juumoji" to commit his crimes) starting from 8am. But right now it's only a little past 7. They must have pasted this first thing upon arriving at school. They sure got some spirit.

As I too was full of spirits to begin with, there's no way I could lose to them, as I too had arrived at school by 7. To be precise, I was already here when the gates opened at 6. And I was thinking there wouldn't be anyone at this time of day, but there turned out to be quite a number of people. Guess common sense doesn't

work during the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

Now, for the main target.

There were two clubs that begin with [KU]: the Quiz Study Club ([KU]IZU KEN クイズ研) and the Global Act Club ([GU]RO-BARU AKUTO KURABU グローバルアクトクラブ). While the [KU] in Quiz Study Club lacked a diacritic

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakuten>), and would seem like the obvious choice, their activities were already completed by the

first day, not to mention they did not book any classroom for use (as a member of the General Committee, I guarantee this to be true). On the other hand, the Global Act Club would be holding a panel exhibition, which was quite rare for the clubs here, which means the door to their room would be open at all times. So by process of elimination, the best way to catch "Juumoji" on his act would be here.

I climbed the stairs and headed to the classroom of Class 3-E, where the Global Act Club would have their exhibition. Before leaving school yesterday, I went to check if they had anything stolen or if any note was left behind, but could find nothing. So by making a stakeout here first thing in the morning before

"Juumoji" could act, I was sure of my success in catching him.

Even so.....

There was already someone else in the Class 3-E classroom.

"Hey, Fukube, you're late."

It's Tani-kun, and it wasn't just him.

"Hmm? You're with the Classics Club..... Thanks for the help last time. So, you're into this case as well?"

It was Haba Tomohiro-sempai from the second year. I met him during the "Empress Incident" during the summer vacation, he's from the Detective Fiction Study Club if I remember correctly.

*Once this becomes public, it'll attract a great deal of attention.*

Looks like Tani-kun's prediction was correct. Does that mean I too have been attracted to it as well? Well, I don't deny it though.

Besides these two, there was another student I didn't know standing some distance from us. As this is the last day, it's not like the clubs would need to prepare for anything extra, so I presume he too is a detective-wannabe. That makes four of us.

This is bad, though we may now have more eyes present, it would also mean security has become too tight for "Juumoji" to

make his move.

Hiding such anxiety, I spoke cheerfully to Tani-kun,  
"Hey, morning. For you to stakeout here, you sure must have  
some spirits, huh?"

"Same goes for you."

"So? Has it begun?"

With his thumb, Tani-kun pointed to the centre of the classroom,  
"As if I'd show any kindness to an expected worthy rival. Go  
investigate yourself."

He must have not found anything yet, as if the crime has been  
committed, these three detective-wannabes wouldn't still be  
here. So I shrugged my shoulders.

The clock had just moved past 7. As we would need to be by the  
Gymnasium by 8.30 to have our attendances taken, if "Juumoji"  
were to appear, he too would choose this moment to strike. I,  
and most likely the other three as well, would be focusing on  
whoever has come here before then. If the crime had happened  
during this time frame, we would be able to narrow down the  
suspects.

Silently, I moved away from Tani-kun and Haba-sempai and

leaned on one of the walls by the corridor. If I were a hard-boiled detective, I would have taken out a cigarette and smoked it while I waited. Unfortunately, this is a high school, so I took out some chewing gum instead.

049 - ♥11

The final day has at last arrived.

As it's a Saturday, there were more visitors from outside of school than usual. Today is also the day where the "Juumoji Incident" must come to an end. It's a make-or-break moment, no matter how one looks at it. To get things started, I first headed to the nearest billboard to have a look at the newest edition of the "Kami High Monthly".

There was already someone else present when I arrived.

Crossing her arms and nodding her head, this person didn't seem like a high school student. She's most likely in college. Dressed in an orange shirt, she had rather tanned arms. Even though autumn had already arrived, she still wore short jeans that still give out the scent of summer. Standing with her legs slightly apart, she gently tapped the ground rhythmically with one of her feet. It looked as though she was enjoying herself.

And right now this person was reading the wall newspaper,  
moving her gaze up and down many times, before long a smile  
appeared on her face,

"I see..."

I heard her whisper. Unfolding her arms, she turned around,  
neither in a hurry nor sluggishly, and disappeared through the  
entrance as her guest slippers squeaked against the floor.

I wonder where I have met her before? A lively looking college  
student..... I just can't figure out where. But I'm sure I've seen  
her face before. I was quite confident in memorizing people's  
faces and names, after all.

"Hmm..."

I guess I just can't quite remember. It must have been my  
imagination.

050 - ♠13

As usual, hardly anyone came to the Geology Room. That said,  
we still managed to sell up to thirty copies so far, so not that we  
have anything to complain about.

While I'm grateful for not needing to work hard, upon seeing  
those boxes, even I could feel myself getting anxious. Right now

those generic looking boxes look quite intimidating to me.

Inside those boxes are printed words that will never be read by a single soul. Besides, by staying sealed inside those boxes, the books would slowly transform, page after page of words would slowly go yellow. As though they would etch itself into one's heart upon being read, these words are now longing to be read. Sealed away in a damp place never to see the light of day, they would continue to ferment and go mouldy while chanting "Read me!" in eerie way. But still they will never be read, all the way until they rot away, or get burnt completely.....

Guess I really have too much free time to be making such imagination. With 141 copies to go, not even entrusting 20 copies to Irisu could guarantee we would ever sell out. So I was pretty much prepared for the worst. There's just no point in keeping up to a hundred copies of a single anthology. If we end up with a large number of copies remaining, the only fate that awaits them would be for them to rot away in some storage, or be disposed as recyclable paper.

I looked at the cover drawn by Ibara, of a rabbit and dog biting each other, as well as the book binding, glued together by

polypropylene.

"....."

Hmm. It wouldn't be so bad even if she had cut corners with it.

Well, at any rate, there's nothing much I could do. Resting my chin on my hands, I listened to the gentle sound of musical instruments being played from the Gymnasium. Looking across the courtyard at the General Block, I noticed one of the classroom windows being covered in black curtains, resembling a broken tooth.

I switched the hand on which my chin rested.

..... I did not dislike the idea of using the "Juumoji Incident" in order to draw visitors over to the Classics Club, much like how zoos would covet a panda to raise attendance. If the Wall Newspaper mentions the Classics Club as being the last target, that'll surely attract people's attention.

Yet I was going along a different train of thought, namely the selling of *Hyouka*. Just attracting visitors was no guarantee of improving sales.....

There were no visitors now, though we do have lots of time.

And so I began to think, slowly progressing with my thoughts.

**[141 COPIES REMAINING]**

051 - ♣17

The Global Act Club, as its name suggests, is involved in global current affairs, thus its exhibition panels include stuff like the flood in Bangladesh, or the internal unrest in Indonesia.

Unfortunately, I wasn't particularly interested in such topics so I can't say whether this stuff is fascinating.

Wait a minute, what have we here? A panel reads "A Mexican cornbread you can make", another says "How to make Bulgarian yogurt using ordinary dairy products". They've got all sorts of ethnic dishes introduced here. Feeling interested, I decided to have a chat with their president, who replied with a bitter looking expression,

"We're not exactly a cooking club. This is a global affairs volunteer club, after all. Though we also dress in various ethnic clothing, but we thought ethnic dishes was more interesting.

Actually we would be making some of those dishes ourselves..... though it doesn't look like anyone was interested in how it's made."

Indeed. Whether it's thanks to the Wall Newspaper Club, or by word of mouth, as time passed, the number of detective-

wannabes seemed to have increased, and the Class 3-E classroom gradually became rather crowded. As I did not hear this from the Executive Committee, it seems the Global Act Club intends to make cornbread on the spot and give them out to visitors. In less than an hour after student attendance was taken in the Gymnasium, all the cornbread had been consumed by these detective wannabes. I can totally understand the president's lamentations. Yet if such a crowd were to appear at the Classics Club, we would probably be sighing and crying out in joy at the same time.

"..... Nothing's happening so far."

A bored sounding whisper entered my ear, it was Tani-kun. He was already saying that even though there was still an hour to go. Yet I find myself agreeing with him. My watch showed the time was approaching ten soon. If "Juumoji" were to release a note every two hours, he would have to strike soon (as Kami High's lessons begin at eight). Still, no matter how many eyes were present, no suspicious movement was spotted.  
Could it be? A doubt arose in my head. Could it be that "Juumoji" really targeted the Quiz Club instead? No, it can't be.

Their activity was long finished, and their members would surely be scattered around the school enjoying the Cultural Festival. How is a thief going to steal from them in such conditions?

But if I consider the question of what could be stolen, then the Global Act Club would seem like an odd target. For example, the Magic Club had "candle" (**[KI]YANDORU** キヤンドル) that begins with [KI], but I can't find anything in the Global Act Club that begins with [KU]. Since all students would be wearing indoor shoes (**[KU]TSU** 靴) inside Kami High, could it be that he would be stealing those? I can't really imagine him leaving a message that reads "Hey I've stolen your shoes, mwahahaha." (That said, the shoes from the cosplay costumes in the Manga Club and other fashion clubs don't count.) If the phantom thief "Juumoji" can twist "water" as "Aquarius" (**[A]KUERIASU** アクエリアス), then there's got to be something here. Could it be that he's given up because he couldn't figure out what matches his sequence as well?

Amongst the detective-wannabes,  
"This is getting boring, I'm off."

Said one.

"Text me if something happens."

Said another. Even Haba-sempai had disappeared, apparently off for some club errand. The only people that were here since the beginning were probably me and Tani-kun.

What's wrong with you "Juumoji"? You can't simply be scared just because there's many of us! I don't believe this, it's nearly ten now!

..... Suddenly, Tani-kun placed his hand in his pocket and took out his cell. He seemed to have received a text as he turned on the display.

It was then when Tani-kun raised his voice,

"..... WHAT?!"

Huh? What happened?

Tani-kun closed his cell phone and placed it back into his pocket, and appeared to dash off. Before he does, I decided to calmly ask him what had happened,

"Did something happen?"

Tani-kun bit his lips, as though gesturing it's got nothing to do with me. The way he's remaining silent means it's something to

do with "Juumoji".

I decided to push his buttons a bit,

"I don't get as many friends like you, Tani-kun, so please do tell me what just happened."

Things sure proceed smoothly if you're willing to lower yourself. Tani-kun snorted,

"Hmph, this 'Juumoji' had set up a decoy for us to fall into."

"A decoy? Could it be that he went for the Quiz Club?"

He shook his head and smirked,

"No,"

"Then who?"

Making sure the other detective-wannabes couldn't hear him,

Tani-kun lowered his voice,

"It's the Light Music Club ([KE]IONBU 軽音部). Their guitar strings ([GE]N 弦) were stolen."

The Light Music Club??

In contrast to Tani-kun, I raised my voice without thinking,

"You're kidding me, right?!"

Tani-kun's face quickly went sullen,

"If you don't believe me you can go confirm it for yourself. I'll

be off then,"

He said and dashed out of the Class 3-E classroom. I thought of chasing after him, but quickly abandoned the thought, as I knew it'd be pointless.

"Juumoji" is more flexible than I could ever imagine. I have been bound by the suggestion of the gojuuon sequence and the release of a note every two hours, and was hoping to make a stakeout in his supposed next target, thinking he too would be bound by these rules. Yet, upon seeing the heavy security of the Global Act Club, he had opted to go straight for the Light Music Club. How could I be beaten by such a simple move like that?

You can't win against that.

This means the usual method of meeting the suspect head on would not work against him.

In that case, I should focus on finding out what his weak spot is, but I did not have the talent for that. After all, I would have already done that if I had known what his weak spot was.

Then.....

I've been thinking since last night. In order to catch this "Juumoji" from the sea of anonymity, I thought the only way

was to stakeout in his intended target. I could not figure out any other way to do so.

Yet "Juumoji" had easily evaded such a confrontation. If he could abandon such rules so easily, how am I going to catch him on the act?

This requires a rethink.

There's got to be something else which I could do.

052 - ♠14

As expected of a Saturday, by noon there were already more visitors than before.

Thanks to Irisu's movie selling well, it seems the twenty copies we entrusted to her had managed to sell as well. As a result, Chitanda had came over to bring ten more copies over.

Most of the visitors that came here were those who were just visiting this part of the school grounds on a whim. Two were middle-aged women, who decided to buy a copy each as they chatted idly away. Including those two, we've now sold nine copies today. As long as this keeps up, this could be something to look forward to.

"Thank you very much," I said with a stiff smile as I saw them

off.

..... I feel like taking a leak.

It's times like these when being the only person in the store becomes bothersome, as I couldn't find someone else to stand in for me while I'm away. While we're merely selling anthologies, it doesn't feel right to leave any interested buyers waiting. So I locked the candy box storing the money and placed it in my shoulder bag, and then took out a piece of paper and wrote:

*Currently away. Anthology Hyouka - 200 yen per copy. If interested, please leave money on counter.*

Under my bag, I noticed something glowing. It was the heart-shaped brooch that Ibara threw at me yesterday. For some reason, I placed it beside the stack of *Hyouka* anthologies and wrote another note: *Please feel free to exchange brooch with something of equivalent value.*

Now then, nature is calling out to me.

Phew.

I'm home.

Hey, I'm only gone for about five minutes and the brooch's gone. Instead, I see 200 yen being placed on the table. Did someone

buy a copy? When did they come?

I noticed someone had written on the note for the brooch exchange. Upon seeing it, my face went sour. I've seen that handwriting before. Reading it, I knew right away who had visited.

*You shouldn't leave the store unattended like that. You wouldn't want this brooch, I presume? Then, I'll have it. I've placed the exchange item on top of the stack of Hyoukas . This would be a good way for you to kill time...*

It's my sis. So she did come. Yet it feels bad for her to sneak in during the five minutes when I was away. On second thought, personally, it's actually not that bad.

Starting with sis's fountain pen, this Straw Millionaire Protocol has gone from a needle badge, a Glock pistol, weak flour, and a brooch, and now it's gone full circle back to my sis again. So what's this item that she had exchange? As it's coming from her, it's gotta be something of interest. I took a look at the stack of *Hyoukas*.

True enough, on top of that mountain, was an anthology-like book similar in size to *Hyouka*. Bound in the back with

polypropylene glue, it's quality was inferior to that of *Hyouka*, though it was rather thick. The cover featured an illustration of a girl's face from the side. It wasn't a live-action sketch, but a manga drawing.

At any rate, I returned the candy box to its original position and placed the 200 yen my sis left behind inside. I don't suppose I need bother counting how many copies we have remaining.

Even if it's my sister, I just can't see her stealing many copies of *Hyouka*. Resting my back on the chair, I picked up the book my sis left behind.

On the side of the cover was a vertical row of small words. Seems to be the title. *Ashes at Dusk*? What a morbid title. And besides that title was the name of the author. "Anshinin Takuha"? Sounds like a Buddhist monk if you ask me, most likely a pen name. And I hope I got that name pronounced properly.

Looking at the title and author name, I wondered what my sis was thinking giving an occult book to me. Flipping to see the contents, turns out it was indeed a manga. It opens with a scene of a sailor uniformed schoolgirl exiting a train station built of

wood. Whoa, this drawing is pretty good.

I see. If it's a manga, it would indeed help me kill time. Though it feels weird for sis to show such blatant goodwill. Well, if she had brought it all the way here from home, it can't be that bad. I might as well give her my gratitude and start reading this. Before that, I decided to see if there was any afterword by the author, and sure enough, it was on the last page.

Here it is.

How did you find *Ashes at Dusk*?

If you ask me, I thought it was well done, though I'm mostly in charge of the background art and didn't really contribute much. If you had enjoyed reading this, rather than thank me, you should thank its writer and illustrator.

Neither three of us belong to the Manga Study Club. We are simply people interested in manga who had decided to try and create a manga on our own. As a debut work, guess we shouldn't be bragging about

how good it is ourselves. That is for the readers to decide.

We do not intend to disband after just making this once. We plan on making another manga in next year's Kanya Festival. Our writer "A" plans on writing a mystery story for it, and I am told it would be based on one or two of Agatha Christie's most famous works. As such, the title has already been decided.

So stay tuned for our next work, *The Kudryavka Sequence*..... Yeah, I know, another morbid sounding title. (LOL) I look forward to meeting you again in next year's Kanya Festival.

"Anshinin Takuha"

It was written in neat handwriting.

"....."

I raised my eyebrow and read the afterword again.

Kanya Festival, this means this manga was drawn by one of

Kamiyama High School's students. There can be no mistake, this was created for the Kanya Festival.

And then there's this "Kudryavka Sequence". While I have no idea what on earth this "Kudryavka" means, but I am intrigued by the word "Sequence". No, if it was just that word alone, I wouldn't have been that interested. Rather, it was the mention of "Agatha Christie's most famous works".

Moreover, this was brought over by my sis. I once again looked at the memo she wrote.

*This would be a good way for you to kill time...*

Why is it a good way for me? If it's just for me to read a manga, then the way she said it was strange. This was definitely not her way of saying "Since my brother is feeling bored, I've brought a manga for him to read." You can bet my ass that I'm right.

"What bothersome matter have you gotten me into?"

I muttered and straightened my back.

The art looks good, and the afterword said it's enjoyable, so I might as well give it a read. While it wasn't explicitly written, but the person who wrote the afterword seemed pretty confident of what he's saying. Even if this was a random joke by my sis,

it'll still do as a great way to kill time.

**[121 COPIES REMAINING]**

053 - ♣18

I've finally organized my thoughts.

My conclusion was: There's nothing I can personally do about it.

For better or for worse, I'm pretty good when it comes to letting go and giving up.

In other words, there was only one thing left which I could do right now. So I said calmly,

"I'm counting on you, Houtarou."

054 - ♥12

I am currently searching for a person.

It is none other than the President of the Broadcast Club. Thanks to the Juumoji Incident, news of the Global Act Club receiving more visitors than usual have reached my ears from various people, and not just Fukube-san alone. I am very curious as to who is this "Juumoji-san", and why is he continuing with such thefts. My mind was filled only with thoughts as to why he would be doing this. Yet it's only now that I began to think of such things. Until now we had only learned the what and the

how, which was pretty frustrating.

If we could attract many visitors by using the Juumoji Incident, wouldn't this be a great chance? Right now, I am making the most of this bold chance, or rather, I'm executing one part of a systemized plan to make this chance work. Thus, I am attempting to offer an interview on behalf of the Classics Club with the Broadcast Club during their lunchtime broadcast.

With advice from Irisu-san, I have managed to enlist the assistance of the Wall Newspaper Club in promoting our cause, the next step would be to speak with the Broadcast Club.

However, just when I thought I would meet him at the Audio Visual Room, the president wasn't there. A girl, whose voice I recognized as the host of the lunch time broadcast, heard my request and tilted her head,

"The Prez' is probably somewhere around here. Wonder where he went..... Well, since he's not yet decided what to put in today's programme yet, you might have a chance if you speak with him."

Thankfully, I knew what the president looked like, so I should be able to find him if I see him. So I began moving around the

campus in search of him. And yet, I couldn't find him.

I came to the third floor of the Special Block during my search, thinking of paying Oreki-san a visit while he watches the stall.

While I did stop by before to collect another 10 anthology copies as requested by Irisu-san, but he was fast asleep.

As I climbed the stairs, I noticed a person walking towards the Geology Room. To my surprise, it was Yoshino Yasukuni-san, the president of the Broadcast Club which I was looking for. As I did not expect to see him here, I straightened my uniform scarf and chased after him,

"Hello, Yoshino-san."

Yoshino-san stopped and turned around with widened eyes. His unpretentious hairstyle and thick eyebrows stood out,

"Yes?"

I bowed politely,

"My name is Chitanda Eru, the president of the Classics Club. I was looking everywhere for you, as I was hoping to request something from you."

Yet Yoshida-san did not wait for me to finish my sentence.

Upon giving my name, he startled me with a yell which

overshadowed the last part of my greeting.

"So you're the Classics Club president! What a coincidence, you came at just the right time. I was just looking for you for a favour."

Oh?

I wondered what it was, and soon enough, Yoshino-san began explaining,

"Is the report by the Wall Newspaper Club true? That 'Juumoji's' final target would be the Classics Club? 'Juumoji's' the trending topic right now, you see? So I was thinking of doing something about that for today's lunch broadcast, otherwise we won't have anything interesting to talk about for the rest of the afternoon.

Thank goodness for this incident to happen. As for who would be our guest, that would naturally be the president of the final targeted club. So you interested? Don't worry, all you'll need to do is answer a few of my questions. Besides, you've got a pretty voice, so it'll be just fine. How about it?"

Oh my.

I didn't even need to apply any of Irisu-san's negotiating skills that she taught me. Though I never expected myself to be a

guest in a radio broadcast, as I was only thinking of having them simply mention us in their broadcast. But as a guest..... That would be like Fukube-san making his speech before the Quiz Club president in the First Day.

..... Will I be able to do this?

A long silence ensued. Yoshino-san scratched his head, "Well, you don't have to do this if you don't want to, of course." "No, wait,"

The sight of the mountains of *Hyouka* floated in my mind, as well as Mayaka's expression upon realizing she made the ordering mistake. I thought of Oreki-san and Fukube-san's hard work as well.

I should not be hesitant, so I bowed deeply once again, "I'll be most glad to do this,"

"R, really?"

Yoshino-san broke into a broad smile, "Then, do please come to the AV Room at noon, the broadcast will begin at 12.30. You may bring your boxed-lunch. Thanks a lot, I'll be seeing you then!"

"No, the pleasure is all mine."

I wonder if I could say I felt relieved? Instead, I felt anxious.

While Yoshino-san all I needed to do was answer a few questions, I'm sure they aren't anything private. I took a deep breath.

Oh yes, I came here in order to pay Oreki-san a visit. The Geology Room door was closed, even though it's supposed to be left open for the whole day. I knocked and opened the door. Inside were Oreki-san, as well as Fukube-san, who raised his hand to greet me,

"Hey, Chitanda-san. Irisu-sempai's managed to sell her copies quite well, hasn't she?"

"Yes, she's asked for another 10 copies," I said while looking at Oreki-san, who seemed to be fervently reading some anthology and didn't bother to lift his head. Could it be that he didn't notice my presence? Noticing my gaze, Fukube-san shurugged his shoulders,

"He's reading a manga. And he seems pretty obsessed with it, since he's not even listening to what I'm saying."

His eyes fixed on the book, Oreki-san spoke,  
"I heard you. The thief had skipped [KU] altogether and went

for the Light Music Club, which began with [KE]."

"It's no use just listening if you don't get the importance of what's happening, you know."

"Hang on, I'm about to get to the ending."

*You see?* Fukube-san gestured to me as he shrugged his shoulders again.

Upon thirty seconds after he told us to "hang on", Oreki-san finally closed the manga he was reading and sighed deeply.

Fukube-san began to tease him,

"Who would have thought Houtarou would be so immersed into a manga? Maybe you should consider follow Mayaka as her disciple?"

What's the difference between these doujin manga and normal manga? I'm not too familiar with such things.....

As Oreki-san glared at Fukube-san, besides looking as lethargic as usual, I somehow felt that he looked somewhat intoxicated by something as well. Turning his eyes away with some embarrassment, he muttered,

"This, is good."

"Really? Let me have look at it as well afterwards."

This was the first time I ever saw Oreki-san with such an expression, and it piqued my interest in the manga as well. Taking a closer look, the cover had a cute yet sad-looking girl drawn on it. The way the girl's expression was drawn was amazing, and the way the fabric of her sailor uniform, which was similar to mine, was drawn was also an eye-opener. I could even sense the wind blowing from the direction she was facing as well.

.....

Umm.

As a habit, I tilted my head. Fukube-san saw me and asked,

"What's wrong, Chitanda-san?"

"Well....."

I looked at the illustration once again. A pitiable yet cute

looking girl. The way the fabric is drawn.

"Haven't I seen this drawing somewhere before?"

"Must be your imagination,"

Oreki-san immediately responded,

"I only got this manga from my sis earlier today, so there's no way you could've seen it."

Is, that so?

I looked at the manga once again..... No, there's no mistake. I'm confident of this myself,

"I've seen this before. This drawing, or rather, the drawing style of this manga."

"From long ago?"

Fukube-san asked, to which I shook my head,

"No, probably recently,"

But I couldn't quite remember when! If I can't clearly remember when I saw it, then I must have only taken a glimpse of it. Once I have seen something, I never forget it too soon.

Umm, ummmm.....

"I, I..."

"Chitanda, we've got our hands full right now,"

Oreki-san as though chiding me. I understood it myself, we're at a very busy period. Even when we aren't busy, Oreki-san would frequently give a grim expression everytime I feel curious about something. It's something I understand very well. But, I couldn't help myself. Feeling a desire to find the answer, I ended up saying it,

"..... I'm *really* curious about it."

I placed my hand on my throat,

"It's on the tip of my tongue,"

"Swallow it back,"

"I can't do that,"

"Then do something about it,"

"Let me have a look at other pages!"

Giving a sigh, Oreki-san handed the manga over to me. Looking at the cover, I don't remember seeing the title *Ashes at Dusk* anywhere else before. Seems like it's only the drawing that I remember seeing.

Flicking through the pages..... I came across the drawing of a

boy, to which I exclaimed,

"Ah!"

"What? You remember something?"

For some reason, Oreki-san looked as though he was disappointed, which got me somewhat curious. I nodded lightly, "Yes, probably. The drawing of this boy, it resembled what I saw. I remember seeing it by the notice board besides the Conference Room, one of the Cultural Festival promotional posters, I think....."

I lowered my voice as I reached the end of my response. I was not very good with manga, so while it does resemble what I saw, I couldn't say I was absolutely sure.

"That poster, huh?"

Fukube-san seems to know something about that poster, which made sense since he works with the Executive Committee, after all. While I was pondering all this time, his eyes were focused on something,

"..... Hmm, it does feel like that poster, but I'm not completely sure. But you might be able to figure out something if you compare the drawings,"

That's it, that's a wonderful idea!

"Oreki-san, can I borrow this manga for a while?"

Oreki-san leaned backwards as I made my request. Oh, looks like I moved too close to him again. Shaking his head gently, but rather than refusing my request, it was more a sense of feeling resigned,

"Sure thing. As long as you're feeling curious about something, nothing will get done until it's finished..... Just, make sure you return quickly, I'm not done reading it,"

"Yes, I'll be right back!"

I said as I held *Ashes at Dusk* manga towards my chest.

055 - ♦11

Both Fuku-chan and Chi-chan were looking forward to the third day of the Cultural Festival in order to boost the sale of *Hyouka*, yet they're not alone in wishing to sell all their anthologies in the final day. The same goes for the Manga Club.

Before we were even ready to begin the day, a few members were already waiting besides the opened door of the First Preparation Room in expectation of visitors. Thankfully, there were more people coming in than the previous two days.

Personally I too was glad about it, with many people happily buying the character posters without even asking for the price. If we were serious, we would break even if we sell each poster at 100 yen, though it's actually taboo to be selling merchandise during the festival as per the school rules. Even though President Yuasa was not one to make such dangerous risks, she still sold many posters to anyone who would ask for them.

We've ended up digging a hole for ourselves.

As we didn't draw a lot of variations for the characters, all that's left is just to draw the characters in differing poses. Dressed in a khaki Mao suit with many pockets alongside an army cap today, there were many people who guessed as to what I was cosplaying, yet it was Kouchi-sempai who made the correct guess,

"..... Could it be, the parakeet chasing detective?"

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow\\_Parakeet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow_Parakeet))

"Yes."

"More like the miniature version, huh?"

Ignoring the remark about my height, I noticed Kouchi-sempai was also dressed as a detective character - her character was

more or less *the* original fighting game Chinese female warrior.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chun-Li>) She wore a qipao with pretty much nothing covering her thighs, I had no idea whether

she made this costume herself, but I had to admit it was pretty amazing in its attention to detail, and the spikes jutting out from her gold bracelets looked quite menacing.

Re-immersing myself in my work, I quickly left many thoughts

behind me, like what went through yesterday, the "Juumoji"

incident, and *Ashes at Dusk* as well. It's just that, if I forget it all, then I'll just find myself feeling miserable again once I'm done

drawing. Having finished drawing one poster, I put my pen aside and begun erasing up the rough patches until I'm done.

"This one's done. Next,"

"Please draw this one for me,"

Alright, sir.

Placing the drawing paper before me, I was at a lost on what to

do next. The classroom was now pretty packed, which means

business is no longer as bad as before. *Zeamis* seems to be

selling well. Kouchi-sempai's cosplay was quite popular with the

older male visitors, and as a result with greeting them, she

wasn't able to concentrate on her poster drawings. Her followers

took on the duty from her, a glance at them showed they were neither as skilled or fast as she was. While I did not get along well with Kouchi-sempai, and I was at a loss for words at the conduct of her followers, I had to admit that she was pretty skilled in her drawing.

The water cup holding the pastel pen was becoming rather muddy, so someone decided it was time to change the water. It was a first year whom I had no recollection before. Instead of crossing through the middle of the room, which was packed, she took the long way via the side of the room. As she walked past me, her expression was one of relish, as in a dragon encountering a tiger, or a cat coming across a mouse.

"Oh my,"

As though on purpose, she suddenly lost her balance and splashed a few drops of water onto my desk.

I understood at once, as she was rather inactive until now. She was here to teach me a lesson for daring to speak up against her beloved Kouchi-sempai. She was probably content with just flicking a few drops at my way.

Yet, things did not end there. No one knew who bumped into

whom, including myself, but someone must have bumped or tripped within the crowded room, and ended up colliding into the girl, who greatly lost her balance and yelled as she spilled the water in her cup.

The water ended up covering me all over.

"....."

On the bright side, at least the water didn't splash on my head. A whole cup's worth of water splattered on my chest, and as a result, the clothes from my lower right shoulder all the way to my stomach was drenched with water, water that was stained with paint and supposed to be replaced. I think I stink.

The drawing paper of which I was still thinking of what to draw on was also soaked in a grey-yellowish colour.

"I, I'm so sorry Ibara! I didn't mean to....."

The girl looked as though she was about to cry.

I wonder why, perhaps it was the sudden splash of cold water that numbed my senses, I don't know.

But I hardly felt angry. Taking a handkerchief out of my pocket, I wiped away the water droplets that was dripping from my shirt.

The white handkerchief was quickly dyed in the same grey-

yellowish colour.

Well, it is a khaki coloured shirt anyway, so the stain shouldn't stand out too much.

Still lively only a while ago, the First Preparation Room was now stunned in silence. Well, sorry about that. I stood up from my chair, finding the President, I said to her,

"I'm sorry, President. Please take care of the rest."

Unlike Kouchi-sempai, who couldn't possibly wear her costume outside the school premises, I was able to come to school in my costume without having to change. I was after all still quite resistant to wearing something that people would quickly associate with cosplaying, besides, Fuku-chan had said it would be hard to find any spot to change at school during this period.

Though more importantly right now, I haven't got any uniform to change into as I left it at home.

Fortunately, my PE uniform was still here. Normally I would bring the clothes back for cleaning, but as our last PE lesson was cancelled, I didn't get to wear it and so I left it here at school.

Finding a room where the Drama Club members change into their costume, I got myself changed.

Come to think of it, I wonder how the Classics Club is doing. Fuku-chan seems to be planning something, while there doesn't seem to be much that Chi-chan could do. As the one who made the ordering mistake, I should at least help out as much as I can in the final moment.

I could describe Kami High's PE track suit colour as "asagi-iro" (light blue), but that specific colour name would invoke memories of the legendary Shinsengumi, so I guess "water blue" would do for now. Anyway, wearing the water blue track suit, I headed towards the Geology Room. Entering the Special Block, as I slowly climbed up the stairs towards the third floor, I heard the sound of someone's slippers running from the corridor ahead.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional\\_colors\\_of\\_Japan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_colors_of_Japan))

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinsengumi>)

"Oh! Mayaka-san!"

It was Chi-chan, waving her hand happily. As I was about to ask why she was in such a hurry, she grabbed my wrist with her rather warm hands.

Speaking of which, we're on the stairs, so it was pretty

dangerous,

"W, whoa! Chi-chan!"

Ignoring my protests, she began to spoke,

"Thank goodness, things would be much easier with your help.

I'm not confident doing it myself, you see. Will you come with me? Are you free right now?"

With my help?

"Eh, hang on, just what is it that you want me to help you with?"

While she held on to my wrist with her right hand, in her left hand was an anthology-like booklet. It wasn't a really expensive booklet as its stapler binding was clearly visible. Anyway, I asked,

"What's that?"

As she turned it to show me its cover, I exclaimed,

"W, why on earth would you be holding this?!"

The cover showed a familiar illustration of a girl looking sideways, it was none other than *Ashes at Dusk*!

"Well, it's not exactly mine, but Oreki-san's,"

Then allow me to rephrase my question. Why on earth would Oreki get his hands on this? It was only sold in last year's

Cultural Festival, in a pretty hidden corner by the corridor.

While mostly unlikely, I did for a moment suspect whether

Oreki had stolen the book from me. Without thinking, I

stretched my hand to reach out to the book, to which Chi-chan

held it to her chest and asked,

"Mayaka-san, could it be that you've seen this manga before?"

I withdrew my hand,

"Well..... yeah, I have,"

"Then you must know the person who made this manga, right?"

The person who drew this manga? I wasn't sure whether to say

it's Ajimu Takuha, the author's pen name, or Anjou Haruna, her

real name. Perhaps sensing my confusion, Chi-chan rephrased

her question,

"I meant the person who drew this,"

"That I don't know,"

Thereupon she said enthusiastically,

"You see, I'm trying to find out if the person who drew the

promotional poster for the Cultural Festival is the same person

as the one who drew this manga! I'm *very* curious about it!"

I see.

Now I get it. Chi-chan would usually get curious about things and then proceed to find out the answer to it, I could never get myself as curious as she would. But now I'm beginning to understand how she feels whenever she's curious about something. I would often see different mangas where the art style is similar and wondered whether it's by the same author. And now she's saying the person who drew the promotional poster for the Cultural Festival is the same as the one who drew *Ashes at Dusk*?

If that's true, then I must confirm it for myself. Once I do that, then I'll be able to find out the identities of both the writer *and* the illustrator. While the writer Anjou Haruna has already transferred schools, if the illustrator is still around, then it just might be possible for "Ajimu Takuha" to make a return.

Feeling excited, I raised my voice,

"Where's this poster right now?"

Chi-chan had begun to climb down the stairs while still holding my wrist. Without letting go, she replied, "Besides the Conference Room!"

Okay, let's go!

The illustration showed a male and female student, with the caption "The 42nd Kanya Festival" written alongside the detailed schedules.

We were looking at the said poster's design. The contrast in shading was quite clear. As *Ashes at Dusk* was all in black and white while this was in colour, I must be more observant. It was actually quite difficult in trying to determine whether the illustrations in a manga and a poster were by the same person. Yet, this time, there wasn't much difficulty. Though the artist did change his style in his drawing of female characters, the style for male characters remained the same. Just one glance and I'd recognize the similarities. To make sure, I took a step back to look at the whole drawing, and then stepped forward to examine the details. While Chi-chan mentioned how the clothing fabric was drawn similarly, the decisive spot was actually the ears, where they're completely identical.

I turned to face Chi-chan,  
"I'm 80-90 percent, no, I'm 99 percent sure it's the same person," Upon hearing that, Chi-chan placed her hand on her chest as though looking relieved,

"I see. Thank you very much, you've taken a burden off my chest,"

It seems like I've helped her a lot, so I smiled, which was something I haven't done in quite a while.

"Haha, you seemed really curious about it, weren't you?"

"Yes, but I wasn't confident in making the comparisons myself....."

"Me neither, it's not like I have any special methods for identifying the similarities,"

Now, I might as well satisfy my own curiosity, I knocked on the door to the Conference Room besides the notice board.

"Coming,"

A person opened the door. He looked just like the guy in the poster. A glance at his collar indicated he was a second year. He looked at us and wondered who we were.

"Greetings, Tanabe-san,"

Chi-chan said and bowed her head. This must be Tanabe, president of the Executive Committee then. He seemed like a nice guy. By the way, Chi-chan really is good with remembering people's names. While my own memory isn't that bad, but I can

never reach Chi-chan's levels.

Upon hearing his name, Tanabe-sempai smiled,

"Well, hello, umm....."

"We're with the Classics Club,"

"Ah, of course. How may I help you this time?"

It's actually me that needs a favour this time. So I stepped forward in Chi-chan's place, and as we've formally met before, I skipped the formalities and asked,

"Excuse me, but would you happen to know who drew the poster in that notice board over there?"

Tanabe-sempai raised his eyebrows. There were many types of posters for the Cultural Festival after all, so it was probably hard even for him to answer right away. Of course it would help immensely if he could answer, but I shouldn't expect too much,

"Hmm, that one, right?"

"Yes, the one with the boy and girl standing together,"

After a short pause, Tanabe-sempai nodded gently many times.

Did he recall something? As expected of the president of the Executive Committee. He replied briefly,

"That one would be by Kugayama,"

Eh?

Chi-chan asked from behind me,

"Would it be Kugayama Muneyoshi, the Student Council President?"

"Yeah, that Kugayama,"

It was a name I didn't expect. Even I knew who President Kugayama of the Student Council was. He gave me the impression of a sportsman-type image, but never did I expect him to be capable of drawing a manga.

Now I see, so he's the illustrator for Ajimu Takuha. His face began to appear in my mind even though I could hardly remember him before that. Meanwhile, Tanabe-sempai seemed pretty proud as he said,

"You guys are probably thinking 'Wow, so he could actually draw this well', right? He's pretty good, isn't he?"

"Yes! I think it's wonderful!"

"Haha, I'm sure he'd be glad to know if he heard it,"  
I've now learned who the author and illustrator were, it's as though good things were happening in quick succession now, much like how the bad things came just before. Though like a

fan chasing her idol, I had wanted to ask about whether Kugayama-sempai was using any pen name, but Tanabe-sempai probably wouldn't know. No matter, I'll just have to ask him in person afterwards. It could be just possible that he might reunite with Anjou Haruna to bring back the dream team.

If that happens..... I'd be dying to read their new work. An expectation suddenly floated in my mind.

After bowing politely, we exited the Conference Room. Chi-chan was now smiling from ear to ear after fulfilling her objective. We now happily raced each other up the stairs towards the Geology Room.

056 - ♠15

"We know who it is now!"

Chitanda said as she ran in. It didn't take her that long to return, which I'm kind of grateful, but then again, she wasn't doing it for me, but to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Really? So is it the same person?"

Satoshi raised his head to ask, but without awaiting an answer, he continued,

"Huh? Mayaka?"

Sure enough, coming in behind Chitanda was Ibara, who was wearing her tracksuit when she's supposed to be cosplaying right now. Or could that tracksuit be part of her cosplay..... Nah, not possible. That's the PE uniform for Kamiyama High School no matter how you look at it. She looked cheery as though looking forward to something good to happen.

"Mayaka, isn't the Manga Club busy?"

Satoshi asked, to which she smiled gently and shook her head,  
"Oh, I've had someone stand in for me,"

Someone to stand in for her? I'm not really familiar with the going-ons over there.

Like a spring, Chitanda moved towards me and placed the *Ashes at Dusk* copy on the desk,

"It's the same person, we also found out his name,"

"Really? That's great,"

"It's Kugayama Muneyoshi-san! I always think of him as a dignified person, but I never would have thought he would draw so well, so it's surprising,"

Who's that?

I looked at Satoshi,

"Do you know him?"

Upon hearing my question, Satoshi froze,

"H, Houtarou, you're joking, right?"

"Is he someone famous? I'm never really familiar with these strangers and freaks that you're acquainted, you know,"

Satoshi covered his eyes as though I'm a lost cause and shook his head slowly. Standing besides him, Ibara looked at me as though I was a fool and whispered,

"He's the Student Council President,"

The Student Council President, Kugayama Munayoshi.

"Oh, ohhhh! Of course..."

My voice trailed off as I spoke. And I thought his last name was read as "Rikuyama" all this time, not that I could tell them that.

It's not like he's someone whom I wouldn't have heard of, but neither is he someone whom I care a great deal about. Trying to change the subject, I picked up the *Ashes at Dusk* and said,

"So, Kugayama is the illustrator for this Anshinin Takuha?"

Despite changing the subject, Satoshi continued with his "facepalm" as he covered his eyes and shook his head. Man, he's annoying. He removed his facepalm and said,

"What's this Anshinin you're talking about? Some kind of temple?"

"Isn't that how you read that?"

"Though it's spelled that way, it's read as 'Ajimu'. It's a place in Kyushu, known for its grapes,"

"Is that a city?"

"It's actually a town, legally speaking,"

Is that trivia supposed to be required knowledge? Besides, do the others know about this..... I looked at Chitanda with misgivings, to which she looked puzzled and said,

"There's a small print next to the name to indicate how it's pronounced..... Right here,"

Huh? Oh, there, the print's kinda small: "AJIMU TAKUHA"  
Surprisingly, Ibara seemed quite sullen. Her eyes were wide, while her mouth was open as though wanting to say something.

After seemingly reading the thing which Chitanda borrowed from me, she seemed kind of shocked. I wondered if it's something to do with her specific interest in mangas.

Standing besides me, Satoshi looked at the *Ashes at Dusk* copy and said,

"Well, if it's something that even Houtarou would approve, then surely this manga is something,"

"..... Ugh....."

Was it Ibara that made that strange grunt? Satoshi didn't seem to hear it as he continued speaking cheerfully,

"But this pen name, Ajimu Takuha, how should I put it? Surely they could come up with a shorter surname, three characters (A-JI-MU 安心院) is just a bit too unrefined,"

Should you be saying something like that?

"..... T, this can't be....."

Chitanda staggered and lost her balance, since her surname had three characters, (CHI-TAN-DA 千反田)

"I, I didn't know my surname would be so unrefined....."

"No! That's not what I mean!"

Satoshi panicked and waved his hands, trying to undo what he just said,

"When I said three characters, I was referring to given names!

Yeah!"

Oh really?

Sensing my gaze, Satoshi moved his eyes away from him. Since

my given name has three characters. (HOU-TA-ROU 奉太郎)

"Well, Houtarou's special, you see,"

I wonder how he made that deduction. Besides, the real problem is how on earth did you not notice that I had a three character name when you made that statement?

"So, Oreki's special, huh?"

Seems like Satoshi's finally realized what he's done, as tears begin to come out of his eyes. This was because Ibara's given name had three characters as well. (MA-YA-KA 摩耶花) It's not like three character names are rare at all, but in an attempt to cheer Chitanda up, he ended up digging his own grave. He ought to have said he was referring to pen-names instead of given names.

Letting the drama play on on its own, I returned my attention to the copy of *Ashes at Dusk* in my hand. It was an interesting manga, yet the afterword at the back seemed pretty relevant to what's been going on lately.

Unexpectedly, Ibara decided to stop her scolding of Satoshi and moved towards me,

"While President Kugayama did the illustrations, the writer is

someone called Anjou Haruna,"

"Really?"

I said as I moved my gaze from the book,

"You familiar with this book?"

"It's my favourite manga. I bought one from the Cultural

Festival last year,"

Ibara was not someone who would easily give her approval to

something she likes, but I never expect her to utter the word

"favourite". Well, now that's interesting. Looking at the book,

she said without any tension,

"Hey Oreki, mind if you could lend me that?"

..... Man, this book is popular, isn't it? First Chitanda, now Ibara

wants to borrow this? Though I had wanted to lend it to them, I

replied,

"Sure thing, but just hang on for a while,"

"I can wait, but how long are you going to make me wait

anyway?"

I thought for a while, and soon tapped on the page with the

afterword on it and said,

"At least until I've memorized this..... Once I make a copy of

this, you can have it right away."

Ibara looked at me in puzzlement. Maybe I wasn't good in explaining myself, to begin with, not even I was sure what purpose doing this would serve me. Maybe I should say "until I figure out whether this afterward serves any purpose or not".

Chitanda suddenly clasped her hands together,

"Oh yes, I have something to tell you,"

"What is it?"

"Well, I've been invited by the Broadcast Club to appear in their lunchtime broadcast,"

What?

"The program that was aired yesterday and the day before?"

"Yes,"

Satoshi whistled,

"That's fantastic, Chitanda-san! You did well to get the biggest media club in Kami High on board! This way we could use the 'Juumoji' incident to ensure 'Hyouka' gets sold!"

"Actually, it wasn't me who made the request. It was more like I was asked to appear on their programme."

"That's even better! Alright, as a frequent listener, allow me to

teach you what kind of questions a guest like you should be anticipating....."

Well, guess we'll let Satoshi deal with the media stuff, I turned my gaze back to the afterword.

For some reason, I sensed some clues relating to "Juumoji" in here. Being in charge of the stall for three days, I no longer view this duty as just something I had to keep as simple as possible.

For me, it's now to ensure the improvement of sales. In order to do that, "Juumoji" must be captured somehow. How ironic that Chitanda had suppressed her own curiosity in order to see that *Hyouka* sells well, and yet here I am, striving for the same objective in spite of my energy-saving principles. Resting my chin on my hands, my eyes landed on the pages of *Ashes at Dusk*, yet I made no effort to read it.

And so I began to think.

## [118 COPIES REMAINING]

057 - ♥13

As I listened to Fukube-san's advice, I noticed Oreki-san had began to behave differently.

Mayaka-san and Oreki-san have been classmates since primary

school, while Fukube-san was the closest male friend he had as far as I know.

And yet, why didn't they notice this change in behaviour?

Oreki-san would stop moving like that while his gaze would lose all focus.

..... That was when he would go into deep thought.

The outcome of such thinking was that he would come up with answers which I would totally not expect. And when the facts come out afterwards, it would always match his deductions.

And so, while listening to Fukube-san's words, I would keep glancing over at Oreki-san's direction.

058 - ♠16

"..... That's what I think, what about you, Houtarou?"

Hmm?

Hearing my name being called, I looked up, and saw Satoshi, Chitanda and Ibara all looking at me. I scratched my ear, "Sorry, say that again?"

Satoshi gave a deep sigh,

"Houtarou..... We're discussing how to deal with the radio interview that will determine the fate of the Classics Club. This

attitude won't do, man."

Since when did we start having a discussion, and such an important one at that as well?

I then realized for some reason Chitanda was looking at me with her breath held back. Her eyes were large as always, but that's not the point,

"W, what is it, Chitanda?"

"..... What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"Nevermind....."

She sighed, though it was more natural than Satoshi's. W, what's going on? To have her sighing naturally at me, did I do something wrong?

Oh well, my thinking is a bit stuck at the moment. I was thinking of asking these guys for their opinion in order to formulate my thoughts.....

But Chitanda would get in the way.

Waving my hand, I gestured to Satoshi,  
"C'mere,"

"Hmm? You said something?"

He said while moving over. I then realized I've been seated here for quite some time,

"Sorry, but can you come with me?"

"Where're we going in such a busy period?"

"It's related to this busy period anyway, but anywhere is fine,"

Seated on the desk and swinging her legs, Ibara looked at a distance and said,

"Could it have something to do with the 'Juumoji' Incident?"

Stop uttering your instincts out loud! Just as I thought,

Chitanda's eyes instantly came alive,

"Eh! Is that true, Oreki-san?! Could you have thought of something?"

"No, no, I haven't,"

"Then, it's not related to the 'Juumoji' Incident...?"

While "misunderstandings should be dispelled right away" is more like Satoshi's motto, after asking me so earnestly, I just couldn't lie to her. She quickly saw through my hesitation,

"..... So, it does have something to do with it!"

"Well, no,"

Chitanda placed her palms before her chest and clutched them

into fists. I wonder if she herself realized the change in her mood.

"I, I've been very curious to know about this..... but why are you only telling Fukube-san.....?"

She spoke in a softer than usual voice. She leaned her face forward that her eyes were covered by her bangs. At this rate, I'll definitely be cursed by a spell from her, I'll end up having to beg her for forgiveness.

What do I do? As I definitely did not want Chitanda to know my thinking this time.

Guess I'll have no choice but to think of something. I've never tried this trick before, I wonder if it would work. I made a serious face,

"You're right. I was about to tell Satoshi something related to the 'Juumoji' Incident, but,"

"Really? Then count me in....."

"But it concerns something very obscene. Is that OK with you?"

Oh, looks like it worked. Quite effectively.

Forgive me, Chitanda, for committing sexual harassment on you just this once. I picked up the *Ashes at Dusk* copy besides the

frozen Chitanda and walked out the room with Satoshi, who was smiling bitterly. Ibara looked at us with an icy stare that I could still feel the cold from behind.

"So, what's this obscene matter that you're about to tell me?"  
Satoshi said after finally catching his breath from laughing too much.

The place I chose to speak with Satoshi was the roof of the connecting corridor. The reason was because there was hardly any festival-related activities up here and so was relatively quiet.

I replied with a sullen look,

"Sorry for dragging you out here,"

"Oh don't, it was fun. To have the 'Juumoji' Incident conclude at the Classics Club is exactly what I'd wish for,"

..... That wasn't exactly what I was thinking, though.

For a moment, Satoshi gave me a curious smile,

"Well, I have great expectations of you, Houtarou,"

Well, I'm not sure about that. I placed my hand on the handrail and said,

"It's not something that you could expect a lot from. These are just my gut instincts at work, and I'm just working my thoughts

around them,"

"Well, there're a lot of things that one's gut instincts can lead to,

besides the biggest question of who 'Juumoji' is,"

"That's something not even my gut instinct can tell me, besides,

we don't even need to consider that at all,"

"You've found the missing link?"

Missing what?

Seeing my dumbstruck face, Satoshi smiled bitterly,

"The missing link. I'm asking if you have found the final piece

of clue that links all the clubs targeted by 'Juumoji','"

Erm, that's not what I'm trying to say. Try again.

"..... Nah, not really,"

"Then, you've discovered 'Juumoji' have made some trivial

mistakes?"

"Not that either,"

Satoshi suddenly stopped moving and looked at me intently with

an unusually serious look, causing me to wince. He then spoke,

"None of those? This is a phantom thief case, a serial thief, with

over a thousand suspects we're talking about. And you're telling

me you thought of something without even considering any

missing link, or mistakes made by a suspect whose identity has not even been narrowed down?"

"Well..... yeah, that's about it,"

"HOW?!"

For someone whose only interest in detective novels come from Sherlock Holmes, you're quite excited about this, aren't you, Satoshi? Well, this is Satoshi we're talking about, it won't be surprising if his interest went from Conan Doyle from one instance to Takagi Akimitsu the next.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akimitsu\\_Takagi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akimitsu_Takagi))

"I've not gone around to figuring out who the culprit is just yet.

I'm just trying to organize my thoughts, want to hear me out?"

I requested to Satoshi, to which he shrugged his shoulders for some reason. Before I could ask the reason, he reverted to his usual smile and said,

"Sure thing, man,"

He then placed his hand on the hand rail on the opposite side like me and leaned against it. We both felt the autumn breeze blowing between us.

Now, where should I start?

I paused for a while, As this discussion was not just to explain to Satoshi, but to organize my thinking for myself as well, I began by withdrawing my index finger on my right hand,

"First, why would 'Juumoji' target only ten clubs, taking one item from each club? This is due to his name, which literally means 'ten characters', which is where our deduction is mainly based on."

"Don't think anyone would object to such a theory by now."

Neither do I. I withdrew another finger,

"Second, why would 'Juumoji' leave behind a greeting card at the crime scene? Satoshi, do you still have one of those cards with you?"

"Yeah, right here,"

He said as he took out the card he found at The Cooking Club from his drawstring bag.

The Cooking Club has lost its ladle.

Juumoji

"I'm pretty sure a similar card was found at the Magic Club. You're not gonna tell me you're gonna trace where these cards are sold in order to find out who bought them, are you?"

Who would do such a bothersome thing?

Now that I think about it, the way "Juumoji" wrote his cards makes sense. Though easily overlooked at first, a lingering question remains, I thus withdrew my middle finger,

"Third, why would 'Juumoji' use the word 'lost' in his message?"

Why didn't he say he has 'stolen' from The Cooking Club?"

While my following deduction was based on just a whim, I withdrew my ring finger anyway,

"Fourth, why did he also leave behind a copy of the 'Kanya Festival Guide'?"

If he was trying to mimic the "A.B.C. Murders", then he must have referred to the festival guide, which contains the names of all the clubs. As it's a guide for visitors, obtaining one shouldn't be too hard.

"Oh, I've got a copy of that as well,"

Satoshi said and took out a copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide" from his drawstring bag,

"This copy is the one that was found with the card at The Cooking Club,"

He's never one to miss any attention to detail. While I have a

copy myself, I took it from him anyway.

Withdrawing the last little finger, I formed a fist with my right hand, pointing out an issue directly concerning the Classics Club,

"Fifth, why would 'Juumoji' target just the Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU 園芸部), when he could also have targeted the Movie Study Club ([E]IGA KENKYUU KAI 映画研究会)

and the Drama Club ([E]NGEKI BU 演劇部), which also begin with [E]? Similarly, why not target the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KEN 才力カルト研), which is a more natural choice for a name starting with [O], compared to The Cooking Club ([O] RYOURI KEN お料理研) with its unconventional name?"

"Ah, so it's related on whether he'll target the Classics Club ([KO]TEN BU 古典部) or the Miniature Club ([KO]USAOKU BU 工作部), right?"

This was clearly a critical issue that needs to be addressed. That said, I'm personally quite optimistic. Thanks to the Wall Newspaper Club, we've been mentioned as "one of the culprits

last targets", plus we've secured an interview with the Broadcast Club, so we've more or less made our presence clear.

From my clenched fist, I released my index finger,

"Sixth, when I was reading my manga, you told me how

'Juumoji' skipped past [KU] and went straight for [KE], you

must've thought I didn't paid much attention to this, didn't

you? ..... On the contrary, this is the most peculiar point,"

"But I thought he was only doing it just to avoid getting caught.

Like I said, the Global Act Club ([GU]RO-BARU AKUTO

KURABU グローバルアクトクラブ) was too heavily guarded

for him to be able to steal anything,"

Though I get where he's coming from, surely he must have

realized how strange this is. Anyway, I have one more issue to

raise, so I released my middle finger,

"Seventh,"

I opened the *Ashes at Dusk* copy I had with me and showed

Satoshi the afterword, and pointed at the part that read "plans on

writing a mystery story... based on one or two of Agatha

Christie's most famous works", and asked,

"Satoshi, what famous work of Christie's can you think of?"

Without hesitation, Satoshi replied,

"Let's see, there's *And Then There Were None*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and *The A.B.C. Murders*..... namely these four,"

I nodded,

"I would also add *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* to that list, but that'll do. The manga that would be titled *The Kudryavka*

*Sequence* will be based on one of these 'most famous works', which one do you think it is?"

Satoshi wouldn't be too familiar when it comes to the details of detective fiction, not unlike me. But for someone who takes pride in his database, he should at least have an idea of which 'most famous work' it could be. Crossing his arms and thinking for about ten seconds or so, he spoke cautiously,

"If I remember correctly, Kudryavka's the name of a dog that was sent to space via a rocket, and died on it when its oxygen supply ran out. She died believing she was returning to the planet below her."

"Is that all?"

Who would seriously understand what a dog thinks anyway?

"Anyway, *And Then There Were None* would fit the bill the

most. But since the title contains the word 'sequence', then it should be *The A.B.C. Murders*,"

"I agree. If the manga was about all the suspects being removed one by one, then the victims being specifically told that they'd be next would make no sense. So I'm leaning toward *A.B.C.* ,"

"Is that so? Since 'Kudryavka' invokes the meaning of an untimely death, whereas *A.B.C.* is more like a game, and doesn't feel that associated with death. So I'm for *There Were None*,"

That so?

..... No matter, this is just me organizing my thoughts, so there was no need to reach any consensus.

"I feel like I'm getting where you're going with this, Houtarou," Satoshi whispered.

Before he said what he wanted to say, I needed to confirm something with him,

"Satoshi, is there a manga called *The Kudryavka Sequence* on sale in the festival this year?"

"..... No, never heard of it. As all items being sold need to go through the General Committee for approval, and would be duly noted in our records. If it's the Manga Club selling, Mayaka

would have told us about it,"

That should do. I looked towards the sky,

" *Ashes at Dusk* was being sold in last year's Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, its afterword mentions a new issue will be made the following year based on one of Christie's most famous works. It's now deduced that it's either based on *And Then There Were None* or *The A.B.C. Murders*. Just to be safe, let us also include *Orient Express* and *Roger Ackroyd* as well, "And now, we have come to the year which the afterword has mentioned, and we are witnessing a series of events that is similar to Christie's *A.B.C. Murders*, which matches my seventh point. Are all these events coincidental?"

"Houtarou,"

Satoshi continued where I left off,

"Are you saying that *Ashes at Dusk* has foretold the *Jumoji* incident?"

Well, I didn't exactly come to such a conclusion yet, anyway,

"If it sounds too good to be true to make these connections between *Ashes at Dusk* and *The Kudryavka Sequence* with the *Juumoji* incident, then what other connection could there be?

*Juumoji* couldn't possibly be doing this just for fun after waiting for a year, could he?"

Of course, this was a rhetorical question. There was no way he was doing this for fun. Satoshi remained silent, implicitly agreeing that I was right.

"Satoshi, there is a meaning behind all this, or rather, a motive. He didn't make any warning beforehand, neither did he attempt to make himself known, plus the stuff he's stolen, like the water gun and candles, these weren't stolen for fun. I get a feeling someone is ensuring *Juumoji* accomplishes his task smoothly without causing any trouble to other clubs,

"And yet, skipping [KU] does not match his profile. If he had intended to target clubs starting with [KU], he would have done so regardless, so why avoid it.....?"

I stopped here, for any further would require more thinking.

After a brief silence, Satoshi slowly spoke,

"..... I'm going back. I can't just let Chitanda-san go to the interview unprepared,"

He said with a bitter smile.

"I guess so. We're counting on you,"

"What about you, Houtarou?"

"I'm just gonna have a further look at the stuff you gave me,"

Nodding, he turned and walked away.

Ah, yes, I nearly forgot. Regardless of *Juumoji's* intention, I gotta make sure the Classics Club gets the attention it needs.

Though I don't think Satoshi and Ibara would forget, I spoke just in case,

"Satoshi, have Chitanda mention about us preparing some item that begins with [KO] in her interview,"

Standing and turning his head, Satoshi gave a mischievous smile,

"A bait to draw in the customers, huh? We've gone to such lengths to make ourselves the target after all, so it wouldn't be fun if we don't prepare something..... No worries, I'll think of something. Most likely something like 'completed manuscripts' ([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿) Never thought you'd think this far, Houtarou,"

Oh, you flatter me.

"Oh and we're counting on you to watch the stall,"

He said and walked away while waving his hand with his back

faced to me.

Talking with someone sure does help in organizing one's thoughts. After discussing with Satoshi, I arrived at one possibility. It was a bold guess, I believe.

I looked at the greeting card, the copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide" and *Ashes at Dusk*.

It would have been convenient for me to do this indoors, but for some reason, I was examining them under the breezy outdoors.

Think.

I have the materials. All that's left is to organize them nicely.

Deduce, and organize those thoughts.

This breeze is kind of chilly.....

## [118 COPIES REMAINING]

059 - ♣19

Before reentering the campus building, I turned to look at Houtarou once more.

Leaning against a handrail, he was looking at the autumn sky.

I wonder where his thoughts were leading him right now. I could never know.

I couldn't know.

The smile in my mouth disappeared.

As the breeze was kind of chilly, I lowered my eyes.

## 5-2 "Juumoji" vs the Classics Club

061 - ♥14

I feel my heart racing.

In situations like these, there's a way of staying calm, and that is to treat everyone looking at you as pumpkins. Since my family grows pumpkins as well, it was quite an easy vegetable to visualize. I'll be able to calm down will calm down should calm down...

Oh no! But right before me wasn't a person, but a microphone!

Then I must try another method. I'll try tracing the character for "person" (人) on my palm and then "swallow" it. (Note: A traditional Japanese charm. )

Writing the word three times, I swallowed it, by which time I realized.

The character I wrote on my palm wasn't "person", but "enter" (入). (Note: slightly different stroke sequence between 人 and 入.)

"We'll begin as soon as the music ends. You ready?"

"Y, yes."

"Music ending in five, four, three....."

"And that was *Breathe* by *The Prodigy*!"<sup>[1]</sup>

"Now then, let us begin with the topic that's trending in the Kanya Festival right now. Our guest for the final day is Chitanda Eru-san of Class 1A, who is the president of the Classics Club!"

(Applause) Now that's a great applause, even though it's just the sound effects box."

"....."

"Anyway, we've now come to the final day of the Kanya Festival. The topic of the day is of course the 'Juumoji' Incident. In case you haven't already heard, it's about a series of thefts from various clubs right after the festival started. Outrageous, isn't it? (Says excitedly) So now, this thief is kind of artistic, shall we say? He first targeted the A Capella Club, then the Go Club, followed by the Fortune Telling Association and Gardening Club, following the order of the Gojuuon sequence. The items being stolen are namely, water, Go stones, the Tarot Wheel of Fortune card, and (Purposely asks) what was it again?"

" (Quickly answers) An AK."

"Yes, that's it. (*Asks casually*) What's an AK anyway?"

"It's a water gun. The Gardening Club uses it as a fire precaution."

"I see, you've done your research well. If you've read the *Kami High Monthly Extra Edition*, then you'd already know this, but Chitanda-san's Classics Club happens to be this thief's final target. Invincible he may seem, the thief did leave a hint that he would target ten clubs, as his name 'Juumoji' (ten characters) suggest, starting from clubs that start with [A] all the way down to [KO]. So how do you feel right now?"

"Oh yes, (*brief pause*) with everyone's help, we would be able to catch 'Juuomogi' in his act."

"Oh really? (*Delighted*) For a quiet person like you, you're pretty confident!"

"Oh, not really."

" (*Attempting to make conversation flow*) But you still think you can catch him?"

"..... The Classics Club is located on the fourth floor of the Special Block, right at the corner. It's where the Geology Room is. (*Without hesitation*) As you would know, the Geology Room, like most classrooms located in the building's corners, has only

one exit. It is an environment that is unfavourable to the culprit.

With everyone's help, in case he does succeed with the theft, he would not be able to escape easily."

"And how would they help?"

"By coming to the Geology Room. We've only got four members in the Classics Club, so we're short in numbers when it comes to guarding the place. (*Says passionately in order to leave an impression*) We're counting on everyone's help!"

"Hmm, (*Says soberly*) but isn't that request a bit lacking in something?"

" (*Pauses briefly*) Actually, in order to confront 'Juumoji', we have prepared something."

"Now that's more like it. So, (*Lowers voice slightly*) what have you prepared?"

"I'm not sure if you could call it a prepared item.

"In these three days, 'Juumoji' has come close to accomplishing his ten character sequence. But he has yet to find anything that starts with [KO] in the Classics Club. Knowing he's not one to quit easily, 'Juumoji' would definitely fulfill the expectation of everyone, who is eager to find out who he is.

For that purpose, (*Speaks slowly*) we have prepared a manuscript for our club anthology *Hyouka*."

"*(Amazed)* Manuscript?"

"Yes. *Hyouka* is the name for our club anthology, it's a strange name, isn't it? Actually hidden in this name is a secret that concerns the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival, or the 'Kanya Festival' for short. For anyone who's interested, please do come and buy a copy to find out for yourselves."

"A secret concerning the Kanya Festival, huh? Now I'm curious. But what's that got to do with 'Juumoji'?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I meant the manuscript for that anthology. But it's not just any manuscript, but a manuscript that has been proofread for printing. Thus a 'Proofread Manuscrip'.

([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿)"

"*(Delighted)* Aha, I see! In other words, an item that begins with [KO]. So this is what you've prepared in order to invite 'Juumoji' to a showdown, right?"

"Well, *(A bit embarrassed)* something like that..... Though it's not like we're not anxious about it."

"How so?"

"The person known as 'Juumoji' has been able to carry out his acts without being caught so far, so he's a very alert and bold individual. Since everyone's attention would be on us, his final target, we would of course feel a bit anxious. (*Emphasizes slowly*) Maybe there's another way, but we couldn't think of anything better."

"I see, so you're serious about this showdown?"

"Yes, we are. (*Smiles and speaks gently*) As we've purposely arranged a target item, while still feeling helpless at not knowing if it would be stolen. So we would like as many people as possible to come to the Geology Room."

"And there we have it..... (*Speaks with vigour*) The final target, the Classics Club, is all prepared! All that's missing is people!"

And they're seeking people interested in finding out 'Juumoji's' identity, or even desire to catch him themselves. That said, it may still be possible for 'Juumoji' to succeed with his act despite all the security..... In anycase, do come to the Classics Club clubroom, located in the Geology Room on the fourth floor of the Special Block this afternoon.

"That was our guest Chitanda Eru-san of Class 1-A, president of the Classics Club. Thank you very much for your time, and I

wish you good luck!"

"Thank you, we'll do our best."

The mike turned off.

I proceeded to give a deep sigh.

I've managed to mention every memo that Fukube-san and Mayaka-san wrote, including "Proofread Manuscript", "Introduce *Hyouka's* Contents" and "Location of Clubroom".

Besides these, I've also written along the side Irisu-san advices, "Do not make requests that demand the favour to be repaid" and "Do not make people think the problem is huge". For the first advice, I made sure there's no favour that needs to be repaid, and for the second advice, I made no mention of the fact that we still had many copies of *Hyouka* that remained unsold. I'm putting into practice the advice of making people think that "only they could accomplish this request of mine".

Thanks to these preparations and advice, I had managed to encourage myself to do this broadcast. I closed my eyes and thanked everyone who had given me their strength from the bottom of my heart.

"Hey, you're pretty good at this. Though hardly eloquent, but

"you've managed to convey what you wanted to say well," Yoshino-san said as he tapped gently on my shoulder.

I suddenly felt a sting. Oh, no, I wasn't referring to Yoshino-san's words, but a discomfort within my heart. I've been aware of this feeling during this whole festival. And right now, after the broadcast, I felt it prickling at me. It's hard for me to describe in words.....

No, I should only think of the Classics Club for now. Will we be able to pull this off? We'll find out at the Geology Room later on. Placing my hand on my chest, I made a deep breath.

062 - ♠18

I took a look at my watch, it was past two o'clock. I did so while handing a copy of *Hyouka* to the expressionless man before me,

"That'll be 200 yen, please."

After he promptly paid up, he was followed by another customer right behind.

This was not a dream from an afternoon nap. There were more customers coming, more copies were being sold. This was reality. The Geology Room was packed with people.

According to Satoshi, the Global Act Club room was also quite packed earlier this morning. If they could attract that many people just for the purpose of catching "Juumoji", then it's only natural that as his final target, we would also get just as many, especially when we've advertised ourselves on the radio broadcast. As a result, we were able to sell off the *Hyouka* copies quite quickly, compared to before when only up to two copies per hour were being sold.

Of course, having many people gathered alone does not guarantee sales. So most of the credit for this has to go to Chitanda, joining up well with Satoshi's down-to-earth PR. As another copy was sold, I came to be amazed by their dynamism. Right now, they too were in the club room, so too was Ibara in her tracksuit, who came despite her duties with the Manga Club. Those three stood at the centre of the room, forming a triangle with their backs facing outwards, while extended their arms firmly. Within that triangle was another triangle made of yellow stickers plastered on a table.

Within the centre of these two triangles was a stack of A4 paper. The cover sheet on top read *Hyouka Manuscript*. This was the

"Proofread Manuscript" bait that the Classics Club was using to lure "Juumoji" out.

By the way, those were the manuscripts for Ibara's section.

Since Chitanda and I wrote too many for our sections, while Satoshi wrote too little.

Those three guarded the manuscripts, emphasizing the showdown between the Classics Club and "Juumoji" to the crowd. There was no way to know when "Juumoji" will strike.

The crowd who came was either feeling bored, or maybe it's due to Satoshi's advertising, they all decided to buy a copy of *Hyouka* from me. I couldn't see it from where I was sitting, but there's a makeshift illustrated poster drawn by Ibara that was posted on the door. The showdown felt like something from a Spaghetti Western, which was kind of embarrassing when you calmly think about it, but perhaps it wasn't so bad if it's to keep the Kami High students entertained till the very end of the festival.

As I was busy selling the *Hyouka* copies, I had no way of knowing...

Hey, I like the sound of that, let me repeat.

*As I was busy selling the Hyouka copies, I had no way of knowing whether "Juumoji" had already sneaked in among the uniformed students or visitors in their casual wear, trying to find an opportunity to break through the triangle guard formation of Chitanda, Satoshi and Ibara. Eyeing the heavily guarded manuscript and the copies of *Hyouka*, I thought to myself Please don't make your move yet, as I hoped to extend the moment for as long as possible in order to sell as many copies as I could.*

Regardless of whether they're detective-wannabes or just curious onlookers, I couldn't help but listen in on their conversations:

"..... Is he really gonna come....."

"..... He managed to pull it off this morning....."

"..... I think this is just a staged show by the Student Council....."

"..... Hey, isn't this *To Terra*... the book that you said you were reading a while ago....."

"..... Aren't they overdoing this a bit? There's no way he'd be able to get through such heavy security....."

"..... Not if he's Lupin....."

Unfortunately, "Juumoji" is no Lupin, but a mere student of Kamiyama High School. He's not gonna pull some amazing

stunt in order to get his hands on those heavily guarded manuscripts. Ibara looked quite anxious, since the "Juumoji" incident wouldn't be solved even if they were to successfully guard the manuscripts.

I continued to observe.

*Hyouka* was still selling. Five copies, ten copies, twenty copies. Time was passing. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes. I opened the boxes that I thought would never be opened, and slowly removed the *Hyouka* copies within it, until I could see the bottom of the boxes. The rate at which we're selling was simply fantastic. So this was what it feels to be able to do a good business, it feels great, really. I felt like singing. If I weren't an energy saving person, I might just aim to go into business myself based on this experience.

But I guess the limit has more or less been reached. After selling about eighty copies, the sales started slowing down, and I could begin to hear the restless mumblings of the curious onlookers, and I guess our three guards were starting to feel uncomfortable as well. We mustn't be too greedy when it comes to things like these, after all. It was probably time someone put an end to this.

"....."

I moved my gaze towards the centre of the crowd.

And then it happened.

A flash sparked.

"... Whoa!"

I had no idea who yell in panic, but the onlookers all turned to whomever made the scream.

"Huh?

"W, what's going on?"

Everyone realized something had happened, with Chitanda and Ibara being one of the last ones to know, since they had their backs to it. In other words, something was happening to the "Proofread Manuscript" they were guarding.

The manuscript which was supposed to be safe suddenly burst into flames.

The initial flash was so vivid it had stunned everyone.

The fire wasn't particularly strong, but rather a trickle of tiny flames. As it happened so quickly, for a moment, nobody was able to react. Turning to see what was happening behind her, Chitanda was so shocked at what she saw that she drew back.

Someone shouted,

"Fire! Put it out!"

As though reacting on impulse, Satoshi was the first to respond as he frantically shook the flames off the manuscript.

Most of the flames had already gone out quickly, but Satoshi still continued to shake the manuscript, smacking them many times with his sleeves.

Thanks to his quick reaction, the flames had completely gone out. But the manuscript was clearly burned badly, that brief moment was all it needed for it to happen. Satoshi held the manuscript up in the air for all to see.

It was clear to everyone that a hole had been burned through the stack of proofread manuscripts.

Satoshi looked clearly frustrated as he moved his lips, muttering "We've been hit."

After the shock, the whispers began to spread,

"..... Was that him....."

"..... 'Juumoji'? It can't be....."

"..... The thing's all burned up....."

"..... No way the manuscript can survive that....."

The mumblings got more and more excited.

Another voice exclaimed,

"He must have left a notice. Search for it!"

The crowd quickly split into the curious onlookers and the detective-wannabes, with the former discussing excitedly with their friends while the latter began looking around furiously.

..... Very soon the message was found. It was dropped on the floor, along with a copy of *Hyouka* which many people had stepped on. Inserted within the pages of the badly trampled copy of our anthology was a copy of the "Kanya Festival Guide", and of course, the greeting card that came with it. It was a girl who discovered it.

"Let me see that!"

Satoshi drew near to her, and next to Satoshi,

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Ibara too arrived. I also walked over from my seat, carrying the money box with me and took a peek over Satoshi's shoulder.

It was a similar greeting card from before, written in the similar curt style:

The Classics Club has lost its proofread

manuscript.

This completes the "Ten Characters".

Juumoji

And now Chitanda too came to have a look.

Covering her mouth with her eyes wide opened, she was so shocked she couldn't even stand properly.

## **[COPIES REMAINING: PENDING]**

### **Translator's notes and references**

1.

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Prodigy/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prodigy/)

### **5-3 The Curtain Closes**

063 - ♣20

The special, three-day long festive atmosphere is quickly coming to an end. And it was time for me and the General Committee to prepare for the Closing Ceremony.

The phantom thief "Juumoji" had magnificently achieved his final objective and made the Classics Club lose its proofread manuscript. The result was announced by the Wall Newspaper Club, while the details were spread via word of mouth. With the last target being taken down, the "Juumoji" Incident has come to

an end. And as though the final event of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival has ended, everyone realized the Cultural Festival too is coming to an end.

As the Closing Ceremony approaches, I walked towards Mayaka, dressed in a track suit. I never did asked why she was wearing such a track suit for nearly the whole day today. Come to think of it, Houtarou got a bruise on his eyebrow for correctly guessing something. But I'm not as good as he is, and I was unable to ask her properly.

Yet, as though completely forgetting about the Manga Study Club, Mayaka was mad at something else entirely, "I don't believe this! How did he manage to bring fire in? Did he threw matches? But we didn't find any....."

She was like that for a while now. She must have thought acting as guards was just a marketing ploy to sell our *Hyouka* anthologies, but we never thought "Juumoji" would actually appear, so she was pretty shocked. All I could do was casually shrug my shoulders to tell her I wouldn't know the answer to her question either. After all, I much prefer seeing Mayaka look so worked up than dejected.

We walked down the stairs to the first floor.

"Hey, Fukube,"

Someone called me, it was Tani-kun.

I made an abjected smile as befitting of a loser. As I really have lost, so it was not a hard expression to make. Though it was not Tani-kun that I had lost to.

"Hey, Tani-kun. As you see, we got had. You were at the Geology Room, right?"

"Of course,"

Yet, Tani-kun spoke with less confidence than before. That's to be expected. I went on to ask,

"So, Tani-kun, did you manage to find out who 'Juumoji' was?"

Tani-kun's face scowled for an instance. He probably felt a sense of humiliation. Yet he quickly went back to his relaxed demeanor, and said in a graceful manner,

"Nope, I haven't,"

"I see,"

"Well, there were too little clues. With so little information, one could never come to any conclusion no matter how much they would think about it,"

There were indeed too little clues.

"Then, what about you? Did you figure out something?"

He smiled while asking with serious eyes, I smiled bitterly and

shook my head. Tani-kun quickly show a sign of relief,

"I see, I see. Even you couldn't solve it. And I had expected

something of you,"

"Sorry to let you down."

"Don't worry about it. Well, it was a fun Cultural Festival. I'll

have to repay you for the Cooking Club clue you gave me

someday,"

Come to think of it, I did tell him something like that, but it was

quite some time ago.

We waved at each other and walked our separate paths. Mayaka

then asked,

"Your friend?"

..... Hmm, I wonder?

"Not exactly a friend,"

"Then what?"

"Hmm, let's see, you could say he's just a classmate,"

I gave it some thought,

"He's bad in Languages, I think,"

"So he flunked his tests often?"

"Not really. How should I say it, it's the way he uses his words  
that's weird,"

Mayaka raised her eyebrows, indicating that I was saying  
something strange again. I smiled and explained,

"He uses the word 'expect' a bit too lightly,"

"..... What's wrong with that? It's not like it's a taboo word,"

"Uh uh,"

I raised my right index finger and waved it two, three times,

"This is a really complex subject. I'll explain to you once the  
Cultural Festival is over,"

"Um, Fuku-chan,"

"One should not use the word 'expect' when one is confident of  
himself,"

I interrupted Mayaka before she could continue, which was kind  
of rare. Mayaka shut her mouth and held back whatever it was  
she had wanted to say.

Looking down the decorated corridor, I smiled. I was pretty  
good at smiling, to the point of not knowing how to make a

serious face.

"Dictionaries usually have a preset definition for a word. I myself am not really a person that quotes from dictionaries. So, Mayaka, while I wouldn't know how a dictionary would define this word, but for me, 'Expect' is only something you say when you've given up,"

"....."

I really hoped she would have said something in response, or I'm just talking to myself,

"One only expects when one is depleted of time, resources or energy. The reason Nelson said 'England expects that every man will do his duty' to his men was because even Nelson himself wasn't so sure if he could defeat France. One only expects when one has run out of all other options.

"Tani-kun doesn't really expect anything from me, as he thought he was able to figure something out by himself. It's concerning how young people these days misuse their words, there should be a reform of the Japanese Language education. You only use the word 'expect' in occasions like....."

As expected of Mayaka. Just when I thought she was merely

listening, she spoke with her usual annoyed tone,

"Like how Oreki beat you in figuring something out?"

Bravo. I clapped my hands,

"..... Wow, how'd you know? I didn't even tell anybody about it,"

"If it's Fuku-chan, I could tell just by looking,"

Was I really the type to show stuff on my face?

Approaching the gymnasium, the corridor was still full of smiling students from Kami High. Everyone either felt fully satisfied, or wanted to spend as much fun as they could in these three days. Dwarfed by such laughter, we could hardly hear each other speak. And so I pretended not to hear Mayaka's reply.

"..... Fuku-chan, did you want to beat Oreki that much?"

Yet I was unable to ignore that. No, that's not it, that's not what I had intended, but.....

"Well, it's complicated for guys. You wouldn't understand even if I explained it to you,"

Glancing sideways at me, Mayaka muttered something without making any sound. I managed to make out "That's not true" by her lip movements. It's just that Mayaka rarely makes such a

quiet expression, and I've not seen her like that before.

So in response, I cheerfully placed my hands behind my head and said,

"I should have realized from the start now that I think about it. I was careless. He's the sort that would finish things off neatly without making any unnecessary movements for not even a moment,"

Mayaka tilted her head to signal she doesn't understand what I was saying. Entering the connecting passageway, we got closer to the gymnasium where the Closing Ceremony will be held.

With a voice that the Kami High Students around us could hear, I spoke clearly. After all, this was something I felt no shame in saying as I was very sure of it,

"I can't come to any conclusions just based on my own database alone."

Mayaka smiled bitterly in response.

064 - ♥15

In the end, Irisu-san was able to sell all 30 copies of *Hyouka* that I gave to her, that's 15% of the total amount of copies. I never thought we would be able to sell them off via this method, so I

was at a lost at how to thank her.

Handing me a small nylon bag containing the proceedings, Irisu-san said softly,

"If I could, I had wanted to sell them at the full price,"

"No, that's more than enough,"

Those 30 copies were sold at a 50 yen discount, still 150 yen is worth more than nothing. It's better to sell these 30 copies at a discount than discard them completely, after all.

While I haven't heard the exact figures from Oreki-san, but I hear that he's sold quite a lot of copies in the Geology Room. I was able to feel some relief at last after such a long anxious Cultural Festival. After that..... yes, all that's left is to investigate the person known as "Juumoji-san". I'll do this. There's nothing that can stop me.

After giving my awkward thanks, I was about to return when Irisu-san stopped me.

"Yes?"

"Hmm..... I think I'd better say this to you now.

It is rare for Irisu-san to be so hesitant with her words. I wonder if it's something important? I stood up straight and replied,

"Yes, what is it?"

She spoke as though carefully choosing her words,

"My advice..... I heard you using it on the school radio broadcast."

Oh, the school radio broadcast. Anyone in school would have heard that broadcast. Even though I knew that already, when being told of that fact, it still felt a little embarrassing.

Still, it was thanks to Irisu-san that my radio interview went smoothly. That's right, I must thank her properly for this,

"It's thanks to Irisu-san that I was able to do this properly, I....."

"It's about that,"

Irisu-san interrupted me with a forceful tone,

"I was too naive. I never thought you would reenact what I had advised.

"I knew what your intention was when you agreed to appear on that radio programme. You probably brought a memo along with you when you went, right? So I'm going to tell you clearly, you're not suited for this sort of thing."

"....."

Without realizing, I nodded gently.

Once she began, Irisu-san showed no sign of stopping,  
"Unless I'm mistaken, I always knew you are the type to not  
want to rely on the help of others.  
"Yet, I don't think you should go on manipulating expectations  
of other people like that. With the way you spoke and  
demeanor you put on, it makes you sound very dependent.  
While it's a very effective way to give someone the illusion that  
they're reliable. Yet it's risky for you to go on like that, not just  
in the long term, but in the short term as well,"

She gave a very serious advice.

She was right. I realized I was very uncomfortable with myself  
after that radio broadcast. During that time, or rather, during  
these three days, I wondered if I was being too dependent on  
other people.

Maybe I was too conscious of my relationship with Oreki-san.  
Anxiously aware that I was constantly making him do the  
explanation on things I don't understand, without even trying to  
figure it out myself.

However.

To rely on this many people, and to get some deal out of them

was, how should I say this? ..... Yes, to quote from Oreki-san, this goes against my personal creed.

I think it's problematic to rely on someone else to solve one's own problems. While it is true that the Classics Club was unable to sell all the anthologies on its own, but I'm not used to such a solution. I was unable to distinguish between 'expectation' and 'reliance'. Could my fatigue last night be related to such anxieties?

With some trepidation, I asked,  
"Did I really sound that dependent?"

Irusu-san raised her hand to the side of her face, and lifted her little finger.

"..... Girlfriend?"  
"No, I mean you sounded as dependent as the tip of my finger,"

Irisu-san continued,  
"If you keep on with such an act, sooner or later pretending can turn into your reality. It's true that you've never negotiated like that before..... but in that case, you should have placed your expectations on people who could do the task. What I'm trying to say is, you should quit with such unskilled maneuvering and

just say what you want to say. While going straight to the point is often your weakness, on the other hand, it could also be your greatest weapon..... You understand what I mean?"

Yes, I do. Irisu-san was worried about me.

Though with apologies to her, she may be worrying too much.

So I gave her a reassuring smile and said,

"Yes, I was thinking the same thing..... I just felt I wasn't suited for such a thing. Umm, in other words..... I'm tired of it."

Irisu-san smiled gently in response.

065 - ♦12

After the Closing Ceremony had ended, the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival officially comes to an end. Though normal lessons won't resume right away, as before that, all students are required to clean up the school before leaving.

Borrowing something from Oreki, I took this moment to head to the First Preparation Room. I didn't feel like heading to the Manga Club, and I wasn't thinking of defeating Kouchi-sempai now of all times. Still, I had wanted to at least show her *Ashes at Dusk*. My position in the Manga Club and its policy during the Cultural Festival notwithstanding, I simply wanted to show it to

her as a fellow manga lover.

As luck would have it, Kouchi-sempai was outside the classroom speaking with President Yuasa. I called her out from some distance,

"Sempai,"

They both turned around,

"..... Oh, Ibara,"

Kouchi-sempai sighed, and asked with her usual upright demeanor,

"Yes, what is it?"

"I know it's a little late, but, here....."

I presented the *Ashes at Dusk* copy to her,

"I've brought it, the manga that I believe would become a classic one day,"

Kouchi-sempai's gaze sharpened as though it would shoot through my chest. She looked at the copy of *Ashes at Dusk* with quite some bitterness before sighing deeply,

"Let's go somewhere else,"

The place she took me was the same place I spoke with President Yuasa, the roof of the connecting corridor. Leaning on

the handrail, Kouchi-sempai glanced down at the courtyard below. I stood a few paces from her and watched her back. In the background, we could hear the sound of people cleaning things up, tearing down their makeshift stalls. The breeze blowing in the late afternoon felt a little chilly.

I continued to stand behind her as she stared at the courtyard. From this angle, her figure looked rather small. She spoke while still facing her back to me,

"..... So you really brought it with you?"

"Yes. Though it's not exactly mine,"

I realized my lips were getting dry, and licked them before continuing,

"Sempai, you knew about this manga, didn't you?"

"Yuasa told you, didn't she? She can be pretty nosey sometimes,"

"She said you were friends with the author of this manga,"

Though I could not see as she was facing her back to me, I could feel as though she was smiling gently,

"Friend, huh? I wonder how Haruna's doing now. I did ask for her number, just in case. I haven't spoken to her for so long

now."

"Have you read this manga?"

There was no reply.

My knees were trembling, but not because it was cold. While I was used to brow beating Fuku-chan, I had never pressed a question on someone else like this before..... I was scared, so much my heart was beating faster and my legs trembled.

Though as there was only the two of us, no one would notice how scared I was. I tightened my fists further,

"..... I, understand what you're trying to say. Whether a manga is interesting or not is purely subjective, I also understand that it's up to every individual to decide whether a manga suits oneself or not.

"But, I still think this is incorrect. Wouldn't that be a bit too futile?"

Sempai's voice was extremely calm,

"Well, for *Ashes at Dusk*, it's on the serious side, you know. If my preference was comedy, I wouldn't bother reading it. Isn't that the case?"

"No, it isn't. One would stop reading only after one has started.

So I'm sure that this manga has that ability to make you understand once you read it,"

"Only to those who'd understand the difference."

"Kouchi-sempai!"

Sempai continued to face her back towards me without turning around. Slowly putting her hand in her breast pocket, she took something out. It sounded like a pen as I could hear her removing the cap. She then began to scribble something on the handrail.

"..... I was joking,"

"Eh?"

I thought I had heard wrong, yet Kouchi-sempai repeated herself,

"I was only joking. Of course I'd understand. You really think I'd seriously say everyone's work is worth the same subjectively? You sure can't take a joke, silly girl."

"....."

I slowly relaxed the grip I had on my fists. *Ayako doesn't really mean what she said*, Those words of President Yuasa echoed in my head.

I could feel the cold breeze blowing through my track suit.  
Under such a breeze, I could barely hear Kouchi-sempai clearing  
her throat,  
"It just couldn't leave me be,"  
".....?"  
"I did read it, but only half way before stopping. Though I  
couldn't bring myself to throw it away. But I still won't read it,  
do you know why?"  
I shook my head.  
I couldn't see her expression from behind, but I could hear her  
laughing softly,  
"You said I'd understand it I read it, right? Yeah, I did  
understand. A lot. But, I couldn't bring myself to admit it.  
"What about you? What if a friend who has never read any  
manga before decided to write one herself and comes up with  
something like that..... you'd normally think it'd be ridiculous,  
right?"  
"....."

*What about you?*

I couldn't understand why she would never read a manga written

by her friend.

..... No, was that really what I think?"

What if Chi-chan suddenly decided to draw a manga?

And what if she ended up creating a masterpiece like *Ashes at Dusk*?

Would I be able to read it smiling?

Kouchi-sempai stopped her scribbling. Her words have been unusually calm,

"So I hid it away in a box and stored it way inside. To the point where I could not see it and tell myself such a masterpiece doesn't exist. But it just couldn't let me be. Who would have thought a copy sold in last year's Kanya Festival would end up reappearing in the hands of a first year? And during Kanya Festival to boot.

"..... It must be fate,"

Sempai said while putting the cap back on her pen. As though leaping, she pushed herself away from the handrail. Waving her hand, she headed towards the school building. Without looking at me, she said,

"I'm sorry that you went through the trouble of showing me this,

but I won't read it. Since it's not yours, you'll have to return it to its owner. Because, you know?

"If I read it, I'll have to call her. And I'd have to say 'I read it, it was amazing! I look forward to your next piece!' That's not something I'd want to say, you know?"

I wasn't able to stop Kouchi-sempai from leaving. Walking lightly as though nothing had happened, she disappeared from my sight. All this time, she never saw me in the face.

It was then I noticed the doodle that she had scribbled on the handrail. It was a semi-deformed character, an anthropomorphic cat. He wasn't wearing anything in particular except for a pair of baggy boots..... I realized I had seen this character before, and I whispered,

"This is..... from *Body Talk*,"

I see.

So that's why.

Both of my treasured mangas *Ashes at Dusk* and *Body Talk* were amazing. But if I had to choose one out of those two, I would have to pick *Ashes at Dusk* after some agonizing.

And I realized Kouchi-sempai would also come to the same

conclusion.

I.....

In comparison to *Ashes at Dusk* and *Body Talk*, I was reminded of how boring my own manga was, and suddenly I felt myself tearing up.....

#### **5-4 Behind the Stage**

060 - ♠17

Noon. The third day of the Kamiyama High School Cultural Festival.

The bicycle parking lot.

There's only four hours until the Closing Ceremony..... We don't really have a lot of time.

I'm feeling hungry, but I'm gonna have to hold it in. Though I may have my boxed lunch here, but it just wouldn't feel right.

The school radio broadcast should begin anytime now. Would Chitanda be able to perform as expected? If she was the same as the previous two days, then it'll be game over by the time the programme starts, as she'll probably right off the bat say "Please buy the Classics Club anthologies!"

Besides us, there was no one else around. There were no walls,

just the lonely sight of an elongated roof covering the parked bicycles, a far cry from the lively atmosphere of the Cultural Festival. I put down the shoulder bag I was holding, as it was quite heavy, and instantly felt a relief on my shoulders.

"What's that for?"

He asked, I replied in a nonchalant manner,

"In short, I didn't come all this way just for nothing,"

"It's not a bribe, is it?"

"Well, not quite, but close enough,"

I smiled bitterly.

"I'll get straight to the point. You must be 'Juumoji', right?"

"Hmm?"

Unexpectedly, "Juumoji" smiled at my suggestion,

"Surely that's just a wild guess?"

"Chances of making a correct wild guess would have been less than one in a thousand. It's not that simple."

"As I don't really have that much free time, so I'll at least hear what you've got to say,"

As he said that, he leaned against a nearby pole. I took out a greeting card from my pocket,

"In a hurry huh? Well, so am I. I'll make this as short as possible.

"First, this is the card that's left in the scene of crime. Why would the culprit use the word 'lost' to describe items being taken? To be precise, what was the difference between 'lost' and 'stolen'?"

He showed some interest, though his expression remained unmoved.

"There wouldn't be much difference whether the A Capella Club had things stolen or lost. Yet along the way, something was not merely stolen, but completely destroyed. And that was a major hint. You have stolen everything from that, but why is that?"

While the "Juumoji" Incident was foretold in *Ashes at Dusk*, but the connection is still very weak. There must be some other meaning.

"The odd one out would be [KU]. You had skipped [KU] and didn't steal anything from that.

"Of course, had you followed the greeting card's procedure, then you wouldn't have 'stolen' from [KU], but make it 'lose' something.

"The question now would be, why would you not have [KU]

lose anything? By skipping one character, you would have destroyed the meaning behind the word 'Juumoji' (ten characters). While Satoshi said it's because the Global Act Club was so heavily guarded that you've opted to avoid it, I do not believe that is the case. If we follow 'Juumoji's' modus operandum, it just wouldn't feel natural. It would feel totally random for you to just skip one character and then target [SA] as the final target," (TL Note [SA] comes after [KU] in the Gojuuon)

I took a brief pause. As my throat was getting dry from the low moisture,

"To abandon the aesthetics of keeping within ten characters would be too unnatural, no matter how I think about it, it doesn't make sense for you to skip [KU]. But what if you had not abandoned that aesthetic, what if you had stuck to the natural order of things? In other words, what if 'Juumoji' had actually worked according to plan?

"..... What if you had also made [KU] lose something?

"Based on the message on these greeting cards, your message would have been: '[KU] had already lost something to begin

with, so there was nothing to take from it'. What if that were true?"

I took a glimpse at his expression, which remained unchanged. Was he prepared for me to turn him in, or did I guess incorrectly? No, there was no sign of weakness from him. Then I'll have to go on,

"How about this? 'The owner of [KU] has lost something beginning with [KU] to begin with. - Juumoji' Indicating that it was not 'Juumoji' that had taken from [KU],"

Silence. Expecting that he would make no response, I went on, "This is actually an accusation. Telling the victim that they have lost something on their own. In other words, the 'Juumoji' Incident actually contains a hidden message. A message intended for the owner of [KU],"

For the first time, 'Juumoji' replied,

"That would have been a very elaborate hidden message, there's no way it could be relayed,"

"You're right. Normally it would have been impossible," "Then we're not going where if it was impossible to begin with."

But that is not true,

"It would be a different story altogether if the owner of [KU] has a way of interpreting the message. You would send the message, and [KU] would decipher it. It would not be impossible then,"

" *If*,"

"But it's not just if, as you have already created such a method, which I believe can be found in the plot of *Ashes at Dusk*,"

He had been able to remain calm until now, yet his eyes widened upon hearing the title *Ashes at Dusk*, as though saying "How did you know such a title?" He would have lost had he uttered that loud. Calming myself, even if he had not reacted as expected, I decided to continue in my usual tone,

" *The Kudryavka Sequence* is inspired by Agatha Christie's best known work, from which the 'Juumoji' Incident is born. Using *The Kudryavka Sequence* as a benchmark, the hidden message would be solved and the owner of [KU] would be....."

I looked up at him,

"Kugayama Muneyoshi ([KU]GAYAMA 陸山), President of the Student Council, and illustrator of *Ashes at Dusk*. Am I right?"

Concealing his unease, he placed his hand under his chin and

began thinking. As though pondering his next time, slowly he began speaking,

"'Juumoji' only targets clubs, yet you say [KU] is a person's name? It doesn't make sense,"

A swift response.

"The name 'Juumoji' merely hints that there would be ten targets, no where does it say that he would only target clubs,"

"Now that's stretching it,"

"Not really. As the culprit, you have already provided a list of targets to begin with.

"Why would the culprit leave behind not just a greeting card, but a copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide*? The clue can be found in Christie's *The A.B.C. Murders*, the guide is actually a list of the targets. By leaving a page open when leaving behind each copy of the *Kanya Festival Guide*, you had wanted to give people a fair chance of guessing. I'm guessing *The Kudryavka Sequence* would also be something like that had it been published. The opened page contains not only a list of participating clubs and comments,"

In other words, it's this page:

**Light Music Club** Though we're more of a band, this time we'll be registering as the Light Music Club. All day in the Martial Arts Dojo.

**Go Club** Beginners Seminar in Preparation Room No. 2. There will of course be tutorial matches as well.

**A Capella Club** Stationed at Class 3-C. Will be performing in the School Courtyard on Day 1 at 11am. Please come listen!

**Wall Newspaper Club** Special Edition published every two hours during Kanya Festival. Featuring the latest and hottest topics being discussed.

**The Cooking Club** Cooking battle "Wild Fire" on the School Grounds on Day 2 at 11am! Seeking participants.

**Gardening Club** Cooking harvested sweet potatoes..... But this isn't gardening, it's farming! Are you sure this is okay, prez?

**Brass Band Club** Performing a different song everyday from 1pm in the Gymnasium.

**Magic Club** Stall at 2-D classroom. Stage performance Day 1 at 11:30am. Please look forward to it.

**Fortune Telling Association** Next to the stairs on the 3rd floor.

**Classics Club** Why is the Kami High Cultural Festival called the "Kanya Festival"? The answer is in our anthology *Hyouka*. 200yen per volume in the Geology Lecture Room.

### **Organizing Committee**

**Kugayama Muneyoshi (Student Council President, Kanya Festival Executive Committee President)** You guys are overdoing this. That's all I'll say.

**Yazaki Keita (Student Council Vice President)** The Organizing Committee can be found in the Student Council Room. Do visit us if there's anything you wish to discuss. "The list of targets can all be found in page 33. This explains seemingly random choices like how The Cooking Club ([O] RYOUKI KENKYUUKAI) was targeted over the Occult Studies Club ([O]KARUTO KENKYUUKAI), or the Gardening Club ([E]NGEI BU) over the Film Studies Club ([E]IGA KENKYUUKAI). Rather than a declaration of crime, this *Kanya Festival Guide* is more like an advanced notice,"

"....."

"Furthermore, on page 33, there are no clubs that begin with [KU], yet there is a person's name, that of President Kugayama,"

I made a deep breath before going on,  
"Let's take a brief detour. By this point, we can guess as to what sort of person 'Juumoji' is, and which club he belongs to. It would be too random for all the targeted clubs to fall so neatly into the same page. The only people capable of manipulating the order of how the clubs are displayed would be the General Committee, the greeting cards would be by the same people as well,

"By the way, concerning The Cooking Club. I had confirmed with their president that they had prepared a ladle before the tournament. For an item to be prepared before a tournament to go missing, the suspect must be involved with the tournament preparation somehow. Satoshi probably had so much fun that he probably didn't work much, but I'm guessing the General Committee had a hand in helping out with the tournament preparation, right?"

He could do nothing but smile bitterly. In which case, it makes

my explanation much simpler,

"Well, there are like twenty people or more in the General Committee. So this would not be enough to pinpoint the culprit,

"On the other hand, I also know that Anjou Haruna, the author of *Ashes at Dusk*, and President Kugayama, whom she worked with, would also know about *The Kudryavka Sequence*. In other words, Kugayama should be able to decipher the message hidden in the 'Juumoji' Incident,

"Then what about the culprit, 'Juumoji'? Who is this person that was mimicking the plot of *The Kudrayvka Sequence* in an attempt to relay a message to Kugayama?

"We have a ten character rule starting with [A], and an accusation that 'something has already been lost to begin with' "Now this is a bold speculation, but what if the message was Kugayama had lost the manuscript for *The Kudryavka Sequence*? Something which Anjou Haruna, who had left Kami High, had left behind. Perhaps the culprit could not forgive Kugayama, who had wasted the preview that 'Ajimu Takuha' had written, and thus instigated the 'Juumoji' Incident.

"In other words, the culprit's message would be: 'Kugayama ([KU]GAYAMA) has lost *The Kudryavka Sequence* ([KU]DORIYAFUKA NO JUNBAN)'.

"Finally, the afterword of *Ashes at Dusk* was written by neither

Anjou nor Kugayama, but by a third person in charge of the background drawings. So 'Juumoji' is none other this third member of 'Ajimu Takuha',"

From the shoulder bag on the ground, I took out a copy of *Ashes at Dusk*. I showed him the cover, which clearly shows the author's name "AJIMU TAKUHA".

" 'Ajimu Takuha' is a rare pen name. I heard it's named after some town in Kyushu. This may be a bit stretching it, but what if this pen name was a composite of the names of the three creators of *Ashes at Dusk*? For example, if Tarou ([TA]ROU) and Jirou ([JI]ROU) had formed a unit, its name would be 'Taji' ([TA][JI]),

"We have Anjou Haruna (**[A]NJOU [HA]RUNA**),

"We also have Kugayama Muneyoshi (**[KU]GAYAMA**

**[MU]NEYOSHI**),

"From 'Ajimu Takuha' (**[A][JI][MU] [TA][KU][HA]**), we can

deduce the third person's name by taking off the initial

characters of the other two. That would leave [JI] and [TA],

"The culprit would be amongst the second years that have

participated in last year's Cultural Festival, who is a member of

the General Committee, whose names contains the characters [TA] and [JI], who is close to Kugayama, and who is familiar with drawing manga. There can only be one person who fits the above description,"

I spoke in a calm tone that surprises even myself,  
"It would be you, Tanabe Jirou-sempai. (**[TA]NABE  
[JI]ROU**)"

"That's amazing. I would never have thought anyone else besides Mune and Anjou-san would be able to decipher such a message,"

Tanabe clapped his hands. I meekly accepted his applause, as I didn't expect to be praised for this. Leaving that aside, I began to speak more frankly,

"What I don't understand is why you would go through such lengths just to convey a message? Surely you could have just told him directly,"

As I said that, I began to guess what his answer would be. And as expected, Tanabe smiled bitterly,

"I would have told him already if I could. And besides..... you must have vaguely guessed it yourself, as to why I would use

such a method,"

While he flatters me too much, it's true that I've vaguely guessed the reason,

"This Cultural Festival is exactly one year since you've published *Ashes at Dusk*, so could this act be your way of expressing your sentiment to Anjou Haruna's departure?"

"Heh, sentiment, huh? That could be true, and since it's the Cultural Festival, it could be a desire to pull a prank as well. It's boring being stuck in the conference room all day, you know. So I decided to have some fun,"

Sentiment and fun. For him to carry out the "Juumoji" Incident just for these reasons, Tanabe's values sure contrast largely with my own energy-conserving ones.

Speaking in a faint voice that was hard to hear, he added,

"..... But the most important reason, was because I was unable to tell him so,"

I knew nothing about Tanabe or Kugayama. There's no reason for me to know what had happened between these two. And to be honest, I'm not interested. So I cleared my throat.

From here on is the main dish.

I slightly lowered my voice,

"Well then, now comes the negotiation.

"Besides accepting your applause, there's something else that I would like you to help out with,"

"Hmm, and what would that be?"

Even faced with a deal that concerns whether I could turn him in, Tanabe didn't look the least bit anxious. The biggest reaction I've seen from him so far was when I uttered the title for *The Kudryavka Sequence*. He sure has some guts.

"Oh, it's simple really,"

I took out the items from the shoulder bag,

"..... I'd like you to buy these,"

The items were of course the *Hyouka* anthologies.

This was my plan to expand sales: Expose "Juumoji's" identity, and then have him buy the *Hyouka* copies, in bulk. Compared to trying to appeal ourselves through tournaments, this was way more efficient.

"The anthology *Hyouka*, 30 copies in total,"

"What are you..... some gangster?"

"What're you talking about?"

"After finding out that I'm 'Juumoji', you're now asking me to buy these anthologies from you,"

I find it troubling to be described as some shady character, so I smiled bitterly and said,

"Oh, no, of course not. I won't go so far as to extort money from you personally. That's not what I was thinking,"

"..... I don't get it. Then what do you intend to do with those anthologies if you're not selling them?"

"I did say I was going to sell them, however, the ones buying would be,"

I took a deep breath,

"The General Committee,"

"That's rid-

Tanabe's face went pale. It would be bothersome if he were to raise a commotion, so I continued,

"It's not ridiculous at all.

"I saw it, on the Kamiyama High School home page. You guys are putting merchandise from the Cultural Festival on sale there, aren't you? And since these anthologies are related to the Cultural Festival, it wouldn't be out of place, would they? You

can simply buy them in the General Committee's name and then put them up on the site for sale,"

Tanabe was at a loss for words. He went into thought for a while before saying,

"..... These anthologies, they're not really that popular, are they?"

"In other words, you'll agree to put them on sale if they're popular enough?"

So he's unable to make such an easy commitment, or something like that. Tanabe began choosing his words carefully,

" *If* they're popular. To begin with, we had a lot of trouble trying to sell most of the items on the site. We would have asked you

already if we had wanted to put those anthologies on the site for sale. That's how these sites work anyway..... So you're gonna need a very good reason for us to accept such an offer,"

Understood. However,

"But *Hyouka* will be popular,"

"How so?"

"Thanks to the 'Juumoji' Incident, of course. You need to complete the sequence all the way to [KO] or your message wouldn't be conveyed, right? In that case, how about having fun

together with others for the finale?

"Me and Fukube Satoshi will be able to provide support for your final target. You won't find insiders willing to assist you in other targets.

"The final target, the Classics Club, will be packed with people. Regardless of whether the anthology itself is popular or not, it's sure to sell like hot cakes anyway. So not only do you have a reason for putting them on the site for sale, you get to complete what you have started. How about that?"

Now how will it go?

If Tanabe were to lash out, then my plan would have failed. Not only would we not be able to sell all the *Hyouka* copies, I would have created a grudge with Tanabe. It's a risky move, but in order to achieve the impossible task of selling 200 copies of anthologies, this was a risk worth taking. Not to mention we have to sell as many copies as possible, though we weren't able to keep things simple.....

I held my breath and waited for Tanabe's judgement. Oh man, I'm getting nervous.

Why're you not saying anything, Tanabe? You wouldn't have

anything to lose in such a deal.

..... Or was he concerned about being blackmailed into such a deal? No, it can't be, but my heart is getting noisy by the second. And then Tanabe.....

Made a relaxed expression and said,

"I see, it does sound like a good deal. It is as you say, we can't leave the 'Juumoji' Incident incomplete like that. And it's time the web store needs some restocking, so I'd say we have common interests,"

If I could, I would breath many sighs of relief. After breathing a sigh, which turned out to be a deep one, as I didn't realize I had held my breath for that long. Looks like my plan had worked.

Tanabe returned to his relaxed demeanor. Smiling gently, he asked,

"..... So, how do you plan on assisting 'Juumoji' on his final target?"

Ah.

Actually, this idea came from a recent news about a power outage in Fukui Prefecture,

"The Classics Club would prepare a 'Proofread Manuscript'

([KO]URYOU GENKOU 校了原稿). I'll convince Chitanda.....

our president about it, and will put a guard around it so no one could get near,"

"I see,"

Looks like Tanabe wasn't too concerned about following the exact plot of *The Kudryavka Sequence*, and was really enjoying what I was suggesting,

"Then what happens next?"

"I'd like you to obtain two items, from the Chemistry Club and the Confectionery Studies Club respectively. I saw it on the *Kanya Festival Guide*, the Chemistry Club seems to be doing some demonstration on the power of sodium. I'd like you to try and get some of that sodium. The Confectionery Studies Club consists of two people selling biscuits around the school. They have a Glock 17 water pistol with them, try and ask them to lend it to you,"

Tanabe widened his eyes,

"..... You sure think of some dangerous stuff,"

I smiled vaguely,

"It's a festival, and it's also the finale, so let's go with a bang.

"I'll try and place the sodium between the pages of the proofread manuscript. And then wait for my signal, since it wound't be fun if the 'Juumoji' Incident ended before the *Hyouka* copies had sold out after all. So wait for my signal before you fire the water pistol. If you conceal your hands with a *Hyouka* copy and stand behind Satoshi, it would be unlikely you'd be caught,"

"And what if the pages catch fire?"

"I'll use as little sodium as possible. What's most important is that a spark is made, even if just for a moment. Just enough for a small hole to burn through the manuscript so that everyone could see,"

Placing his hand on his chin, Tanabe smiled,

"Hmm..... This would require some effort. I know some people from the Chemistry Club, so that wouldn't be a problem. As for the Confectionery Studies Club, if I can't them, I'll use the one I borrowed from the Gardening Club..... And what about the greeting card?"

I nodded,

"Place it between one of the *Hyouka* copies, and then drop it at the first chance you get. Or place it in the desk drawer if that's

impossible. There'll be many people by then, so it shouldn't be a problem,"

"No, it's better if you just prepare it before hand. Try to keep the procedures during the crime as simple as possible,"

I see, you have a point. Guess I'll take it.

"Then I suppose you'll be needing this copy of 'Hyouka' for that purpose,"

"You're a shrewd one,"

"We're the ones in trouble here, after all,"

Tanabe smiled bitterly and handed 200 yen over.

"I'll give the signal by making eye contact with you,"

"Understood..... By the way, what's your name?"

Oh dear me, where're my manners? I purposely cleared my throat and announced,

"Oreki Houtarou, of Class 1-B,"

As we parted ways, Tanabe spoke as though it were nothing,

"You said that the 'Juumoji' Incident was an elaborate hidden message for Kugayama, right?"

Carrying the shoulder bag, I turned around and said,

"Yeah,"

"And you said that the message was Kugayama had lost *The Kudryavka Sequence*,"

"Was I wrong?"

Yet his voice was soft. I could only imagine as to what Tanabe had wanted to convey to Kugayama.

Tanabe's voice went softer. I could not understand what he was thinking then,

"No, you guessed wrongly, but I don't blame you for that. The only other person who would get the message would be Anjou-san,"

Hmm?

"Not both Kugayama and Anjou?"

"Mune, Kugayama wouldn't get the message,"

What's going on? I was starting to get confused,

"But Anjou Haruna has....."

"She's transferred, so she probably didn't come today,"

"Then, your target was?"

As though enjoying the reversal of roles, Tanabe smiled bitterly, "It's Kugayama, as you've guessed. Though the message was different.

"The original message was supposed to be 'Kugayama, *The Kudryavka Sequence* is slipping away from you', in other words, "Kugayama, do you not intend to draw Anjou-san's story?'"

Ah.

"A plead, huh?"

"Not even that,"

Tanabe's smile remained, but it was one of jaded realization,

"Kugayama never felt like drawing manga.

"You've read it, right? I knew Anjou-san was a genius, but I never knew Mune could draw this well. Artistic sense is not something you could describe in words, but if you've seen his works, then you could have said that he's got some artistic sense,

"Yet he doesn't seem interested in it. The manuscript for *The Kudryavka Sequence* does exist. I have a copy, and Mune should have a copy as well. It was a great story. If Mune had the will to draw it, it will be a work that would surpass even *Ashes at Dusk*.

Yet for Mune, drawing manga for a year seems to be merely a fun detour for him,"

That would be.....

The image of the *Ashes at Dusk* manga I received from my sis

flashed in my head. It was a great manga, the drawings were amazing. And yet to call such drawings a fun detour.

As though reading my thoughts, Tanabe said,

"It's a waste, right? You'd feel pity for it, right?

"It's ridiculous. For him to have skills which I could never have even if I spend years working on it, Mune completely has no intention of drawing. I would do anything just for him to say yes. And so I waited. From an unskilled amateur like me, Mune was a star of hope. So I couldn't bear watching him like this.

He's a smart guy, even without Anjou-san's manuscript, he would have come up with another classic,"

Even though he was still smiling, his words were nothing but sadness. I could feel it from beneath his words,

"It is from such a despairingly wide gap that expectations were born. Yet if such expectations were unanswered, one would be left with disappointment. For the past year, I had believed that Mune would draw once again, and once again, I had expectations of Mune,"

I now get it, what Tanabe intended to convey to Kugayama.

Tanabe stopped speaking and stared at the ground. If

expectations were born from such a despairingly wide gap, then as someone who has no idea how wide that gap is, I have no way of knowing how bad that expectation was. Neither would I know admiration or have stars in my eyes.

..... Would there come a day when I would find myself in such a "sequence"?

However, even now, I understood the meaning behind Tanabe's actions.

And so I spoke,

"So, what you really wanted to convey in the 'Juumoji' Incident..... a question that you were unable to ask directly, 'Kugayama, have you read *The Kudryavka Sequence* yet?'"

Tanabe slowly raised his head,

"You really are something,"

"And your answer is?"

"Yeah, it's as you say.

"Mune has never gone to read the manuscript that Anjou-san had spent her entire energy writing. The hidden message was never deciphered, and he never did receive the message,"

So, has your expectation turned into disappointment?

Even I had the sense to not utter such a question. Without saying anything, I turned around.

Turning my head one more time, I saw Tanabe still standing there.

The school radio began broadcasting,  
"..... Anyway, we've now come to the final day of the Kanya Festival. The topic of the day is of course the 'Juumoji' Incident....."

## [88 COPIES REMAINING]

### 6 And So It Ends

066 - ♠19

"So, how many copies do we have remaining in the end?"

I quietly turned the cardboard boxes upside down.

Only five copies of *Hyouka* fell from the boxes. The "Juumoji" effect was amazing, in more than one way.

"W, wow, to think we would come this far.....!"

Satoshi said filled with emotions.

"But..... it's such a pity, to have just this little remaining,"  
Chitanda was surprisingly aggressive.

As for Ibara,

"..... And I thought it was going to be hopeless, and was thinking about how I could make up for it....."

Her voice trembled as she said.

We managed to go past the break-even point. If we consider the copies Irisu sold for us, we actually made a profit. Sadly school rules dictate that all club profits are to be returned to the school.

Guess I'm aggressive myself, sort of.

"But, did we really sell over a hundred copies in the afternoon?"

No matter how emotional she was, Ibara was still pretty sharp.

As there was no longer any reason to hide this, I cleared my throat and said,

"Actually, I've arranged for *Hyouka* to be put on sale on the Kamiyama High School website. I've handed 30 copies to the General Committee,"

"Wha? When?!"

Chitanda's eyes became round.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you. I just didn't have the chance to tell you,"

The first half was true, the second half was a lie.

"But Oreki, what if the site couldn't sell all of them?"

"That wouldn't be a problem at all!"

My accomplice Satoshi cheerfully patted Ibara on the shoulder,

"As the copies have all been purchased by the General

Committee, they're the General Committee's problem now. The

Classics Club has nothing to do with them,"

"Oreki-san, when did you make such a deal..... I didn't realize at all,"

Well, I made sure you didn't realize when I made the deal, after all.

Before I realized it was Tanabe, I had already planned on selling the *Hyouka* copies to "Juumoji" to begin with. Depending on who it was, I could make some adjustments to my plan depending on the level of risk. To be precise, I resorted to blackmail, which was something I could never tell Chitanda.

So "Juumoji" turned out to be Tanabe, which makes things easier since he's with the General Committee. Instead of an extortion, I was able to make a decent transaction with him, which was lucky for me and for the Classics Club. Come to think of it, it was strange for me to take on the role of the blackmailer.

That's right, thinking back, these three days have been fortunate. Not just the existence of the web store, but we were also lucky that "Juumoji's" final target, a club that began with [KO] was us as well. Receiving a copy of *Ashes at Dusk* from my sis of all people can also be attributed to luck, as without *Ashes at Dusk*, it was impossible to solve the "Juumoji" Incident. According to Satoshi, those detective wannabes sure went around for nothing, with the conditions they have, it was not possible for them to solve this. The ones who came closest were me, and probably Satoshi if I had to pick a second person. The fact that I managed to find Tanabe was really down to luck. And I have no idea what that Straw Millionaire thingy was for. Could anyone care to enlighten me on that?

Still, wouldn't this be a perfect application of my favourite proverb "Good things come to those who wait"? If you sit quietly, fortune will come upon you. While it may apply to me, I'm not sure about Satoshi or Chitanda, though.

Anyway, what should we do with the remaining five copies? "There's no point leaving them behind. Let's each buy one copy,"

We quickly accepted Satoshi's suggestion, and each placed 200 yen into the candy box.

Chitanda held her copy to her chest, Satoshi put his in his drawstring bag, while Ibara caressed the cover with her hand.  
That leaves just one copy.

..... I placed another 200 yen.

"Huh, Houtarou?"

"I'll place this one in my sis's room,"  
It's thanks for the manga she gave me. I'm not sure if she knows it's me thanking her. If she has no use for it, I can always use it as a pot stand.

I picked up the last copy.

We looked at the empty cardboard box.

As though flushed with emotions, Chitanda said first,

"We've, sold out,"

"Sold out....."

"S, sold out....."

Sold out huh?

The dark brown coloured mountain of despair that we saw on the first day has now been completely flattened.

However Chitanda continued, as though spellbound,  
"All that's left is the 'Juumoji' Incident. I can now put all my  
attention and curiosity into it,"  
"Ah, about that,"

Satoshi smiled and said,  
"I think Houtarou has figured something out,"  
"Eh, really?"

Suddenly, Chitanda's gaze changed as she approached me. Hey,  
you don't have to come so close, do you know how many times  
you've startled me like that?

Even if I don't panic, we still had a lot of time. As though  
escaping Chitanda's large eyes staring at me in close distance, I  
leaned back towards the back of my chair and said,  
"Well, about that, how about we have a party as well to go along  
with it? To celebrate us selling out?"

"W, what in the world has happened? Oreki actually making a  
suggestion?!"

What's that supposed to mean? Talking as though you've seen  
the world.

At once, Satoshi sprang up,

"I agree! Even the Disciplinary Committee are having a party!

Only a party can dispel the sorrows of this fleeting life, after all!

And it's Sunday tomorrow, so why not?"

Ibara, whose has been looking gloomy for some reason for the past three days, finally lightened up,

"Yeah, you're right. I've not been able to appear in the Classics Club these past few days. I'd like to hear what's been happening..... Something interesting has happened, right?"

Looking aside, Chitanda made a calm smile. By making such an elegant smile, she really looks graceful like that. This is so unfair.

"Then how about we have it at my place? While it's not really lively, you're more than welcome to come,"

Chitanda's place, huh? It's a bit far, but, it's wide and quiet. So I'm thankful for that.

"Then it's decided. Shall we go,"

"Yeah, school's closing soon,"

"Oh! How about I make some sushi?"

"Chi, Chi-chan, you're really modest....."

As if on cue, the chime rang as we all stood up.

It was a chime signalling students to go home, a chime to declare the three day Cultural Festival has come to its end. It also felt like a chime to celebrate a satisfactory conclusion to things.

I'm sure we all felt the same way.

## [SOLD OUT]

### **Afterword**

Hello, this is Yonezawa Honobu.

The most vivid memory of any school Cultural Festival that I've been to was that of a girl in the Literature Club. She would bring a chair out into the dim corridor where the sun could not reach, alongside a few anthology copies, and would sit there all day reading books.

That year, I was put in charge of writing the script for a mystery movie that my class was making. As the movie was completed, I was free to do anything I like. And so I bought an anthology copy from her, but I have no memory of having read it.

This was because I had already brought my own book to kill time with.

The centrepiece for this volume is none other than the Cultural

Festival. For a formless event to take centre stage, I had to present it using multiple points of views. This was required not just by the setting, but also by the story, or else the whole book would consist of nothing but the protagonist sitting on his chair. When this book was finally ready for publication, I was stuck in coming up with a title. Though the story began in the eve of a festival, and ended at the end of it, I just couldn't think of any other title besides "Cultural Festival" or "School Festival". Though it's titled *The Kudryavka Sequence*, I feel its subtitle would be more fitting for the volume as a whole.

In the afterword of the first volume *Hyouka*, I said I'd reveal the truth of a certain mystery, which I had intended to do so in the afterword of the second volume. But I ran out of pages.

Anyway, it's been seven years since *Hyouka* was first published. In these seven years, the series has managed to survive thanks to all you readers. The answer to the "Sushi Incident" which I've mention in the afterword of that volume is actually hinted at in Chapter 2-1 (009 - ♣03), I wonder how many of you had realized that? It's not really that much of a mystery, or it would have taken an entire chapter..... Furthermore, in the afterword of

*The Credit Roll of the Fool* in which I mentioned about the meaning of each chapter title, in short, the main theme would be "agitation".

This ends the current volume. I hope you all enjoyed the carnival in *The Kudryavka Sequence*, and look forward to the next carnival.

Yonezawa Honobu

April 2008

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米澤穂信

Honobu Yonezawa

遠まわりする雛

Little birds can remember

角川文庫

# **Story 1 - If I Have To Do It, Make It Quick**

# 1

I understand that some people have personal preferences, but I wouldn't say that I hope to have one.

Thinking back, I did not actually have a unique upbringing. While my father was rarely at home, he still managed to maintain the family. My sister was a rebellious, arrogant and strange person who quickly saved up money as soon as she entered college to escape on a long adventure, but it's not like she had six arms and three faces. And I, Oreki Houtarou, have not had any intense, life-changing experiences, as expected.

Once, I was involved in some trouble that no one should have been through before. During that period, I had no idea what was happening, but I got to know Fukube Satoshi, who is still a close friend. At that time, my sister said that it was a trivial matter that happens all the time, but I was really indignant that it should happen to me. In the time when I was busy twitching my eyebrows and complaining about everything being annoying or difficult, I had graduated from middle school without realizing it. Thinking back about it, however, I realise that they were indeed all insignificant matters.

My results at school were not bad. I was not a genius, but I was not so terrible at studies to be so worried about it. Aimlessly following most of those students in the Kamiyama City area with average results, I tried to get into Kamiyama High School. Studying for the examination was difficult, and yet to my expectations.

Kamiyama High was the perfect link between middle and high school. While it was the best school for further studies, it had an acceptance rate of more than 90%. Even considering the existence of private schools, most people who wanted to enter Kamiyama High were able to pass the test. I also somehow passed the test and got into Kamiyama High.

During the school entrance ceremony, I thought that Kamiyama High would also have various occurrences. I was sure that in my three years here, there would be some eye-catching incidents.

However, everyone here, that is to say my peers, would have their own personal experiences that catch their attention, so I have not had the chance to say, “I see, this is something different” and show my pride. While I was leaving Kaburaya Middle School, I gazed upon the school building and muttered, “In the end, it seems that nothing special happened here.” I would probably say the same thing when I graduate from Kamiyama High three years later.

That is because I hold an unshakable motto.

No matter how much I try to think about it, I somehow cannot remember when I started following that motto. It was neither taught to me by someone, nor did I read it from somewhere. Even so, I hold firm to this motto.

It is...

If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick.

## 2

I like my motto from the bottom of my heart.

But because of that, I was thrown into a predicament after class. On my table there were two pieces of writing paper. The first had the topic “Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations” written on it, while the second was blank. The guidance counseling department must have thought well of freshmen and believed that we could fill at least two pages with our aspirations. I sure am thankful for that.

Since this was homework, I had written it yesterday at home. I absolutely cannot remember exactly what I wrote, but I did complete it. So why do I have to stay behind after school and again face these questions which answers I cannot recall? Actually, this should be a surprising mystery, but if I had to summarize the cause in one sentence, it would be, “Sensei, I left my homework at home.”

Satoshi laughed at my writing, which was stuck at three lines out of the two given pages.

“That’s definitely the Houtarou who doesn’t do optional things. I dare say it would be difficult for you to talk about aspirations. Then again, shouldn’t you have at least done it more properly?”

Seems like you don’t understand at all. I objected while holding my mechanical pencil between my fingers and spinning it.

“I did complete it last night.”

“Then why are you having so much trouble with writing it a second time?”

“Because it’s the second time.”

Satoshi looked at me suspiciously.

I spun my pen again. Well, I was trying to spin it again, but as it was rotating with too much momentum, it grazed against Satoshi's face and flew off to a corner of the classroom. I calmly stood up, picked up my pencil and went back to my seat while acting that nothing had happened. Satoshi put on a nonchalant air, as if wondering if something had happened.

"What's so unpleasant about writing a second time?"

"I could write the first essay properly. I'm trying to make this second essay follow the first, but in the end I'm still unable to write it well."

I had put in much effort last night to fabricate some aspirations. Throwing that away and writing from scratch was actually rather difficult. Satoshi smirked as if he was happy about something.

"Haha... I sort of get it. Then, why don't you just recall what you wrote last night?"

"It's precisely because I wrote it so well that I can't remember."

The bottom of the mechanical pencil hit the table with a clunk. Satoshi shrugged, as if the punch line of the joke had been delivered.

It was nearing the end of April. It was after school, but it wasn't that late yet. Besides myself, there were still many others in the classroom, having their own private discussions. There was a slight drizzle outside, which had been going on for two or three days now. The weather forecast said that there would be heavy storms between the evening and night, but that's not the only reason why I wanted to get home early.

Satoshi sat down at the corner of the table and peered into my purse, while spinning the drawstring bag he always carries around his shoulder.

"You sure look like you're going to take a long time. You're going for club activities, right?"

At the mention of the word "club", I grimaced.

With the guidance of my motto, I would of course have no interest in joining any clubs. Since I'm aspiring for an easygoing high school life, why would I intentionally do something which requires so much energy?

But one letter threw my hopes into disarray. It was a letter from Benares, India. "Join the Classics Club," it said. Thanks to some bad luck and a reading error, I am now in the Classics Club, as instructed.

The person in front of me is Fukube Satoshi, a Classics Club member. On top of that, he's also a Handicraft Society member as well as a member of the Executive Committee. He enjoys cycling. What a man of leisure.

"Chitanda-san is curious about something. She said it would be good if you could come."

I fell silent and stared at the tip of my stationary pen.

Chitanda was also a member of the Classics Club. Her full name was Chitanda Eru.

According to Satoshi, the master of trivial information, Chitanda is the daughter of an old family which owns a large plot of farmland in the Northeast region of Kamiyama City. Her distinguished background isn't really reflected by her appearance. She just simply looked like a really neat student in the same grade with long hair and a dainty face. Chitanda... upon hearing that name, I stayed silent without thinking. Was this noticed by Satoshi? Actually, it's because I'm somehow not good with her.

I joined the Classics Club because I thought that it would be empty, but due to Chitanda also entering the club, it actually became a real club. But that's not all.

She's not exactly a type I dislike. An energy-saver like me doesn't have strong likes and dislikes. But on the day we met, Chitanda asked this of me, "Why was I locked in that room... I'm really curious."

That day, Chitanda was in a locked classroom, but had not noticed that she had been locked in herself. Being the one who unlocked the door, I was of

course not the one who locked it. It is understandable to find it mysterious, but Chitanda just had to ask me to solve the mystery. Being overcome by her extremely strong request, I had to explain my thoughts on how it happened.

Thankfully, I somehow managed to show off my prowess that day. However, after the truth of the matter had been revealed, I had a strange premonition on the road back home. My energy saving motto is unshakable. That's because no one would intentionally try to cause a complete stranger to waver from his insignificant beliefs. That is normal, and so was what Chitanda did that day. But... the phrase "I'm curious", together with Chitanda's huge eyes coming way too close. These have been ingrained deep in my memory, as a strange premonition of what's to come.

"I had Chitanda-san fill up the authorization request application form. All that troublesome paperwork is the professional duty of a loyal Executive Committee member like me."

"Sounds tough. By the way, how do you spell 'assiduous'?"<sup>[1]</sup>

"You don't get points for using words you forgot how to spell. How about replacing it with working hard or something?"

Satoshi is basically someone who says what he wants whenever he wants to, but he's definitely not an obtuse person. He let out a small sigh and spoke.

"Well, if you don't want to go, you don't have to force yourself to go for club activities."

I wouldn't say that I don't want to go. It's just that after school, for today at least, completing "Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations" is more important than going off to the Classics Club. It was just my intention to put in more hard work as a proud student of Kamiyama High. Hmm, I think I won't be able to get my point across if I don't use the word "assiduous".

Ignoring my essay paper which had not filled up at all, Satoshi stifled a yawn. When I glanced outside, thinking I would see the never-ending spring rain, Satoshi suddenly turned towards me with a grin.

“Oh yeah, I just came across some interesting talk. Apparently, a clichéd rumor has been floating around. Have you heard of it?”

“Clichéd?”

I raised my head. The fact that I could be so easily distracted is proof of how bored I was with the essay. Satoshi nodded in a self-satisfied manner and raised his index finger with a snap.

“It’s totally clichéd. I had always wondered if Kamiyama High, the largest school for further studies in Kamiyama City, and home to many suspicious clubs, held any dark secrets or supernatural occurrences, but what I was really interested in was that such talk actually existed.”

“What’s with that finger?”

“Ah, sorry. No reason whatsoever.”

Satoshi quickly withdrew his index finger, but maintained the grin on his face. “Don’t you want to listen to the strange stories and suspicious rumors of the school?”

I fell silent, thinking of what to say, but Satoshi continued.

“In the dead of time after school<sup>[2]</sup>, the piano playing on its own the music room...”

“All right, that’s enough.”

I don’t think it’s interesting at all. I thrust out my palm and stopped him from telling his tale.

It is indeed clichéd. There was also this kind of talk in elementary and middle school. These school rumors may seem original, but they all have the same format. I wouldn’t say that I’m fed up with them, but I simply

have no interest. I'm disappointed that Satoshi, as a man of many hobbies, has brought me some boring talk.

"You don't understand, Houtarou. Do you actually think I find the commonplace 'weird school stories' interesting?"

I wonder about that. A while ago, you were interested in the structure of the postal life insurance.<sup>[3]</sup>

"You're wrong. Isn't it obvious that I'm more interested in the fact that this rumor got started in the first place?"

"Oh?"

"There are three hundred and twenty first year students like us, wandering around aimlessly like pitiful lambs in a totally new environment. And just two weeks after entering school, we have become able to say 'It really exists in this school.' Don't you find this growth to be remarkable?"

Satoshi's hand widened, showing his joy.

I see. Now I understand what he's trying to say. I laid my right elbow on the table and rested my chin on my fist.

"That is indeed true. While familiarizing yourself in a new environment, there probably wouldn't be space for things like rumors to spread. You're trying to say that because people have become more accustomed to this school and started having more time, room for strange rumors was created, right?"

"Yes, exactly. You understood unexpectedly quickly."

"It reminds me of blood type divination."

As I accidentally blurted out my thoughts, the good-humored Satoshi suddenly stopped nodding.

"...Why do you say that?"

“It seems like a topic you would bring up in your very first meeting with someone. Both sides hardly understand the topic that they are encountering for the first time. In most cases, the conversation would flow smoothly and harmoniously but in reality, many people wouldn’t believe a word.”

Satoshi sucked in his breath and his eyes widened. I winced at the exaggerated response.

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m shocked!”

Satoshi exclaimed, and I sat up straighter.

“Houtarou actually criticized an interpersonal communication technique! I was beyond a doubt that Houtarou had shut his eyes to becoming a social animal!”

What a rude guy.

“I don’t dislike people. I can say that while looking you in the eye.”

I insinuated, while staring at Satoshi in the eye. Of course, Satoshi did not like that, and turned away.

“Fine, I understand. It’s just Houtarou conserving energy.”

Is that something strange?

“So, how about it? Would you like to listen to the symbol of the first years’ free time, the mystery of the music room?”

No matter what kind of tedious talk Satoshi brings, it’s not the case that I want to listen to it. It’s just that if I suddenly announce that I’m not interested, he would probably say something like, “As expected, you turn your back to the social situation, Houtarou. Trying to listen with interest no matter how boring the topic is the first step to a harmonious interpersonal relationship.” Well, since I’m currently writing about my ambitions, it

shouldn't be a hindrance. I picked up my mechanical pencil, returned my attention to the questionnaire and said,

“If you want to tell your story so badly, I’m listening.”

“All right.”

Satoshi cleared his throat intentionally.

“It was yesterday. A first year girl went to the fourth floor of the Special Block.”

“It’s not Chitanda, is it?”

I had planned to not listen to the story, yet I responded to the first sentence.

Besides the music room, the Special Block also houses the geography lecture room, which is the Classics Club room.

Our first year classroom was on the fourth floor of the General Block. To get to the fourth floor of the Special Block, one would have to walk down three flights of stairs, then go through the roof passageway to the Special Block, then walk up to the fourth floor. On a rainy day like this, the roof passageway can’t be used, so one would have to use the sheltered pathway on the ground floor. That is annoyingly far.

Actually, the fourth floor of the Special Block is a remote region of Kamiyama High. I can’t think of any girl other than Chitanda who would intentionally go there.

Having been interrupted from the outset, Satoshi looked downhearted for an instant.

“No, it’s not.”

“Then, who is it?”

“Just listen.”

It seems that I made him angry. Time to shut up.

“After school, the girl went to the fourth floor of the Special Block. It was almost six. Since the school gates are locked at six, there was hardly anyone still in school.

“As she was walking up from the third floor, she noticed the melody of the piano. For better or worse, this girl knew how to appreciate music. The music was amazing and the girl was overwhelmed by the abundant expression of the piece. It was a melody that one could easily get accustomed to. It was Moonlight Sonata. The girl was in the midst of taking something she forgot to bring, but being immersed in the music, she stopped there in a daze.

“The corridor, stairs and girl were painted crimson by the setting sun. It was as if the world had burst into flames and was about to burn up. The beautiful music was just like a requiem devoted to one’s last moments. Feeling a shaky feeling creep up from her feet, the girl actually...”

I had an objection to Satoshi’s story.

“It also rained yesterday, so there was no sunset.”

“Yes, the air was damp with the continuous rain, as dusk drew near. The feeling of discomfort coiled around the skin, as the noise of the rain faintly mixed with the music. The timbre of the music etched an inexplicable feeling of anxiety on the girl’s heart.”

What the hell...

It seems that Satoshi’s skill has not declined in the slightest.

“Kamiyama High is well-known for its artistic clubs. It isn’t strange to have a piano expert of this level. The girl wanted to give a compliment to the pianist, so she put her hand to the doorknob of the music room. There was indeed music coming from that room. Besides, where else would have a piano other than a music room?”

I believe there's a piano in the gym that's used for ceremonies. But I kept quiet, thinking that I should not pour cold water on Satoshi again.

"But the moment she was about to open the door, the music was suddenly interrupted. Wondering what had happened, the girl slowly opened the door."

While acting out the action of opening a door, Satoshi's voice became soft. From the stifled voice, I knew that the scary part was imminent.

"After she did so, she went into the music room, which seemed to be filled with a bizarre atmosphere.

"All the curtains were closed, and it was pitch-black. The girl instantly looked at the piano, but there was no one there. The lid of the piano was up, yet there was no pianist. 'Why?' the girl thought as she faltered. She shifted her gaze to her left and right, and then she saw it. A female student with long, messy hair drooping on her face and fiery, bloodshot eyes clad in a sailor uniform lurking in a corner of the music room!"

With his hands clasped together, Satoshi shook with indignation. What a detailed act.

"Having been stirred up by a hair-raising event, the girl fled immediately without turning her head. Later, the girl found out that on that day, the piano club had sole possession of the music room. Also, the only person in the piano club, who was a third year student, had unfortunately injured her finger, and couldn't have played the piano!"

"But Houtarou! It is also impossible for the piano to play a tune by itself. Unless you consider the piano club member who regretfully committed suicide before the National Competition..."

"Someone committed suicide?"

Satoshi put on a serious look as he neared the summary of the story. This solo performance has taken longer than usual.

“I guess. It probably happened, but I’m not sure.”

For some reason, my writing pace had actually increased while I was listening to Satoshi’s nonsense. Perhaps my writing ability is connected to my mental state when ignoring him. I spoke without even looking up.

“It was actually you who knew about the piano club’s possession of the music room as well as its sole member, right?”

Satoshi seemed to give off the feeling of a bitter laugh.

“Brilliant deduction, Houtarou. That’s right. The piano club president, Tamaru Junko, is currently undergoing treatment for her index finger.”

I wouldn’t know the girl student witness, let alone the events in the piano club. But Satoshi would. As a member of the Executive Committee, he would have detailed knowledge of the clubs in Kamiyama High.

Satoshi’s pompous tone changed into one of amusement.

“It seems that there really was a ghost-like girl student wearing a sailor uniform with messy hair. The first-year girl who witnessed it was probably scared or shocked, but during today’s lunch break, this incident was being talked about in class A.”

“It’s obvious that she was wearing a sailor uniform.”

At any rate, male students in Kamiyama High had to wear the gakuran, while female students had to wear the sailor uniform. I would be surprised if there were female students wearing blazers or smocks.

“The question is, will this story spread? If it does, how and at what speed would it propagate? If you document the process of circulation, it would probably become the basic material for folklore research. It will be called ‘The Second of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries’. At present, I wonder when it would reach my class D.”

Satoshi said it jokingly, but he was fairly drawn to the idea. Indeed, isn’t Satoshi just the person to have a deep interest in something like the means

by which rumors propagate?

But I did not have time to be concerned with Satoshi's research. There was something in Satoshi's words that I could not let go.

"Wait a minute. What did you just say?"

"Hmm? Folklore. Well, you could also call it urban legend. By saying folklore, I was trying to instil a sort of nuance..."

"No, that's not it."

On seeing my countenance suddenly change, Satoshi also looked dubious.

"What's the matter? Did you really find the strange tale of 'The Moonlight Sonata Piano' that interesting? I sure didn't expect Houtarou to have an interest in such a thing..."

I didn't really care about the story. But if what Satoshi said was true...

This is no simple matter. Some action is needed to deal with it.

It all depends on the questionnaire in front of me, "Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations" If I can finish writing this quickly, there would be no problems.

However, as I thought about hurrying up, my mechanical pencil just got stuck and the words just wouldn't appear. If I have to do it, make it quick. However, just like there are situations when it is possible to do things quickly, there are also times when that is impossible.

# 3

The rain would not stop.

While listening to Satoshi's detailed story, I was intent on filling up the questionnaire. I finally finished writing my ambitions for the second time and was just thinking that I would be able to go home, when a person with fluttering black hair appeared in the classroom.

“Ah, you’re still here, Oreki-san.”

An almost non-existent smile surfaced on my eyes and mouth. This person was the Classics Club president, Chitanda Eru, a female student who lacked elegance but was undoubtedly a beauty. She was walking straight towards me, causing those classmates who were still in the classroom to give me meaningful looks all at once. Well, I guess that’s understandable.

I pointed in the direction of the blackboard.

“Your classroom is over there.”

I was in class 1-B. Chitanda was in 1-A. But she just smiled and said,

“Yes, that’s true.”

She was already close enough, but she drew closer by another half a meter and stopped. She then took out a handout from the clear file in her hand.

“I’ve filled up the form, Fukube-san.”

“Ah, many thanks. This form is really unnecessary no matter how you look at it.”

Come to think of it, Satoshi did mention that Chitanda was in her classroom completing some paperwork. Since it was called the authorization request application form, I initially thought it was a joke, but it seems that she was really writing something. I glanced at it, but only saw that it was titled “Club Application Confirmation Form”.

Satoshi retrieved a leather-bound notebook from his drawstring bag, folded the form twice and placed it in the notebook. After witnessing that, Chitanda turned to look at me. Her huge eyes betrayed her neat image. Her pupils dilated, and her look made me feel hot.

I recognize those pupils and eyes. It was only this straight look of Chitanda that could cause the energy-saver Oreki Houtarou to solve mysteries. Since the day I met Chitanda in the Classics Cub room, I had not experienced this again. We didn’t really have many chances to speak personally, after all. But I had a hunch. Here it comes.

Before her lips could open, I quickly spoke.

“You came at a good time.”

“Huh?”

Having lost her momentum, Chitanda blinked. Using the excess energy from the sense of liberation from completing that annoying questionnaire, I laughed with extreme lightheartedness.

“I’ve just heard a strange story from Satoshi. It’s a really weird rumor.”

“Are you talking about that incident?”

...As expected.

“Have you heard of the ‘Secret Club Invitation Memo’? It’s known as ‘The First of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries’.”

Again, Chitanda’s huge eyes blinked repeatedly.

For a moment, her lips narrowed in doubt. She then linked her hands together in front of her chest and her usual smile returned.

“Hmm? What’s this about a secret club? Is this true?”

“I didn’t believe it at first, but instead of listening from me...”

I turned to look at Satoshi.

“Satoshi, tell her the story.”

“Ah, okay.”

Trying to digest the course of events, Satoshi hesitated for a while. Satoshi took a slight glance at me, and I waved my hand while smiling, urging him to speak.

As expected of Fukube Satoshi. He didn’t refuse when I asked him to speak. Satoshi sat up straighter on the table, and took on a more cheerful tone.

“Right, thank you for listening to the story of ‘The Secret Club’... The Executive Committee is also in charge of freshman invitations. This is what I heard when I was there,” he began.

“In any case, Kamiyama High has too many clubs and societies. Since there are so many clubs, there would obviously be many invitation posters. In the first school term, the notice boards in school would probably be overflowing with these posters. Of course, using the notice boards require permission. If you do not get the stamp of approval from the Executive Committee, you cannot stick your poster on the notice board.

“Nonetheless all it needs is a piece of paper and one thumb tack. If we do not patrol frequently, pirated versions of invitation posters appear. It is also the duty of Executive Committee members to tear down such posters when we see them. There is a penalty for legitimate clubs which put up these pirated posters. At the worst, their club funds could be cut.”

“...That was unexpectedly severe.”

“That’s right! It’s really quite serious.”

Having been quickly taken in by Satoshi’s flowing speech, Chitanda nodded her head repeatedly while listening.

“But then, every year, there is just one invitational poster from an unknown club. Well, I guess it’s more of a memo than a poster. Anyway, last year, there was a piece of paper that looked like it was cut out from a notebook detailing the time and place to meet. The memo on the notice board was not officially recognised, and needless to say, the club was also illegal. The Executive Committee President, Tanabe, then realized that there was a secret club that the Executive Committee did not have a hold on and that the club was holding secret gatherings.

“The purpose of the club and the identity of its members were unknown, but they knew what the club’s name was.”

“And what was it?”

Satoshi laughed while bearing a broad grin.

“The Silk Spider Society.”

“Silk Spider...”

Chitanda repeated that phrase a few times, trying to digest it. Suddenly, she said, “I often see their nests at my house garden.”

You can actually tell the species of spider just by looking at its nest?

“Based on the confiscated memo, Tanabe-senpai tried to get in contact with the Silk Spider Society, but it did not go well. The designated spot was an empty classroom, and on top of that no one could enter without a key. As Chitanda-san would know, it is impossible to borrow the key without a valid reason. With that, Tanabe-senpai concluded that the Silk Spider Society did not actually exist. He believed that the memo on the notice board was just a prank of a childish student. But then...”

Since he had reached the climax of his story, Satoshi put emphasis on his words.

“On the day of graduation, one of the graduates said to Tanabe-senpai, ‘...I was the president of the Silk Spider Society. Please also take care of the next club president. If you can find him, that is.’

“The newly-appointed Executive Committee president, Tanabe-senpai, had no intention of allowing any unapproved objects on the notice boards. They are probably also holding a gathering this year. The Executive Committee members are keeping their eyes peeled, but they still have not found it as of yet...”

Satoshi shrugged, ending his story.

Like the music room story just now, Satoshi modulated his voice without creating a relatively unnatural feeling. I have known Satoshi for a long time, but I never knew that he could tell a story so well. This guy would probably be a silent cinema narrator in the future.

Chitanda let out a small sigh.

“There is indeed such a strangely large variety of clubs in this school. It wouldn’t be surprising to have a mystery club among all of them.”

Indeed, compared to normal full-day general education schools, Kamiyama High’s culture-related clubs are too diverse. There are over fifty different clubs, from the Acapella Club to the Magic Society, and in autumn, the three-day Cultural Festival will start. It would seem comparatively inelegant not to have one or two mystery clubs. I replied,

“The Silk Spider Society? If you take into consideration the fact that its purpose is unknown, it is quite similar to the Classics Club.”

“The Classics Club is not like that!”

Chitanda exclaimed, but after some silent thought, Chitanda could not agree with her previous statement.

“I can’t really say that they are dissimilar...”

Which reminds me, Chitanda said that she joined the Classics Club for a special reason. She said that it was some personal matter, so I have not questioned her further.

“One single memo in the midst of countless invitation posters, huh?”

Chitanda held her head in her hands and thought for a while. With her eyes staring fixedly into the distance, she looked like a refined young lady.

But soon after, with one large nod, Chitanda’s emotions cleared up in a flash. She put her hands in front of her chest and said,

“That’s right... I’m curious!”

Right.

With the questionnaire paper in my hand, I stood up.

“I thought you would say that, that’s why I said that you came at a good time.”

“What do you mean?”

Chitanda shrugged curiously.

“Of course, we’re going to find the memo.”

First, I asked Satoshi about the number of notice boards the Executive Committee is responsible for.

As expected, Fukube Satoshi had not tallied the number.

“Hang on a sec.”

He muttered, and began counting.

“There are two boards on each floor from the second to the fourth floor of the Normal Block. On the first floor, there are also boards at the infirmary and staff room, so there is a total of four boards. There are also boards at the passageway. On the second floor passageway, there is one near the Normal Block and another near the Special Block. There is one board on each floor of the Special Block. This brings it to a total of sixteen.

“Also, there is one board per landing. In that case, since a building has four floors and two flights of stairs per floor, there would be another sixteen boards.”

Since I only wanted to hear the grand total, I ignored the calculation, but Chitanda did not do that. To Satoshi who had bent his finger too much, lost count and was just staring at his fist, Chitanda gently said,

“That’s wrong, Fukube-san. If a building has four floors and two flights of stairs between floors, there would be twelve landings altogether... since a four storey building has three landings.”

“Er... Ah... That’s right.”

He bent his finger again. His hand somehow turned into a shape that a suspicious rapper would be envious of.

“And that brings the total to...”

“Twenty-eight boards.”

Satoshi looked amazed.

“One notice board can fit at least ten posters regardless of size. As a result, this small school would have at least three hundred posters.”

“Isn’t there also a notice board in the gym?”

“Now that I think about it, there is indeed one there. And there’s also one in the Martial Arts building... so there are thirty locations in total. The Executive Committee is certainly putting a lot of hard work. What a great committee this is!”

Satoshi looked up at the ceiling and exclaimed with emotion.

Surprisingly, Chitanda ignored Satoshi, who was overcome with emotion. Without commenting or even giving him a cold remark, she merely shifted her gaze. Did she already discover the method of dealing with Satoshi even though they have only met a few times? Obviously, that was true.

Chitanda turned to look at me.

“It seems that there are thirty locations in total... Do we search all of them?”

As if. Doing that will betray my belief and cause me to die as punishment.

“Wouldn’t it be better to consider where it would be first? Which is the most suspicious spot? It’s not too late to use our feet only after thinking about it.”

“Mayaka was talking about it before.”

Satoshi replied, with a mocking look on his face.

“That Houtarou always uses his head before using his body,’ she said.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“As a result, you usually end up not using your body at all.”

Of course, I could not refute that.

Mayaka refers to Ibara Mayaka. For some reason, I’ve been in the same class as her from elementary school. Now that I think about it, we entered different classes for the first time in high school. She was not especially friendly with me, but she had a really close relationship with Satoshi. They say there’s no accounting for taste, but Ibara has a crush on Satoshi.

“Who is Mayaka-san?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll have the chance to introduce you eventually.”

Satoshi has been confessed to many times, but he has never accepted her. I have no idea why, and I have no interest in finding out. Anyway, as Mayaka had pointed out, I was now using my head.

“Suspicious places... In other words, if a secret club put up a memo, where would be its most likely location, right?”

“What conditions do you think the location should fulfill in general?”

I asked. Chitanda thought a little and answered with upturned eyes.

“If it is seen by an Executive Committee member, it would be taken down. If it were me... I would definitely place it in some corner of the school, where it wouldn’t stand out. For example, the area around the geography lecture room would do, since hardly anyone walks past.”

“Well, I guess. For the notice board at the Martial Arts building, the memo wouldn’t be spotted if any related club members or Executive Committee members were not present.”

Satoshi agreed.

But there would be a problem if the memo was in such a corner of the school. I declared with as much self-confidence as I could muster,

“That’s wrong.”

One should not do what he is unused to. From the corner of my eyes, I noticed Satoshi frown, and I wondered if I had been excessively blunt. But then Satoshi was not the problem. It seems that the concerned Chitanda did not find anything strange at all.

“Is it wrong?”

“You were not mistaken at first.”

I took a breath and added,

“If the Silk Spider Society’s invitational memo has been put up… it would be at the entrance to the staircase on the first floor, or at any of the landings between the first and fourth floors.”

Chitanda tilted her head.

“In other words, you think that it is somewhere on the route that first year students would use, right? But that’s…”

She murmured, pondering about it. If I had an better understanding of language skills, I would be able to explain faster, but unfortunately, I do not have Satoshi’s speech techniques. I was trying to recall what to say next, when Satoshi butted in.

“Well, well. It seems that Houtarou has thought of something. Chitandasan’s theory is that it is in a corner of the campus, while Houtarou’s theory is that it is along the first year’s line of movement. Now that we have determined the two sides of the coin, wouldn’t it be faster if we go check it out?”

On hearing the suggestion, Chitanda’s started moving quickly. She turned back and exclaimed,

“Then, let’s go!”

I nodded, and carried the school designated shoulder bag on my shoulder. I met Satoshi’s eyes for a fleeting moment, and he turned away, whistling.

# 4

“Which middle school were you from?”

Since entering high school, I have been asked this question countless times, but this is the first time I am asking this question. Chitanda has also probably been questioned about this repeatedly, but she answered without a hint of reluctance.

“I was from Inji Middle School. Fukube-san and Oreki-san were from the same middle school, right?”

“Yeah.”

Satoshi’s voice came from behind.

“Fukube Satoshi and Oreki Houtarou were known as the Earth, Wind and Fire in Kaburaya Middle School.”

Who? Where? What are you talking about?

It goes without saying that I was not well-known in middle school, but Satoshi was. He used to be the Student Council treasurer.

Chitanda and I went down the stairs in a line, while Satoshi followed behind. After school, as the day gradually became cloudy, there would be a large amount of traffic at the staircase. We did not spread out horizontally so as to avoid being a hindrance.

On the landing between the third and fourth floors, there was a notice board with posters of various colors competing for attention. Each club was devoted to different directions of design, producing a chaotic atmosphere. Chitanda pointed at a particular poster.

“I like this one.”

That poster was circular, and boldly occupied a large amount of space. Below the simple invitation “Would you like to join the Handicraft Society?” was a knitted panda. It was not drawn, but was embroidered. The embroidered panda was stuck onto the circular paper as part of the invitational poster. I was overwhelmed just imagining the amount of time and labor that was used. Why would someone go so far...

Seeing that I couldn’t say anything, Satoshi put his hand on my shoulder.

“What do you think, Houtarou? Seeing this detailed craftsmanship that totally opposes your energy-saving belief, you can feel the determination and workmanship of the artists, but you can’t say a word about it.”

“I think that experiencing different cultures is always exciting.”

“I’m really glad about your honest opinion.”

Satoshi nodded deeply, turned to Chitanda and stuck out his chest.

“I also got interested in that, so I joined the Handicraft Society.”

“Eh?”

Chitanda became speechless. It seems that she was unaware.

If Chitanda continues interacting with Satoshi from now on, she would probably come to know of his active personality. Sooner or later, she would come to think, “Does Fukube Satoshi have any constancy at all?”

After Chitanda touched the notice board, a poster sagged by a large amount.

“Ah, has the thumb tack fallen off?”

Chitanda leant over and searched the floor, but she could not find the thumb tack.

“...Anyway, it doesn’t seem to be here. Let’s move on.”

We then went to investigate the landing between the third and second floor, as well as the landing between the second and first floor.

Decorative words, tasteful slogans, intricate craft, and various illustrations ranging from the realistic to manga style. All kinds of work to attract freshmen were displayed in front of us. There was no limit to the variety of club activities. The Ink Painting Club had painted a landscape, the Manga Studies Club had illustrated a four-frame manga, the Shogi Club and Go Club had presented their respective chess puzzles, and the Marching Band Club had pictures of their gala performance. Kamiyama High's slightly embarrassing physical activity clubs were also not letting up, for the Basketball Club, Volleyball Club, Track-and-Field Club and Baseball Club were inviting students under the delusion that they were the most appropriate place for all high school students to pour their energies into.

“Ahh, looking at it again, Kamiyama High is really awesome!”

“You’re right. You cannot even see the board of the notice boards.”

Taking a backward glance at the two who were having fun commenting on each poster, I felt that I had made a mistake tagging along with them.

These were posters that I pass by everyday, posters that I have seen tens of times.

However, facing them head-on, I was affected by the energy that I wanted to run away from, and I felt dizzy.

Despite that, we somehow managed to descend to the first floor.

We were in front of the entrance to the staircase that all first years use. The notice board there was the most disordered one we had seen.

Satoshi laughed and said,

“This is the first notice board that freshmen see. This is the prime location, so it’s a warzone here.”

Is this notice board really cared for properly by the Executive Committee? There was not a single poster of normal size. The notice board was filled with recruitment posters the size of postcards. Because this is the prime location, it is shared by many clubs. I see this everyday on the path to and from class, but I'm still not used to its chaos.

In front of this mess, Chitanda somehow seemed to have reached an understanding.

“Ah, I see. So that's how it is.”

I looked over my shoulder and grinned.

“I still don't understand why Oreki-san thinks that the notice boards that attract public attention are suspicious, but with so many posters here, an unauthorized notice would be hard to spot.”

In other words, the best place to hide a stick is a forest.

For an instant, I wanted to show my pride and say, “Of course, that is the reason,” but that would just be showing off. I'll just be honest here.

“... Ah, sorry. I did not consider this. I forgot that the notice board here was in such a state.”

“Eh? Then why?”

“I'll say it only if it's actually here. If it's not here, I'll be too ashamed to answer.”

Chitanda touched her lower lip with her finger and smiled. She stood in front of the notice board and said, “It would be troubling if we cannot find it, then. Just now, Oreki-san was strangely confident that it would be there. I would really like to know why!”

That was a little exaggerated... Speaking of which, it seems that Chitanda already knows that it's not like me to have a self-confident attitude, although we haven't talked very much.

With her large eyes widening even more, Chitanda perused the notice board. I couldn't help but feel uneasy at her eyesight that seemed to be able to see through the back of a page. She probably isn't very intuitive and sharp, but she was by far the best at memory and observation. At our first meeting, I didn't even know of Chitanda's existence, but she even knew my full name. That was the result of strong memory and observation. On the other hand, it was difficult for me to remember everything about this notice board.

"Global Act Club, Debate Club, and there's also the Hyakunin Isshu Club<sup>[4]</sup>  
Ah, the Fortune Telling Club! I have a friend who joined that club."

Chitanda started looking from the top right corner of the notice board and moved to the left, lowering her gaze and shifting to the right again when she reached the end, as if reading a catalog.

"So, I suppose it's there?"

Satoshi asked. Chitanda was so focused on the notice board before her that she did not notice the irony in that question. "Kato Music Club, Table Tennis Club, Arts Society... nope."

Chitanda groaned, as she straightened her body, which was bent forward.

"It seems that the Silk Spider Society's invitational memo is not here."

Chitanda gave a bitter smile filled with disappointment.

Seeing this expression for the first time, a feeling of guilt welled up within me.

"If you think about it, we do not know whether this secret club has put up their memo as of now, so Oreki-san was not wrong."

So, she even used these comforting words.

Unexpectedly, I felt like apologising to Chitanda. This is not due to my weakness. It's just that Satoshi and I, whether we wish to or not, view

things with a pinch of salt, but Chitanda seems to totally disregard that inclination. She should be a little more doubtful, in my opinion. Does she even consider that there are wheels within wheels, or if she is being cheated? It can't be true that Chitanda is just a fool, right? Despite that, why hasn't she doubted me? I think I may have taken this farce too far. But then the plan has progressed thus far without a hitch. Having gone too far to retreat, I can only proceed with the plan. Thankfully, Satoshi's voice came from behind Chitanda.

"I wonder about that. I think it should be there, though. You can't really tell if it's there just by looking."

"What do you mean?"

Chitanda turned around and asked in return.

"I think that it would take some effort to do things behind the Executive Committee's back. Well, whatever. If it's been put up we'll find it eventually."

Satoshi shrugged with one shoulder.

"But more importantly, I also want to know why Houtarou thought that it would be in the middle of the first years' line of movement." "... Ah, you too? Alright."

I replied with a toneless voice. I probably sound unexpectedly down.

I asked while aimlessly moving my hands,

"Hey, Satoshi, if you had to hide an object in school where would you choose?"

Satoshi probably didn't expect that question to suddenly appear, for his response was slow.

"Hide something? Well, I guess it depends on size. Assuming certain conditions are met... I would choose the empty classroom in front of the staff toilets on the first floor of the Normal Block. No one goes there."

“Besides that?”

“Some Japanese-style room, I suppose, since only the Tea Ceremony Society would use it.”

“I see. Then, where would you hide it in Kaburaya Middle School?”

Satoshi’s response was even slower. “That’s obvious,” he said, and grinned.

“Ah... I see.”

“That’s how it is.”

We exchanged phrases that made us seem like partners-in-crime.

“I think I understand what you’re getting at, Houtarou. It certainly seems to be the case.”

“Eh, what are you talking about? Is there really such a suitable hiding place in Kaburaya Middle School?”

Chitanda, who had been left out, edged into the conversation with large curiosity and slight dissatisfaction.

“I wouldn’t call it a really suitable hiding place. The first place that comes to mind is the pantry. A large crowd of people visit every day, but no one pays much attention.”

Chitanda still did not understand the explanation. She did not know the difference between the pantry and the Japanese-style room. I said straightforwardly,

“Satoshi wanted to hide the object in a remote location in Kamiyama High. However, when it came to Kaburaya Middle School, he actually wanted to hide it in a crowded place. What about you? If you had to hide something in Inji Middle School, wouldn’t you pick a hiding spot which everyone sees but does not look at?”

“Ah...”

Chitanda took a breath and brought her palms to her mouth.

“You’re right. I do not know why, but I would not hide it in a corner.”

“The question is whether you’re familiar with the place.”

I declared.

“We are still quite unfamiliar with Kamiyama High and think of it as a new place. Since we are not used to this new environment, we choose to hide things in secluded areas. On the other hand, we spent those three years in middle school and we know every nook and cranny in the school building. Because of that, we think that it is better to boldly take advantage of blind spots, rather than hide the object from public notice inexpertly.

“Even if you hide something in unusual places like the Japanese-style rooms and empty classrooms, the occasional visitor might be watchful of his surroundings. Since people still go to these remote areas, it would be considered risky to leave objects there. As a result, the Silk Spider Society would distance itself from such locations.”

“I see!” Satoshi exclaimed.

“So it would be at the staircase entrance, huh. Indeed, there is no place in the school that no student would visit. If that’s the case, it’s just as Chitanda said earlier, ‘You hide a corpse in a battlefield.’”

That’s one disturbing illustration, but it’s true.

“The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional. There are no first year students in the Silk Spider Society. A mystery club worth its salt would have seen through that without hesitation.”

Chitanda seemed like she was deeply moved. With an unbearably serious face, she took a deep breath, ruminated on what I had just said for a while, then nodded slowly.

“Indeed, that is natural. It was naïve of me to think that it would be hidden at a corner of the school. It seems really unnatural that the memo is not on

the notice board, though.”

“Well, something’s that’s not there doesn’t exist. Houtarou’s confidence can’t always be relied on.”

Satoshi joked as he moved towards the notice board. Then...

“... Hmm?”

He stopped in his tracks. All of a sudden, his face became serious once more and he reached out to a postcard affixed to the notice board. It was a large postcard that seemed to be asserting itself in a group of slightly smaller postcards.

“That’s by the Baseball Club, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it. But don’t you think it’s a little out of place?”

Satoshi gave a half-hearted reply as he turned over the postcard.

Underneath the postcard, there was a small, torn piece of essay paper fixed to the board. On its front surface, there was text that had been aligned with a ruler. The words which had been written by a black felt-tip pen read:

“Silk Spider Society Two Members Required 05021722LL”

“So it was there... It’s strange, but after hearing your explanation, I felt it was natural that it would be there, so I was not surprised at all.”

Chitanda, who was more taken aback than surprised, said. On the other hand, Satoshi was staring intently at the contents of the memo with almost no expression.

And then, he said slowly,

“Executive Committee Authorization Stamp, no check. Now, time to do my job...”

And destroyed the memo.

While we were searching for the memo, many first year students walked by in front of our eyes. They were all putting on their shoes at the staircase entrance, and starting on their journey back home.

I said.

“I’m somewhat relieved. I have to go to the staff room to submit my homework, and I’ll go home after that.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll head home too.”

Chitanda looked blank for while, but immediately smiled.

“Alright. Then this is farewell... ‘The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional.’ I shall remember that.” With that parting phrase, Chitanda waved her hand in front of her chest.

## 5

Contrary to the weather forecast, the intensity of the rain gradually decreased. Satoshi and I held umbrellas and started walking back home. On the way, we passed through a shopping district with an arcade, and we finally managed to close our umbrellas. Satoshi broke the silence.

“I thought that something was off from the start.”

His voice was thick with amazement, sarcasm, and to some extent, criticism.

“After hearing about ‘The Moonlight Sonata Piano’, you suddenly asked ‘By the way, what’s the first of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries?’ I was thinking, did Houtarou actually turn the conversation around?”

“I am much obliged.”

I said. Actually, the key was Satoshi surmising my intentions and helping me out. If not for that, I don’t think it would have gone that smoothly.

Satoshi turned his umbrella in a circle. It was a grey, fashionable umbrella with a checked pattern. It was totally different compared to my vinyl umbrella. The drops of rain pattered on the walkway we were walking through.

“The plan of ‘Controlling a Mystery with Another Mystery’ was amazing.”

Right.

There was just one reason why I purposely brought up the story of the Silk Spider Society. That was to cause Chitanda to be unable to bring up the mystery of the Moonlight Sonata Piano.

According to Satoshi, it was yesterday when a female student from class 1-A heard the piano at the music room. That apparently became the talk of 1-A at around lunchtime today, but it hadn't spread to Satoshi's class, 1-D, yet.

There was one phrase by Satoshi that I could not ignore. That was "I wonder when it would reach my class D." If he was wondering when the story would become the talk of his class, he must not have heard it from his classmates.

Then, when, where and from whom did Satoshi get the story?

There was no need to even think about it. Before coming to my classroom, Satoshi was in the Classics Club room, the Geography Lecture room. Chitanda was in that very room filling up the authorization request application firm. Chitanda is a student of class 1-A.

Ergo, Satoshi had obviously heard it from Chitanda.

Another point was that Chitanda wanted to come to my classroom. That gave me a premonition. I didn't know if it was a good or bad premonition, but this is what I thought: Since I had solve The Mystery of the Locked Room, wouldn't Chitanda want me to solve the mystery behind the Moonlight Sonata Piano?

I thought that I was over-thinking. I could count the number of times I had met Chitanda. I don't think that I've done anything to show that I can be relied on, and my assumption that Chitanda wanted to come to my classroom in order to tell me the story could be wrong.

But, while I had doubts about my premonition, I had to prepare for Chitanda's arrival. The best case scenario was that I left before Chitanda reached my classroom. But then I had to stay back to complete the homework, which I had forgotten to bring. I could not return home freely, so I thought of counter-measures.

Then, Chitanda finally arrived.

Her main motive was to hand in the form to Satoshi, but the fact was that she came. I did not want to be concerned with the story of the music room, so I thought of fighting that curiosity with curiosity in another topic.

Specifically, ‘the First of Kamiyama High’s Seven Mysteries’. The scheme was successful. Chitanda was clearly about to mention the story of the music room, but her interest was diverted to the secret club.

Satoshi spoke.

“I understand what you did, but I don’t understand why. What were you planning when you replaced the mystery of the Moonlight Sonata Piano with the story of the Silk Spider Society? It can’t be that you wanted to escape because that mystery was beyond your powers, right?”

That is, of course, wrong.

Also, it’s not what I wanted to do, but I didn’t have a choice.

“About the piano story, I formed a conclusion immediately after hearing it. You can check if it’s true if you go to the music room.”

“Then, why?”

If you need a reason, all I have is one sentence.

“The music room is far away.”

The light rain hit the vinyl room of the arcade and made a rustling sound. A lightweight truck drove through the narrow road of the shopping district in a constrained manner. A spray of water soaked my shoes.

Then, Satoshi took a really deep breath.

“... I see. I get it now. As expected from Houtarou.”

The music room was on the fourth floor of the Special Block. To get there on a rainy day, one would have to go down to the ground floor, use the sheltered pathway and then climb up to the fourth floor. It’s really far from my classroom.

The weather forecast said that the rain would become stronger in the evening. I had absolutely no interest in going somewhere far like the music room.

That is exactly why I brought up the story of the secret club. The First of Kamiyama High's Seven Mysteries, which I asked Satoshi to present, was extremely appropriate material to draw Chitanda's attention. I would then suggest searching for the memo, go to the staircase entrance and go home when it was over. Thus the plan was set.

Whatever was up with the piano in the music room, it was not a topic for me to be involved in. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. But, when Chitanda says "I'm curious!" with those blue eyes...

"If I have to do it, make it quick."

In short, I managed to get it over with as quickly as possible.

However, Satoshi was singing a different tune.

"Houtarou, that's not a good thing."

"..." "If you want to announce your motto, your should do it magnificently and with pride. Now, you're just making an excuse."

I can't reply to that.

On the contrary, I also could not look at Satoshi in the face. With the hushed pitter-patter of the spring rain, I could only stare at my soaked feet.

I love my motto from my heart.

But today, I don't feel any satisfaction from facing problem after problem with my belief. Instead, only guilt remains in my heart as I wonder if I had done the right thing.

The trick had gone well. Chitanda was persuaded to go down to the staircase entrance, and she also had admiration for the paradoxical explanation. Also, while Satoshi was drawing attention, I managed to

secretly stick the Silk Spider Society invitational memo onto the notice board.

The memo was made from a scrap of essay paper. They had given two sheets of essay paper for the high-spirited freshmen to write “Feelings after the first month of school and future aspirations.” Obviously, there was no way I could write two whole pages for that. Thus, I put the leftover sheet of essay paper to good use.

I appropriated the thumb tack from the staircase landing. When Chitanda saw the dislodged poster and thought that the thumb tack had fallen off, it was actually already in my hand.

Everything had gone as planned. I prevented the story of the piano from being told, and I thus managed to return home, as I had hoped. But now, even I recognise that my motto seems like an excuse. There is no room for argument. Even while the plan was being carried out, I was thinking that I should stop. I want to get home quickly, and I don’t want to go to the music room. Alright, the goal is justifiable. But what about the method?

The arcade came to an end, and we came to an intersection. I would have to hold my umbrella from here on. Satoshi stopped, peered at my face and let out a strange laugh.

“Houtarou, do you understand your basic fallacy today?”

I think that I know what it is, but I don’t think I’m absolutely right. I stayed silent.

Satoshi shrugged with forced grandeur.

“Fighting a mystery with a mystery. Yeah, I like it. It’s a good twist.”

And then, just like I had done to him earlier, Satoshi stared into my eyes and spoke.

“But that’s not to your taste.”

I quietly looked away.

“If you really wanted to conform to your motto, there was only one thing to do. It can’t be helped that you forgot your homework and had to stay back. Chitanda’s arrival was also not your fault. But why didn’t you just say ‘I don’t know’? That, is your fallacy.

“No matter what topic Chitanda came up with, it was not your duty to find the answers. You could half-heartedly listen and then ignore it. Actually, isn’t that what you’ve always done?”

... That is indeed true.

Why did I even think of blocking a problem with a problem? That was definitely better than going to the music room, but that was unmistakably a time-consuming method.

Why did I choose to do that?

Satoshi’s words stung, but they were not without truth. If I had really wanted to shun Chitanda’s attack, couldn’t I have ended it by just saying “No idea”?

Satoshi’s strange smile became even deeper.

“I’m glad to be able to teach you something other than miscellaneous knowledge. Alright, Houtarou? I know exactly why you chose to do that.”

“.....”

“That’s because... ‘The more inexperienced one is, the more he displays the unconventional.’”

This phrase sure rings a bell.

I think I know why Satoshi’s smile seems weird when I should have been used to it. The only part of him smiling was his mouth.

“Houtarou still isn’t familiar with the situation that he belongs to the Classics Club, which Chitanda-san is in. That’s the reason. That’s why you

used such a roundabout method. You probably planned to reject Chitanda-san today. But in my eyes, that was not a rejection.”

“I didn’t exactly want to reject her.”

I did think that Chitanda was a nuisance, but it’s not like I wanted to sever all connections with her and never see her again.

“Of course. That was only a deferment of the status quo.”

Deferment.

That’s a word that mysteriously made sense. To deal with Chitanda’s arrival, the display of her unparalleled curiosity and the time I would have to spend, I chose deferment. That word is seriously apt in this situation.

I also knew what comes after that.

As if washing his hands of my situation, Satoshi looked up at the sky and opened his umbrella with a bang.

Satoshi carried his checked umbrella on his shoulder and walked out in the rain. Satoshi’s house is just straight ahead. Mine is after the turn. The pedestrian crossing signal was still red.

In the end, Satoshi turned around.

“By the way, what do you think about ‘The Moonlight Sonata Piano’? Don’t worry, I won’t tell you to go all the way to the music room.”

“Ah.”

In this wet drizzle, I shouldn’t be feeling thirsty, yet I licked my lips. I looked at Satoshi’s feet.

“It was before six, when the school gate closes. There was one female student with an injured hand in the music room. She had messy hair and bloodshot eyes... because she had just woken up.”

“Ah, really?”

“The piano club member slept because she was tired. To ensure that she woke up before six, she set an alarm. She placed ‘Moonlight Sonata’ in the CD player.”

Satoshi sniggered.

“I see. Kamiyama High has vigorous club activities, after all. Of course there would be a CD player in the music room! You would definitely understand if you went there, since the CD player would still have the same setting. Ah, you sure destroyed my dreams! I shouldn’t have asked.

“But Houtarou...”

The signal turned green. There was a tune which indicated that it was safe to proceed. Satoshi took one step and spoke, his words sounding like that of a prophecy.

“I think going to the music room would have helped you fulfil your motto in the long run. Today’s unsolved mystery will come with great interest. I have no intention of pursuing the matter, but what about Chitanda-san? Well, I’ll be going now. See you tomorrow.”

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Houtarou actually asked how to write 鑽 in 研鑽を積む which means to devote oneself to one's studies.
2. ↑ This is a play on 草木を眠る三つ時 which means the dead of night.
3. ↑ If you, like Satoshi, are interested, go to <http://www.jplife.japanpost.jp/en/index.html> for more information.
4. ↑ I believe this refers to a club where members play Uta-garuta, a Japanese card game based on poems - [1]

## **Story 2 - To Commit A Deadly Sin**

# 1

We were learning about China's history in our World History class. Unfortunately, I already knew a lot about the Warring States period, so I was feeling extremely bored. However, I neither had the interest to draw little comical illustrations in the margins of my neglected notebook, nor did I feel like circulating pleasant notes to my classmates. Besides, I didn't have any hobbies, which can be said to be as tedious as side jobs, or interests in general. While ignoring the wearisome explanation of the tactic of horizontal and vertical alliances<sup>[1]</sup>, in order to pass the time I motionlessly reflected on the good fortune of having nothing to do while craving idleness.

Since Kamiyama High is a high school centered around preparing students for further studies, the pupils here largely have good attitudes towards learning. The old teacher's clear voice resounded in the classroom where tranquility is preserved. A stiff scraping sound rang out as the chalk hit the blackboard. It was currently the fifth period, so I'll probably get attacked by the sleep demon soon. It was a clear day in the June rainy season. And thus, my high school life is wasted. I knocked my mechanical pencil. It was not because I wanted to write something, but because the lead would not come out. I hadn't noticed that the lead was broken. I took out a spare pencil lead from my pencil case, holding it with my thumb and index finger. Instead of inserting it from the back, I tried inserting it from the front, as if I was threading a needle.

However, the peace was suddenly broken.

A dangerous sound rang out. It seemed like the sound of bamboo striking some hard object. Taken by surprise, I cringed. All sleepiness dissipated as the HB lead broke in the middle into two clean pieces. What a waste. Oh well, I guess I can still use them.

It seems that I was not the only one being startled, as commotion filled the classroom. Beside me, a female student said to her friend behind, "What was that? It totally surprised me." It seems that no one would give up the opportunity to talk.

The sound did not occur only once. It rang out a few times in succession, mixed with some irate words. It was a loud, frightening male voice, but since it was in the classroom, I couldn't understand what it was saying. At that point, my classmates and I had deduced a large part of what was happening. In the classroom next door, the math teacher, Omichi, had lost his temper yet again.

The teaching profession is commonly referred to as picking up the teacher's cane, but in this era, I haven't seen a teacher hold a cane. At best, they had a flexible pointing stick. In the past, I had a teacher called Morishita in the student counseling department who embraced the belief "Even though you are not holding a fencing stick, there is no doubt that you want to hold it if it is allowed." Speaking of which, Omichi-sensei has a rough bamboo pole shaped like a fencing stick which he carries around and sometimes uses as a teacher's cane. However, Omichi-sensei, who can be said to be the most veteran teacher in the school, would definitely not use his pole to hit a student. He would only wield it on the teacher's desk and blackboard in order to coerce students to behave. Omichi-sensei is the honored teacher who has taught me that the blackboard is unexpectedly firm and difficult to damage.

Nevertheless, while I have this impression of Omichi-sensei, I neither dislike nor have disdain for him. I had this kind of teacher in middle school, and even in elementary school. If I had to say what I felt about him, it would be the same feeling I have for the girl that sits next to me. I know their faces, names and personalities, but I don't really care.

At any rate, I was not impressed by him causing a racket in my class. While I was thinking about that, a clear voice cut into the unstoppable, angry voice. That voice sure rings a bell. When I realized who the voice belonged to, I muttered at the same time without thinking,

"No way..."

That was Chitanda's voice.

I got to know her through a little fateful incident right after entering this school, and we have been in the same club ever since. Come to think of it, Chitanda was in the adjacent class. I was surprised that there was a student in this school who would argue with Omichi when he had just started hammering on the blackboard, and I never thought that the student would be Chitanda. I strained my ears to confirm that it was indeed Chitanda, but in any case it was a voice from across the wall. I can't say for sure, but the intonation also sounds like Chitanda.

I couldn't understand what she was saying, but her every word was without a doubt sharp and excited. I have heard her voice countless of times, but it's the first time I've heard that tone. It seems that Chitanda also gets angry and raises her voice.

She had probably said whatever she wanted to in one go, as the voice soon died down. Silence had also descended in our classroom for a short while, as if we were collectively holding our breath. On that note, stillness had returned to the classroom next door. Did Chitanda seriously cause Omichi to shut up? The irresponsible atmosphere which made us expect further trouble relaxed in an instant. In any case, since it was now quiet, we had no choice but to be brought back to our history lesson.

I took out another piece of lead for my mechanical pencil. This time, I refilled it quickly from the back, then spun it around my finger.

## 2

It was after school. The rays of the early summer sun shone diagonally into the Classics Club room, the Geography Lecture Room.

I held my paperback book open between my fingers, as I noticed Chitanda's flustered state. As to why she was being so nervous, it was because of the argument between Fukube Satoshi and Mayaka Ibara, who had taken up positions in the middle of the classroom, though it was not actually feasible for the two of them to quarrel. It was actually Ibara unilaterally criticizing Satoshi, and Satoshi avoiding it with some frivolous talk or taking it with a wry smile. Although I have been a witness to the squabble from the beginning, I have no idea what it is actually about. It probably started as a debate about something trivial like whether all telephone poles are tall or whether all postboxes are red.

It was April when Chitanda, Satoshi and I joined the Classics Club, which had no members. In May, Ibara approached Satoshi and asked to join the club.

Ibara has been in the same class as me since first grade, but we didn't really talk to each other. We finally went to different classes in high school, but now we're in the same club. Just how closely are we linked by fate? Then again, Ibara is currently engaged in three trades at the same time, as she's in the Library Committee, the Manga Research Society as well as the Classics Club. Satoshi, who is in the Executive Committee, Handicraft Society and Classics Club should go well with her.

The Classics Club was such a quiet, peaceful place when there was only three of us.

Satoshi talks with frightful passion, but if he has nothing he wants of others he would stay quiet. And Chitanda would be really calm, as one would

expect, if her usual curiosity does not explode.

It's a peaceful place where we have our club activities and nothing happens. Little by little, I have been going to the Geography Lecture Room. It's not that I'm particularly interested in the activities, but I've come to think of it as a relaxing place to be.

But the situation changed when Ibara joined the club. If Ibara is alone, she's just an unsociable classmate. However, when put together with Satoshi...

"You were the one who said you were going to do it in the first place maybe you have a reason but that's beside the point isn't it obvious that you should have just contacted me it would have been alright to cancel but you should have at least given me a call I know you had your phone with you it would be fine if it were just a hassle for me but it's not what's with that look can you listen properly do you understand the position you're in this won't be fixed just by saying sorry to me."<sup>[2]</sup>

It turns out like that.

How many times has it been? The first few times, Chitanda got terribly flustered and somehow tried to arbitrate. She tried to coax and cajole them, but unfortunately it was just wasted effort. Now she was not trying to interfere, but was waiting for the right time to ask about what was wrong. I looked up and met her troubled gaze. She quietly pointed at the two of them with her index finger.

The book I was reading was a SF novel, and although the opening was interesting, it got difficult to understand at the climax. I knew that something bad had happened, but I had no idea what exactly it was. It couldn't understand it even after reading it a second time, and that was when I gradually found the two voices to be noisy. I sighed and put my book face down.

"And I know you're aware of it but you don't have a shred of decency when it matters you know what was going to happen but you didn't say anything after that it rained it was windy there was lightning and even hail fell in the end I didn't really care about this meeting but I spent time picking what to

wear and all of a sudden they're a wreck and it's all your fault you can't say anything about it right?"

Ibara shouted on and on with one breath.

"Are you tired yet?"

Ibara, who was staring daggers at Satoshi, turned to look at me, and gave a short and clear answer.

"I am."

"Then take a break."

"Fine."

She sat down meekly on a table nearby. She was really angry just now, so I'm not sure if her ire was dealt with so easily. Satoshi faced me and gave me an American-style thumbs-up as a sign of gratitude, and shamelessly said,

"Boy, you sure can get mad. I bet you released a lot of stress there."

"If Fuku-chan had more common decency, I wouldn't get stressed in the first place."

"Well, but..."

At the blatant falsehood, Satoshi turned to Chitanda.

"You should learn from Chitanda-san. I've never seen her get angry."

Chitanda was heaving a sigh of relief and stroking down her chest as she witnessed the truce. I've never seen her do that before. Upon suddenly being dragged into a conversation, she let out a startled reply.

"Eh? Me?"

But Ibara frowned.

"Really? But doesn't she get angry whenever Oreki is late?"

There was indeed something like that in the past, but that anger is slightly different from Ibara's ire. What's the appropriate word for it?

"I also saw it. But that was more of a scolding than anger."

That's it, I thought for an instant, when I realized that I was quite pitiable to be scolded by a girl of the same age.

"Ah, yeah, that's right. It did seem more like a remonstration."

That's also not good.

With a troubled smile and a vague expression, Chitanda tilted her head.

"If you're talking about not getting angry, I have not seen Fukube-san or Oreki-san get angry, either..."

After a brief moment, Ibara and I opened our mouths at the same time.

"Satoshi totally gets angry."

"Fuku-chan does get angry."

When people are attacked from two sides, their ability to judge falls considerably, and it was no different for Chitanda. Her large eyes tried to focus on both Ibara and I, failed, then settled on Satoshi, who was in between us.

"Is that so?"

Satoshi answered with a wry smile.

"Well, I guess. I don't display my anger as much as Mayaka, but I do get angry every now and then."

I just realized that I haven't seen Satoshi get angry in front of Chitanda yet. Well, it's only been two months. Anything's possible.

"I cannot imagine Fukube-san get angry, though."

It's understandable from Chitanda's perspective. Since Satoshi likes to show off his prowess in weird areas, he rarely displays his emotions without being afraid of what others might think, much less to the opposite gender, with Ibara being an exception.

"He's not at all scary when he's angry."

Yeah, his anger has hardly any intensity. He just speaks less, doesn't make eye contact and distinctly changes the topic by saying "Let's not talk about this." From my experience, it's not actually that rare for Satoshi to do this.

"Not scary? You really look down on me..."

Looking at the grumbling Satoshi with upturned eyes, Chitanda muttered.

"I think I am curious."

It seems that Chitanda is planning to rile up Satoshi. I'm totally looking forward to that.

"What about Oreki?"

Ibara was looking at me.

Just when I was about to tell them about how I haven't been angry lately, or that I was enjoying myself in this situation which was as stable as a spring day, Ibara smiled. While a smile is a smile, that was unmistakably a sneer. Ibara then turned to look at Chitanda, and in a tone that seemed to say "Get ready for it," she spoke.

"Oreki would never get angry."

"Is that because he's too gentle?"

Ibara shook her head.

"No, it's just that he's a lonely human being who can't even gain satisfaction from getting angry."

... Hey, isn't that a little cruel, whatever the circumstances?

Ah, but I realize that I didn't even get angry from that. I haven't been angry lately, but when was the last time I lost my temper? Well, no need to be bothered about it. Ibara'a pithy sayings are always accurate... not. It does get one aspect of the truth, but I can't say that it is totally correct. There's also the explanation that I'm too gentle to get mad, after all. Wait, that not right either, I can get angry if I want to.

"Haha, Houtarou's unsure."

I was a little annoyed at Satoshi stating the situation so frankly. Hey, I got angry!

Not caring about me, Satoshi carried on with his joke.

"Houtarou's lack of emotions aside, I think Chitanda never getting angry is a special case. It's like she's used to having forbearance and being composed. Mayaka should try to be more calm and collected, not in Houtarou's style but like Chitanda-san."

"Even if you say that, it's not like I can change that part of me just by trying. I don't want to be like Oreki, and I can't be like Chii-chan."

Chitanda's eyebrows clouded over. In a voice which was difficult for me to hear, she asked.

"Erm... am I being praised here?"

I wonder, although I'm definitely being spoken ill of. I somehow met Satoshi's and Ibara's eyes.

First, Ibara spoke.

"I think you might be."

Next was me.

"We were just making observations, so we said nothing positive or negative."

But Satoshi smiled with extreme amusement.

"No, no, forget those people who are unable to get angry, but I believe it's an excellent trait to not get angry. Wrath is a serious sin, after all. I think you should scale back on your outbursts, Mayaka."

"Sin? Do you get fined for them? Like for loud noises?"

Satoshi shook his head in a self-important manner, while Chitanda gave an explanation with a slightly red face.

"The deadly sins, right? I thought it was known as rage..."

But then she continued.

"If you are trying to praise me, please stop."

Chitanda was hanging her head in embarrassment. On top of that, her voice was even smaller than before, so no one accepted the protest. This is probably the first time I'm seeing Chitanda feeling shy. On the other hand, Satoshi nodded in satisfaction.

"That's right. As expected of Chitanda-san. Since it's a popular topic, I believe Mayaka has heard of the seven deadly sins?"

"Yeah, of course I would know that."

I don't.

"Aren't there 108 sins?"

"That's klesha."<sup>[3]</sup>

Whatever.

"The seven deadly sins are concepts from Christ's teachings, but they were only put together in posterity, so they are not recorded in the Bible. Er, besides wrath, there's also..."

Satoshi said as he bent his thumb. Bending the rest of his fingers in order, he continued.

"Pride, greed, avarice... Hmm, I can only remember these four..."

Satoshi, who was looking like an idiot staring at his fist, was saved by Chitanda.

"Envy, lust and sloth, I think."

When she said the last sin, it seemed like Ibara looked at me and laughed... Well, it's not good to have a persecution complex. Currently, Ibara was looking at Chitanda.

"So that's the seven deadly sins. Doesn't that make Chii-chan perfect? You're diligent, and you don't overeat."

"I can't imagine you being greedy, and you're definitely not lazy."

"And, er... you're not dirty-minded."

"It's hard to tell if she's envious of anyone, though."

These two were now clearly mocking her rather than praising her. Chitanda's cherry-colored face became gradually redder. She wrung her hands to deny the allegations and spoke at a rapid pace.

"Please stop! Besides, when I get hungry I can eat a lot!"

So would anyone.

"She seems like Saint Eru, right?"

"Doesn't 'Chitanda Eru' sound kind of angelic?"

"Uriel, Gabriel, Chitandael? Ahaha!"

These two sure go well together. Chitanda was pressed for a response in the face of extraordinary coordination. She cleared her throat, and mustered her fortitude and dignity. Then, suddenly,

"I said, please stop it!"

She cried in a clear voice.

"She got angry..."

"And scolded us."

Chitanda smiled at the two despondent-looking people.

"Besides, I don't think that it's a good thing to never get angry."

Ibara and Satoshi looked shocked, and I probably also had a similar expression. Chitanda continued smoothly without showing even a hint that she was searching for words to say.

"Is it not the same for the other deadly sins?"

"Sorry, Chii-chan, but I don't really understand."

"Is that so? I should have used a better choice of words, then."

Chitanda smiled while answering.

"I think that one cannot do without pride and greed. Although since they were based on religious teachings, there must have been various reasons as to why they were considered deadly sins."

Satoshi tilted his head at an unnatural angle.

"Any examples?"

"For example, if you have no pride, then that means that you have no self-confidence. And someone who can never be called greedy would be unable to support their family. Furthermore, if no one in the world felt envy, new technologies would not have been invented."

Chitanda stopped in surprise. Looking at our expressions, she spoke.

"Umm... I didn't mean to turn this into a lecture..."

Satoshi, who had been listening attentively, folded his arms.

"Hmm, I see. Interesting..."

I was pleased that my way of life was being defended. I asked with a light tone.

"Basically, you're saying that it's a matter of degree? That's like Confucianism."

"I cannot explain the Bible, but I just don't think it's useful to take the deadly sins as absolute and apply that to our lives."

She asserted without shyness. I hadn't thought about what Chitanda believes in, so this is quite interesting.

"So do you think that getting angry is not a bad thing, Chii-chan?"

"That's right. If you can never get angry at anything, that probably means you have nothing that you like."

I can totally get angry.

"But if that's the case, then why don't you ever get angry?"

That was a quick response.

"Because it tires me out. And I do not want to be tired."

Oh?

Satoshi held his head, which had been drained of color, in his hands and rose to his feet.

"Chi-Chitanda-san's been poisoned by Houtarou! What in the world! I should have at least prevented this from happening! There's a ghost haunting Kamiyama High! The ghost of conserving energy!"

"No, that was just a joke."

Silence descended.

In a voice that seemed like it would vanish soon, she apologized.

"Sorry, I had a sudden impulse to play around."

I could say that it was obvious, but that's just escaping from the fact that I was just fooled by Chitanda. And I thought that I had found a soulmate.

Chitanda answered the question again, as if the tomfoolery earlier had been forgotten.

"It's not that I can't get angry. I can also lose my temper. Hmm, for example..."

Our attentive gazes were gestures prompting her to get on with her answer.

"When I see people wasting food, I get angry."

... Well, she's the daughter of a farming family. She believes in the saying "Each grain of rice is a drop of sweat."

Thinking about that, I suddenly remembered about the incident during the fifth period. I spoke without giving much thought.

"On that topic, wasn't it you who got angry in Omichi's class during the fifth period?"

While speaking, I felt Chitanda's mood change.

Now I've done it. A wave of regret caused my back to stiffen.

Chitanda, who had been enjoying the amusing a calm chat, slightly pulled back her slender chin and closed her lips tightly. While she doesn't exaggerate her emotions, her mood changes are easy to understand. She muttered.

"Ah, that's right! How could I have forgotten? I was hoping that I could ask Oreki-san about that!"

Great. Another blunder. Satoshi and Ibara were teasing Chitanda about being a saint or blessed person just now. I was thinking that the image didn't really suit her if you consider the aspect of doing things in moderation. That was a huge error. While she is diligent, the trait that makes her differ from a perfect person is her curiosity.

Having stirred up trouble for myself<sup>[4]</sup>, I clicked my tongue silently. Indifferent to my plight, Satoshi seemed to be at ease.

"Did something happen, Chitanda-san?"

"Yes. Actually, during the fifth period, I got angry in math class."

Chitanda gave Satoshi and Ibara a vague nod, and then turned to look at me. I wish I had been looking elsewhere, but there's no use crying over spilt milk.

"But I do not know what happened to make me angry. Of course, there was no need for me to get angry, but something happened to make me angry, and I do not know what it was that happened."

I had to work really hard to grasp the meaning of her convoluted sentence. In short, it's probably what Chitanda said next.

"I'm curious!"

# 3

Today's fifth period was math, taught by Omichi-sensei.

I believe that Oreki-san and Fukube-san know what kind of teacher he is.

I'm not sure where I should start so that you will understand, so I will explain from the beginning.

Omichi-sensei arrived pretty much just as the bell chimed for the fifth period. He looked displeased, but as far as I know, he has that expression for most circumstances. He opened the door, and right before he entered the classroom, he stopped for a moment and looked at the class name plate. Everything up to that point was fairly normal.

After hurriedly bowing, he started writing a quadratic equation on the blackboard. It was quite a simple equation,  $y = x^2 + x + 1$ , but he restricted the domain of  $x$  from 0 to 3. Then, while tapping his shoulder with his bamboo pole, he singled out Kawasaki-san and told him to draw the range of  $y$ . Do you know Kawasaki-san? He is a tall and thin guy who stammers a little... but that has nothing to do with the story.

Kawasaki-san obviously looked confused, as was I. We had not been taught anything about domain restrictions yet.

I thought that Omichi-sensei was testing our imagination, trying to find out what we knew about domain restrictions before starting his lesson. Frankly, I am no expert on these matters, but I have experienced this style of teaching before. Then again, this method of making students think does not seem to fit with Omichi-sensei's lesson plan.

Kawasaki-san thought about Omichi-sensei's question for a while, then said that he did not know how to answer it.

At that moment, contrary to my expectations, Omichi-sensei became angry. "What? You don't know? What were you listening to in my previous lesson?" He started berating Kawasaki-san... I don't really want to say this, but it was actually more like he was abusing Kawasaki-san.

After saying some more unreasonable words about how his future was insecure, Omichi-sensei told Kawasaki-san to sit down.

The next one chosen was Tamura-san, who is better in math than Kawasaki-san. He stood up, but was unable to give an answer.

Omichi-sensei called Tamura-san an idiot and ordered him to sit down. He then looked around the class and said in a loud voice, "Isn't there anyone who can solve this?"

I should have probably noticed it earlier, but at this point I finally realized that Omichi-sensei had mistaken how far we had gotten in the textbook. I checked the textbook, and found that today we should have only completed the methods of determining a quadratic function and started on maximum and minimum values. Omichi-sensei was off by about one hour worth of lessons.

As others in the class began to realize too, the classroom started to get noisy. That only made Omichi-sensei more irritated and he started striking the blackboard with his bamboo pole. He then criticized our attitude towards lessons, love of learning and public spirit in an exasperated tone. He also had really harsh words to say about our path after graduation and our future. Yes, that's right, he would hit the blackboard after every pause.

I think there were a few people in the class who could sketch the range of  $y$ . I do not go to a prep school, but I know that most prep schools cover lesson content considerably earlier compared to normal schools. However, those who knew the answer just kept silent, and no one raised their hand.

Omichi-sensei pointed at Tamura-san again. He was made to stand up and remain there until he thought of the answer. That was when I stood up. I told him that he might have mistaken our progress, and requested him to double-check in the textbook.

Eh? What did I say specifically?

... Sorry, but that's a secret. Whatever I said while I was angry is not something I want to recall and be proud of.

That's right, that was when I got angry.

## 4

After saying all that, Chitanda cleared her throat slightly. She was probably embarrassed from revealing her anger.

The expert on rage, Ibara, urged Chitanda to carry on.

"What happened after that?"

"Omichi-sensei picked up the textbook. Then he checked a few pages, muttered 'Ah, I see!' and told Tamura-san to sit down. It was a normal lesson after that."

Ibara folded her arms imperiously.

"So Omichi's that kind of teacher. I'm sorry for Chii-chan and everyone else, but I'm glad I didn't get that kind of teacher!"

"Exactly! Seriously, it's thanks to him that I had to work my ass off even after the midterm exams!"

I gave a reply to Satoshi, who had raised his voice, as if he was in a play.

"Your failing marks are not Omichi's fault. You'd better do something about your final exams."

Next, I said to Ibara,

"He's not exactly a bad teacher."

"That's right, he is not a terrible teacher."

"Well, I guess he's not so bad."

Aren't these amazing people who can understand any perspective?

Chitanda looked at me.

"So, anyway, what do you think?"

By that, do you mean that the story is over? I rearranged my crossed legs.

"Was there something strange about that story?"

Chitanda looked from right to left, troubling over whether she should repeat what she had just said. Then, she spoke.

"Ah, I did not mention what I was most concerned about.

"What I find mysterious is why Omichi-sensei made that kind of mistake. From his writing on the blackboard and his exam markings, Omichi-sensei does not seem the type to make mistakes."

"Well..."

Satoshi edged into the conversation.

"There are two types of strict teachers. One is strict to himself, while the other is lenient to himself."

Isn't that also true for people in general. Well, even I know that Omichi would be the former type.

"Even so, why did he make such an obvious mistake? I really don't understand."

As usual, you're asking the impossible. I raised my eyebrows.

"So you want to know why he committed the error? That's impossible no matter how you look at it. Why don't you go to the staff room now and look inside his head?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"No, please listen. Oreki-san and Fukube-san probably know this, but Omichi-sensei always opens his textbook after the lesson, even if he did not use it at all."

Satoshi and I looked at each other and shrugged at the same time. None of us had bothered to observe his actions.

"And then he uses his pen to write some short memo. What do you think that is for?"

I see, so that's how it is. I get what she's trying to say.

"To keep track of how far in the curriculum he went in that class?"

"I think so too. Omichi-sensei would notice any mistakes by checking the textbook, and I believe that has happened a few times before. Furthermore, he most likely knows that we are class A, for he always checked the name plate before entering a classroom.

"Are you following? Omichi-sensei then looks at the memo that shows the lesson progress and then checks the classroom again. You could say that it is perfect.

"But then, why would he still be able to make a mistake?"

I'm guessing that his notes are like "1<sup>st</sup> June, Class X" on page 15 and "3<sup>rd</sup> June, Class X" on page 20 or something. If not, he wouldn't know which page he had gotten to.

I threw out a suggestion without giving much thought.

"Couldn't he have mistaken the date?"

One has to take responsibility for his words. The punishment for my careless words was dealt swiftly. With a cold gaze, Ibara retorted.

"... If that's the case, he might backtrack, but it couldn't have caused him to skip ahead. use your brain, don't just speak by spinal reflex."

Did you have to say the word "spinal"? Ibara is in perfect form today. Indeed, he could look at a previous memo, but he definitely cannot do so for a future memo that has not been written...

Ibara, who was on top form, turned to Chitanda and cocked her head in puzzlement.

"I'm not trying to beat you at your own game, but..."

"Yes?"

"I'm a little curious about something. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"You're asking me? Yes, go ahead."

Chitanda changed her posture, which may have been a lack of judgment on her part. Instead of taking on a more serious disposition, Ibara asked the question in her usual tone.

"About Chii-chan's story, I understand why you would get angry. It seems like he said something extremely severe, and in that situation I would be angry, too. But I wouldn't want to talk back to a teacher like that. Isn't that like deliberately putting your hand into a fire?"

She said the last sentence while looking at me and Satoshi in order. Well, that's an extreme thing to say. Witticisms like that don't suit her.

Ibara may not know Omichi, but she knows that it's a huge risk to argue with him when he has lost his temper. I would obviously not do something like that, and neither would Satoshi. I doubt anyone in Kamiyama High's thousand-strong student body would do that. That's why I was surprised during the fifth period.

But Chitanda gave a careless response.

"I'm not sure why I got angry."

She got so mad she forgot herself? Is this Chitanda we're talking about here? No matter what, I just can't imagine... As I thought to myself,

Chitanda continued.

"But I don't think I got angry because he was criticizing us."

After pondering for a while, Ibara asked,

"Then was it because those who could answer kept quiet?"

"No. NO one would want to answer in that situation. Also, if someone had answered, the lesson would have continued while it was too far ahead."

"Because no one else pointed out the teacher's mistake?"

"No."

Ibara thought some more.

"Was it because that Tamura person looked pitiful?"

That would be just like Chitanda.

Or too much like her. The person in question tilted her head to the side.

"I was sympathetic towards him, but I don't think I would get angry over that. I don't really understand myself, but I can understand why Omichi-sensei would scold students who did not remember anything from the previous lesson, although his words might have been too harsh."

"... But what was it that made me angry?"

Then Chitanda gave a half-smile.

"I find myself difficult to understand sometimes."

"Hmm, I see."

Ibara also smiled awkwardly.

I understand why Ibara asked her question. Anyone in Chitanda's shoes would feel pissed off. Even I would have felt uncomfortable in that position. But since we have the impression that Chitanda never loses her temper, it is strange for her to be angry even when that would be natural for others.

But the answer for that question was not given. As Chitanda mentioned, it could be because she finds it difficult to answer, or perhaps because she feels embarrassed about it, or maybe because it's troublesome... Wait, did she even mention anything about it being troublesome?

I don't know Chitanda well enough to sense her likes and dislikes. Moreover, I had more interest in finishing the paperback book in my hand.

"What do you think, Oreki-san?"

"No clue."

"I also don't know why, but..."

At that point, Chitanda paused. She quickly took a deep breath and looked at me, her huge eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"But you can figure it out if you just think about it a little!"

"Oh?" Satoshi said in a raised voice. I was taken aback. Is this what it feels like to be depended on?

And did she realize that I had not put in any thought about it?

Ibara, who was sitting on the other side of the classroom, raised her eyebrows.

"Chii-chan, you can't expect much from Oreki, even if he tries. He was a grasshopper in his previous life."

"Eh, Mayaka-san, you can see people's former incarnations?"

Just when I thought that her curiosity had been diverted,

"But right now I'm curious about Omichi-sensei."

In an instant, we're back to square one. How annoying. By the way, Satoshi's more suited to being a grasshopper than me. They die in the winter not because they save energy, but because of their principle of enjoying life to its fullest.

"Oreki-san."

Well, I won't get anywhere if I don't say anything...

I guess I'll give up on my book for a while and start thinking.

# 5

It should be safe to assume that Omichi was indeed writing down the class' progress in his textbook. At any rate, he's done nothing but teach math for the last ten or twenty years. Like for previous years, he's teaching many classes this year, and it would be definitely confusing to keep track of each class' progress. Using memos would be the obvious answer.

However, despite his efforts, he made a mistake. And he did not backtrack, but went further ahead. This is truly a strange story.

Wait a minute. How would it be possible to skip ahead?

To commit that mistake, there has to be a note on one of the pages after the correct one. Class X has not advanced that far yet, but a note on the page indicates that they have.

That could just be the simple answer to the problem. I crossed my legs and asked Chitanda,

"Your class hasn't learnt about domains, right?"

"Yes, you're right."

Chitanda looked bewildered as she affirmed the needless statement. My next question only added to her confusion.

"What if I said that your class already has?"

"... What do you mean?"

"Omichi teaches math every year. We're not Omichi's only students... last year's class A also learnt about restrictions on the domain of X at some point."

"Ah," Chitanda gasped. Mistaking last year's memo for this year's is certainly plausible, right?

However, before Chitanda could declare her agreement, Satoshi shook his head slowly.

"If you're saying that he might have mistaken last's years notes, I'm afraid that's impossible."

"What do you mean?"

As always, Satoshi seemed awfully happy when sharing some meaningless information.

"It's simple. The teachers get new textbooks every year. They need to have the latest revisions to stay consistent with the students, right? By the way, Omichi is using this year's fourth edition."

Chitanda cast down her eyes.

... I see, it does seem obvious after Satoshi said it. I would really like to know how he even knows which edition Omichi is using, though.

But since Omichi has the habit of writing in his textbooks, what if the notes got mixed up... it's certainly possible, but whether Chitanda would accept it is another question. Omichi probably writes the class and date on the page where he stopped. Could he have written it in some confusing scrawl? Unless there's a way to prove that he likes to scribble in his textbook...

Hmm.

Seeing me sit there in sullen silence, Satoshi decided that I was not to be depended on and continued in a light-hearted tone.

"I really don't get domains, though. I'm not proud of it, but it's already hard enough for me just to draw the x and y axes. It would be scary to be singled out by Omichi."

If that's the case, how about you forget some of your random trivia and focus on your studies instead? ... I can't really say that, can I? It would be like telling birds not to fly. I wonder what Satoshi is trying to learn about now. I remember him saying something about The Book of Changes.[\[5\]](#)

Ah, hang on.

I suddenly hit upon an idea. I questioned Satoshi.

"Satoshi, is your class already done with domains?"

"Hm? Yeah."

"What class are you in?"

"Hey Oreki, you should at least remember your friends' classes."

I tried a counterattack on Ibara.

"Then do you know what class I'm in?"

"It's not like we're friends or anything."

I was lost for words.

Seeing the situation, Satoshi laughed.

"It's okay, Mayaka. Houtarou knows."

As he said that, I had a feeling that I did know.

Satoshi's class has completed domains. My class has not. And of course, neither has Chitanda's.

I see. I get it now.

"There is not question that he made a note on some page ahead of where your class has gotten to."

I asserted.

"Yes, that's right. I think so too."

"Additionally, the note was written this year, and shows the class' progress. What if the memo he wrote wasn't, in fact, for your class, but for Satoshi's class?"

"Fukube-san's class?"

Ignoring Chitanda's question, Satoshi asked dubiously.

"Omichi is in charge of classes A, B, C and D. Even if it wasn't class A or B, it doesn't have to be class D, right?"

Ibara interjected.

"And anyway, why class D?"

"Because it wouldn't be strange for him to mistake D for A. C is clearly nothing like A."

Ibara glared at me, as if to say "You've said something stupid again." No, that's inaccurate. She actually said it.

"You've said something stupid again. A and D are totally different."

I slightly quailed under her stare, but I pretended to remain calm.

"Omichi's a math teacher."

"So?"

"A math teacher has a much higher chance of mixing up A and D. It's like the katakana ツ(tsu) and シ(shi)."

"What?"

Her disdainful glare seemed to ask, "Hey, are you not feeling well?" Somehow, when she's arguing with Satoshi, she can remain enlivened all the way until the end, but when arguing with me, she seems to lose her energy.

Even so, I continued.

"For example, Omichi wrote something like '1<sup>st</sup> June, A' on page 10 and '1<sup>st</sup> June, D' on page 15, right? If he mistook D for A, that would explain what happened. Furthermore..."

I took a short breath.

"Omichi would be used to writing in the lower case."

At that instant, all four of us fell into silence.

I was wondering if they had understood, or if they were thinking, "What rubbish is this?" It was a tense moment for me.

Finally the silence was broken.

"Ah, I see!"

Satoshi exclaimed.

"It's the lower case a and d!"

I nodded with a stiff expression. Since Chitanda claimed that Omichi checked the class name plate, it would be wrong to say that he had gotten the classroom wrong. In that case, there would be no other way for him to be mistaken except through the memo. It would be impossible for him to read A wrongly. However, it would be a different story for a.

Ibara still firmly remained silent.

Her lips stiffened, and for some reason she stared at me resentfully. But unexpectedly, what came out of her mouth was words of agreement.

"... Yeah, that's possible."

"What, are you feeling uncomfortable?"

"Yeah, I recently lost points in an English test because the teacher couldn't tell the difference between my a and d."

"Oh, you too? In my case, it was n and h."

Thankfully, it seems that I'm not the only one with this experience. In my case it's not English but Math, and I've lost marks because my 1 and 7 could not be differentiated. Thinking about it, that was when I was still a rosy-cheeked, handsome youth, that is to say, when I was in first grade. I remember feeling vexed about getting the right answer and not getting the marks, but I didn't care too much about it.

Now, what about Chitanda?

Chitanda, with her elegant handwriting, has not had such an experience. She thought for a while, then gave two slight nods.

"Yes, that does seem likely."

Chitanda smiled gently.

"a and d... I can understand the mistake now. I may have gone too far in what I said to Omichi-sensei. That was wrong of me."

Those words made me feel slightly shocked.

Those were almost the exact words that I predicted that Chitanda would be thinking.

"Eh? Why do you say that?"

After taking a sidelong glance at Ibara, who was insisting that Chitanda did not go too far since Omichi was in the wrong, I stole a glance at Chitanda's face. Contrary to her self-blaming words, her countenance was sunny and I could even see that she was somewhat relieved.

This is what I thought deep down.

The normally calm Chitanda got angry, and she wanted to know why. She said that it's not necessarily bad to get angry, but the truth is that she never wants to. Perhaps Chitanda wanted Omichi to have had his reasons, and wanted to believe that she got angry because of her own mistake, so she wanted to understand her reasons for getting angry.

Isn't Chitanda that kind of person?

No.

I shook my head to chase that last thought away. What's with me thinking "Isn't Chitanda that kind of person?" when I've known her for only two months? I would largely understand Satoshi's thoughts and feelings, since I've known him since middle school. The same can be said of Ibara, who has been in the same class as me for nine years and can be said to be an acquaintance. But what do I know about Chitanda?

That's right. I've managed to predict her actions sometimes, but then again, her motives were clearly shown, and to think that I can read her innermost thoughts would be, as she said, to commit a deadly sin. The deadly sin of pride. I'd better watch out, I've somehow become quite conceited. Even just today, how many times has Chitanda acted different from my expectations?

I smiled bitterly, and realized that Ibara and Satoshi had digressed from the topic of Omichi. Seems like it's not my turn anymore. I looked at my watch and found that it was almost five. I gazed at the sunset outside. Perhaps it's time to go home?

"I understand what Chii-chan is saying, but I don't know, if I was there..."

"Then you would do what you would normally do. But think about what Chitanda-san was saying earlier..."

Well, I guess it's still early. I picked up my book and read the page it was open at again. Like this, more of my high school life is squandered away.

Personally, I think that committing the deadly sin of sloth is more than enough for me.

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Horizontal alliances refers to states allying with each other to repel the Qin state, while vertical alliances refers to states allying with Qin to participate in its ascendancy.
2. ↑ I didn't forget to include punctuation for a bunch of sentences, it was just Ibara.
3. ↑ In traditional Buddhist thought, people are said to have 108 afflictions or kleshas. There are six senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and consciousness) multiplied by three reactions (positive, negative, or indifference) making 18 "feelings." Each of these feelings can be either "attached to pleasure or detached from pleasure" making 36 "passions", each of which may be manifested in the past, present, or future, making 108 klesha.
4. ↑ The original phrase is 蛇のいる藪をつづいた which means to disturb the brush where the snake is residing.
5. ↑ An ancient Chinese divination text, also known as I Ching.

# **Story 3 - The Ghost, When Examined**

# 1

I've often heard the saying, "All ghosts, when examined, are just withered flowers." However, in this modern era, people are unable to grasp the idea of romanticism even after looking it up in a dictionary, withered flowers are rarely treated as ghosts, and apparitions in this world are revealed in succession to be nothing more than withered flowers. It would probably be difficult for us to notice a real specter if it kept its true form.

I was saying that on a bus that was traversing a mountain path in August, when the lingering summer heat was still severe. Fukube Satoshi, who was sitting next to me, nodded in deep thought.

"Interesting. A metaphysical repudiation of the merit of the idea, in the form of a witticism. It really suits you, Houtarou."

Ibara, who was sitting in front, turned around even though she wasn't called. She raised her eyebrows.

"I don't like that way of thinking. I guess I'm not the type to only use my head for everything."

I listened to their responses, took a short while to digest them, and quickly shouted a denial.

"Hey, I said nothing of the sort!"

I was actually intending to bring up some urban legend similar to UFOs and Nessie, or in other words, an extremely common topic of discussion. Specifically, I wanted to talk about the story on TV yesterday, "Reporters on the scene! The truth behind Hamana Lake's giant eel, Hussie<sup>[1]</sup>!" My phrasing might have been rather indirect, but I didn't think that my words would be misinterpreted so willfully. Just as I was about to explain myself,

Chitanda, who was wearing a dress and sitting next to Ibara, turned around and smiled.

"I'm also curious about the true nature of the withered flowers."

It seems that everyone misunderstood. I didn't really want to force everyone to understand what I was saying, so I shut my mouth.

There are four members in Kamiyama High's Classics Club.

And why were all members of the Classics Club on the bus that was making its bumpy journey on the mountainous road? The answer to that, of course, lies in the bus' destination. The final stop, Zaizen Village, is a village in a ravine famous for mountain hiking and hot springs. I would never go hiking, so by process of elimination, we were heading there for the hot springs.

The groan of the bus' engine became louder as the path grew steeper.

## 2

It was summer break in August, and actually taking a break during a holiday fits with my personal beliefs. However, thanks to the Classics Club President, Chitanda, I had to go to the hot springs.

During this summer break, all of us in the Classics Club worked together to solve what Satoshi calls "The Hyouka Incident", which was really important for Chitanda. After solving the mystery, she thanked us, and to reward our efforts, she planned a trip to the hot springs. By default, I just wanted to stay at home, so I definitely would not agree with the plan, but somehow my resistance was broken and it was decided that I would participate.

Zaizen Village was one and a half hours from Kamiyama City by bus. We did not have to pay for our accommodations, as Ibara's relatives were running na inn, and since they were currently renovating and were accepting no customers, they were letting us stay for free.

I'm not especially weak in taking transport, but perhaps because the mountain road was too steep, I got car-sick right before we arrived. After that, we were picked up at the bus stop in a van by Ibara's relatives and we finally reached Seizansou. I sat down by the window of my allocated room and enjoyed the amazing scenery, which dissipated my discomfort.

The room was twenty tatami mats in size, which was really large for just me and Satoshi. I opened the large window, and was surprised that we were so close to the mountain, which was covered in a deep foliage. There was white fog rising up here and there, probably steam from the hot spring. Along the winding prefectural road, there were a few inns and private houses. I could see a school a little further away. Since there were few students, the elementary school was combined with the middle school. I'm

definitely not a person of plentiful sensitivities, but I'm not so stolid as to not feel anything while traveling.

"This room has a pretty good view, huh?"

Satoshi's voice came from behind. I replied without turning around,

"I guess this kind of thing isn't bad every now and then. I might be asking too much, but it would be more dignified to come here alone."

Satoshi sniggered.

"Houtarou, traveling alone? Stop joking around, you're definitely not the type of person to voluntarily do something elegant like going to the hot springs. Don't forget that you're here because Chitanda planned this trip and Mayaka used her connections."

As Satoshi intended, I was sullen with silence. The one with the most poisonous tongue in the Classics Club was Ibara, but Satoshi's eloquent speeches could be quite insulting, too. What made it worse was that he was right. There was no doubt that I wouldn't even think of going to Zaizen Village on my own.

That's why I should be thankful to Chitanda for causing me to actually go to Zaizen Village and enjoy the beautiful scenery.

I heard footsteps in the corridor, and soon after, there were a few rough knocks on the door.

"Dinner!"

That was Ibara's voice.

Next came Chitanda's voice, which sounded like she was imitating Ibara.

"It's time for dinner!"

"Hear that? Let's go!"

As prompted, I left the area near the window. While it's certainly not a bad thing to be at the hot springs, I somehow felt ill at ease knowing that those guys would be near me all the time. There was the smell of cheese wafting down the corridor. Dinner would probably be stew or gratin, with the dark horse being cheese fondue. Yeah, I guess that would be it. I took a deep breath.

Seizansou consists of two buildings: the annex, which we were currently using, and the main building, which was undergoing renovation.

Both buildings were almost equal in size. They were connected by a passageway, and if you look at the inn from a bird's eye view, it would look like the character 口(ko). Each building had two floors and was made of wood; the floorboards in the corridors creak when stepped on. There was only one staircase in the whole inn. Chitanda and Ibara's room was at the very end of the second floor, while Satoshi and I were one room away. Those large rooms could fit all four of us, or even double that, and have extra space remaining, but that's that.

The stairs were quite steep, so I had to concentrate when going down.

There was supposed to be a dining hall in the first floor of the main building, but it was being renovated, so we were to have dinner in a Japanese-style room on the first floor of the annex. I opened the sliding screen which had Mount Fuji painted on it, and saw that Chitanda, Ibara, as well as the two sisters had already taken their seats.

Chitanda and Ibara were sitting opposite the sisters, and the seats at the head and front of the table were empty. They had not started eating yet; it seems that they were waiting for us, as etiquette dictated. I sat on the floor cushion nearest to me, so Satoshi had the seat of honor. No one was taking any notice of the seating order in this setting, though.

The table was actually quite cramped with all six of us sitting around it. On the table, contrary to my expectations, there was a salad of fresh vegetables, fried shishamo<sup>[2]</sup>, cold cuts of pork, and a miso soup with tofu and radish. Rice ad already been scooped into wooden rice bowls. There was definitely the fragrance of cheese. What could it be from? I scanned the room and murmured,

"Is a cheesecake being baked?"

"Ah, how did you know?"

A girl with centered hair grinned. The cushion she was sitting on was low, but she was short in stature. With her frameless spectacles, large eyes, and her jubilant smile, she somehow gave off the impression of an excitable person. She wore a thin T-shirt and knee-length denim shorts. When put together with Ibara, they would totally look like siblings, but then again they are related by blood. Furthermore, Ibara was also wearing a shirt and denim pants.

Speaking of which, Ibara's appearance hasn't changed a bit since elementary school. She would look like a younger sister when put together with anyone, but I can't say that to her face.

That recklessly sociable girl was one of the sisters of Seizansou, Zenna Rie.

"Amazing! It's just like what Maya-neechan said!"

What did you tell them, Ibara!

Next to Rie, there was a ponytailed girl sitting well-manneredly. To put it more accurately, she was shy. IT seems that she hasn't gotten used to us yet. I unnecessarily wondered if she could get on with being in a family that was running an inn.

Even without considering her shyness towards strangers and her frail appearance that I could not imagine a smile on, she was not like her older sister. I saw both of them standing up earlier, and noticed that they had around the same height. Although her long sleeves were thin, she looked

warm wearing them in the middle of summer. She would be graduating to middle school next year, but her stature was similar to that of Rie, who would be in the second year of middle school next year. She must have grown really fast for her age. Her name was Zenna Kayo.

"Let's eat!"

Ibara, who was acting more like a host than a guest, said. Everyone then separated their chopsticks successively and started on their meal. Chitanda clasped her hands tightly in prayer, which was normal. The sisters' parents weren't in the room; they were probably eating in the main building, for this room definitely couldn't fit another two people.

First was the miso soup, which I slurped continuously for a really long time. It was delicious, as expected for a business. Next, I tried the shishamo. It probably wasn't actually shishamo, but I still liked it since it had a nice popping texture.

Rie was really interested about Ibara's high school life and was asking her about it. On the other hand, Kayo was hesitatingly asking Chitanda about her name. Satoshi would occasionally interrupt a conversation with a smile on his face, while I would just move my chopsticks in silence, pleased with the shishamo which I hadn't tasted in a long time.

"...And then it was like this..."

Rie, being immersed in the conversation, started drawing in the air with her chopsticks. That was improper dining etiquette, but I shouldn't worry about the home discipline of another family.

Rie reached out for the bamboo ladle in the salad bowl while Kayo was moving her chopsticks towards the pork. Since they moved at about the same time, Rie's arm struck Kayo's hand. Kayo's chopsticks, which was holding a slice of pork, jolted a bowl of miso soup. Having witnessed that scene from beginning to end, I wanted to warn them, but it was too late.

Some soup spilled from the bowl. Kayo squeaked.

"Ah!"

"Aah, what are you doing!"

Rie scolded while frowning. From my point of view, they were both at fault, but...

"So-sorry, Onee-chan!"

Kayo apologized, and reached for the tablecloth. Since it was a little far away, Chitanda passed it to her.

"Here you go."

"Th-thank you very much."

Rie told Kayo to be more careful next time. After Kayo had wiped up the spilled miso soup, I extended my chopsticks to get more shishamo. I actually wanted to taste some mountain vegetables, but I suppose that would be asking too much.

## 3

After enjoying Rie's handmade baked cheesecake for dessert, we all went about with our separate activities. I went back to my room, but Satoshi, who should have gotten back already, wasn't there. Has he already gone to the bath house?

Being alone in the room, I retrieved a manga from the shoulder bag I usually use. Satoshi said that it was really outstanding for a manga about the Warring States period<sup>[3]</sup>, so I borrowed it from him. Indeed, it was quite a realistic portrayal with a good range of human emotion, and the artwork went into the minutest details, so it was readable. Satoshi sure has interesting taste.

The story was set in the climax of Oda Nobunaga's<sup>[4]</sup> attack on the Asakura Clan. Nobunaga was about to secure the victory when he received a gift from his little sister. It was a pouch tied at both ends, with adzuki beans inside. On seeing this, Nobunaga declared, "This signifies that we're trapped like rats! Azai<sup>[5]</sup> has betrayed us!" It was the episode where Nobunaga's sister, who had married into the Azai family, covertly informed her brother about his predicament.

It made me wonder how Nobunaga realized that he was betrayed with only one pouch, but I thought that it was fundamentally a good story. Would my sister help me without a moment's delay if I'm in such a pinch? That would be a sight worth seeing.

After reading for about half an hour, my eyes got tired, so I stopped for a while. The lighting in the room was quite dim, which would be normal for a hotel, but not for an inn.

What should I do if not read manga? There was a TV in the room, but it would be even more painful for my eyes.

As a result, I had a lot of time to kill. If I don't feel like doing anything, I would usually lie down and sleep, but since we were at a hot-spring lodge, I thought that I might as well go down to the hot spring. I carried a towel which was provided in the room and went out to the hallway. That was exactly when I ran into Chitanda.

"Ah, where are you headed to?"

Chitanda also had a towel with her.

"Same place as you."

"It seems that there isn't a mixed bath here."

"No one said anything about that."

We walked together, and the flat sounds of our slippers alternated with the creaking of the floorboards. After thinking for a while, Chitanda asked,

"This may seem a bit random, but what kind of person is your sister?"

What? That's seriously random.

I recalled that Chitanda was an only child. I took a little time to choose the words for my answer.

"My sister, huh? By some definitions she would be an oddball, and by others she would be a genius. I doubt that I could be better than her at anything."

"Ah."

"Though I've never really cared to be... Why ask about my sister all of a sudden? Is it because of the Zenna sisters?"

Chitanda nodded slightly. She smiled shyly and answered in a small voice.

"The truth is, I've always wanted a sibling. An older sister or a younger brother. Don't you think it's wonderful to have someone you can go to for

anything to be always by your side?"

I was slightly amazed by those words, and I shrugged instead of giving an answer. It seems that this young lady has the tendency to think too highly of others. And doesn't she also believe in ghosts?

The annex does have a bath house where one can be immersed in a hot spring, but apparently it was as narrow as a normal bathroom. According to the others, there was an open air bath house nearby, so we headed there. I may believe in conserving energy, but I'm not so unrefined as to decline two or three minutes of walking and give up on a larger bath house.

After exiting Seizansou, we descended down the slope. It seems that the open air bath house, which could be seen after going round the bend, was managed by the inns and hotels in the area. There was a middle-aged woman collecting money at a bamboo counter, but she let us pass when we told her that we were guests of Seizansou.

Chitanda and I went our separate ways. There would have been a serious problem if we hadn't.

The changing room was unexpectedly small. I didn't see any other people there, but it seems that there was already someone inside, for there was a set of clothes in a basket at my feet. On closer inspection, I recognized the cargo pants in the basket. The person inside was most likely Satoshi.

I entered the bath house after taking off my clothes. The bathing area was made entirely of artificial rock so that it would look like a natural hot spring, and it was larger than I expected it to be. The water was white and cloudy, giving off the appearance of an actual hot spring, rather than normal hot water. The area was surrounded by a tall bamboo fence, so I couldn't get a good view of Zaizen Village. Well, I guess it would be troubling if people could peek inside with a lower fence. I scooped some water using a bucket, poured it on myself, and quickly stepped into the bath.

The water temperature was just right. I made my way to the interior of the spacious pool and found that there was a large rock in the middle. I touched it, and it felt real.

I could see someone on the other side of the steam. It's probably Satoshi. I raised a hand, and the figure languidly waved back. The person used breaststroke to swim, pushing his way through the water to get to me. During that time, I was leaning on the rock, and my whole body from the chin down was immersed in the water.

"Houtarou! You've come! This bath is great! It's practically flowing through my body!"

"Getting your blood diluted with water is dangerous."

"It's something to do with osmotic pressure, right? How boring. Well, I guess it shows that you're relaxing."

With that, I kept quiet, while Satoshi also silently enjoyed the hot bath. I could hear the sound of someone getting into the water. That would probably be Chitanda.

It was evening. The soft rays of the sun slowly faded, as dusk noticeably fell over us. The stars started shining, and the warmth of the water gradually permeated my body, in proportion to the passage of time. I felt sleepy, probably because of that uncomfortable bus ride.

Before I knew it, Satoshi had left the bath to wash his body, while I was still drifting in the hot water.

My vision's going dark...

Mm.

I can't move?

## 4

I really have to thank Satoshi for bringing me back to the room safely. If I had been alone, it would have been a case for the hospital, or even a matter of life and death. At the sight of me returning to Seizansou while being supported by Satoshi's shoulder, Ibara shouted sharply.

"What happened, Oreki!"

I was in no state to reply. Satoshi answered in my place.

"He got dizzy from the hot water."

"....."

"It's kind of pathetic, really. He hadn't even been there half as long as me, but when I turned around, he'd almost passed out."

Ibara massaged her eyebrows.

"Oreki, you really..."

Thanks for worrying about me. I was carried into the room, while Ibara quickly laid out a futon and opened the window. I lay spread-eagled on the futon and breathed deeply.

"...Sorry about this, both of you."

"Don't mention it."

"You're just so pitiful...it's like you're fated to never enjoy an event."

With that, the two of them left the room. As Ibara unnecessarily stated, I was seriously pathetic. I might not be what you would call a tenacious

person, but I at least had some confidence in my physical capabilities. I was probably still sick from that bus ride.

As I lay sprawled on the futon with my eyes closed, someone came into the room. From the scent of the shampoo, I could immediately tell that it was Chitanda. She knelt down by the side of my futon and quietly spoke.

"Oreki-san...are you alright?"

"Not really."

"Should I bring a towel?"

A cold towel would certainly help me feel better, but I didn't feel like asking for Chitanda's assistance.

"No, it's okay. Sorry for throwing cold water on your carefully planned trip."

"It's fine. Anyway, we're going to tell ghost stories in a while. Would you like to join us?"

I smiled weakly. Isn't that a really old-fashioned way of spending summer nights? I was somewhat interested, but it was impossible for me to participate in this state.

I opened my eyes to find Chitanda's face to be much closer than expected. This young lady's sense of personal space is lower than the average person's. This is not the first or second time I've been startled by her. All I could see was her cherry-colored cheeks and her sparkling, wet hair. I instinctively looked away.

"Ah, I'll just go to sleep."

"I guess it can't be helped. Hope you get better soon."

The door closed, leaving only the smell of shampoo.

I checked my watch, and found that it wasn't even eight.

I could hear some strange sounds coming in from the window. I thought for a while, and concluded that they were probably the croaking of frogs. There was also a taiko<sup>[6]</sup> beating out a rhythm somewhere. Moreover, because we were on high ground, I could hear the chirping of insects, even though it wasn't August yet.

And then...

After a short while, Rie's suppressed voice reached my ears. It seems that the window next door is also open. I wasn't paying much attention, but I could catch her words distinctly...

"You know that the inn is separated into the main building and the annex, right? Actually, we don't need the annex. There is a secret as to why it was built.

"A long time ago, when my grandma was managing the inn, a gloomy customer came to stay. He was put in room seven in the main building. However, he told them, 'I don't need meals or room service. Just stay away.' But he'd already paid in advance, and it was the busy season, so his conditions were accepted.

"Then, that night, a piercing scream echoed throughout the inn. Grandma was shocked and ran outside. The guests who were taking a stroll pointed at room seven and said that there was an indistinct shadow of a hanged man swaying in the breeze... It turned out that the customer had embezzled money from his company and run away.

"Ever since that incident, guests staying in room seven have been saying the same things. They say that there's something in the room and that they see shadows at night. And the ninth guest to stay in that room suddenly succumbed to an unknown illness in the middle of the night!

"That's why Grandma asked for an exorcism. However, she felt that alone wasn't enough, so she had the annex built to stop bad rumors from spreading. You can see room seven right across from this window. It's the room furthest in on the second floor. We live on the first floor, and we're told to stay away from the second floor..."

"This story is strictly confidential! Don't talk about this in front of other customers, okay?"

I sniggered into my futon. That was seriously old-fashioned.

I wanted to sleep peacefully, so I somehow managed to move my uncontrollable limbs and crept out of my futon to close the window. I could tolerate the heat.

I thought I saw a shadowy figure in the courtyard while I was grappling with the window. However, I didn't manage to confirm the existence of that figure, for I immediately slipped into the futon and slept soundly until morning.

## 5

I slowly opened my eyes. It was already eight, according to my watch. Wow, I've slept for about twelve hours. My head still hurts a little, but I don't think it's because I'm still dizzy from the bath, but because I've simply slept too much.

I suddenly noticed that Satoshi was sleeping right next to me. I was careful not to wake him up as I took care of my personal appearance. I went down to the first floor while steadily tapping the side of my head, which was still feeling a little fuzzy.

Rie and Kayo were already in the living room, but breakfast was not on the table yet. I was about to ask about Chitanda and Ibara's whereabouts when both of them entered the room.

Ibara was acting strangely. She was clinging onto the sleeve of Chitanda's dress. She then looked at us and said,

"It, it appeared..."

I observed that scene coolly. Just what appeared?

Ibara drew closer to Rie with a jerk and said in one breath,

"A warm breeze in the middle of the night woke me up. When I turned over, in the room across from ours, I saw the shadow of a hanged man vaguely swaying back and forth, like this!"

Haha, this is thoroughly old-fashioned... It's pretty rare to see Ibara panicking like this, though. Too bad you're not here to see this, Satoshi.

Kayo brought us some hot tea. I was about to take a cup when I noticed that it had Rie's name on it, so I chose another one. I thought that Kayo would have also written her name on her cup, but I didn't find such a cup.

Rie smiled and said,

"I didn't know you were scared of stories like that, Maya-neechan!"

"It's not that I'm scared of ghosts, and I don't have a reason to detest them. But when you see something like that, it's just so disturbing!"

Kayo, who was holding a teapot, stiffened.

"Maya-neechan, you saw it?"

"I saw it. I definitely saw it. I really saw it!"

"Onee-chan! You told them the story? Dad said not to tell anyone!"

"Oh, shut up. It's fine, isn't it? It's only Maya-neechan."

As Ibara and the Zenna sisters were talking excitedly about the ghost story, I turned to look at Chitanda, who was kneeling a little further away, and our eyes met.

Chitanda wore a troubled expression and looked like she was brooding over something. Based on past experience, she probably wanted to say something. I spoke softly,

"What's the matter?"

She responded.

"Er... What do you think of Mayaka-san's story?"

"The hanged shadow, huh?"

I smiled.

"Well, these kind of standard, or you might say clichéd, stories live on because they're an indispensable part of life. Just like that time..."

"That time?"

"Ah, never mind."

I swallowed my words at the last moment. I almost said "Just like that time when Satoshi told his story about the Seven Mysteries<sup>[7]</sup>." That was also definitely classic, clichéd and old-fashioned. And of course, it also made use of the power of suggestion. However, I do not wish to dig up that story. Especially not in front of Chitanda.

Since I had unexpectedly stopped committing myself to my own words, Chitanda peered at my face curiously. This is bad, I thought, but thankfully, Chitanda's interest was totally preoccupied with the hanged shadow.

"... So, do you think what Mayaka-san said is true?"

"Nope."

As I said that, Chitanda looked increasingly troubled and tilted her head in doubt.

"Then perhaps I'm mistaken as well."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

For some reason she lowered her voice and whispered into my ear.

"I saw it too. The hanged shadow that Mayaka-san mentioned."

It was at an unknown time. When Ibara woke up, Chitanda did too. She opened her eyes heavily, and she saw the shadow of a hanged man swaying in the dark.

"However, when I woke up, I was still feeling a little dazed. That's why I thought I was mistaken, but if Mayaka-san said she saw the same thing..."

"Oh."

If it was only Ibara or Chitanda who saw it, then I could conclude that it was just a daydream. However, since both of them saw the same thing at the same time, I would not be able to deny the existence of the hanged shadow. I changed my mistaken theory and said,

"You probably just mistook something else for it. Like Satoshi was saying yesterday, 'The ghost, when examined...'"

"...was just withered flowers?"

But Chitanda was not satisfied with that answer. Her gaze wandered to the ceiling, and then she looked me straight in the eye. Her eyes were filled with energy, showing that she had strong curiosity towards this mystery.

"If so, what exactly did I see?"

Before I knew it, Ibara was right behind us.

"That's right. If you say that we mistook something else for it, then tell us what it was we saw. Isn't it cowardly to deny what Chii-chan and I saw just because you didn't see it?"

...Why did you have to call me a coward?

Chitanda and Ibara were staring at me fixedly. Based on past experience, now that it has turned out like this, it's all too late to do anything.

"Of course, I will not ask Oreki-san to handle everything. Let's investigate together!"

Chitanda forcefully declared without dropping her stare.

I did not reply, because I don't like attempting the impossible, but I would at least have the privilege of acknowledging my situation with a sigh, right?

As if dealing the final blow, Chitanda exclaimed,

"I'm curious!"

After a simple breakfast of bacon and eggs, instant soup and vegetable consomme, we returned to the second floor. We passed Satoshi, who was going down the stairs. He didn't know of the incident last night, but that's no problem. He has a kaleidoscope of irrelevant knowledge, but I don't think it would be useful for this case.

Ibara had promised to help Rie with her summer homework.

"Sorry for not being able to help. Good luck, I guess."

"Leave it to us! We'll discover the truth behind the mystery! Right, Oreki-san?"

Well, I can't really say for sure.

In any case, if I have to do it, make it quick. I let Chitanda into my room, where I would be asking her for more details. There were two chairs and a small table near the window, so we took a seat there. Now, then...

"Did you see the hanged shadow in the room right across yours?"

I asked while opening the window and looking at the main building.

"Yes, that's right."

"How big was it."

"My mind was quite hazy then, so I'm not really sure, but I think it should be approximately human-sized. As for the shape... I'm sorry, but I cannot remember. It was only after hearing Mayaka-san talk about the hanged shadow that i thought of it as the shadow of a person."

Chitanda's voice grew softed as she tried to recall last night's events. It seems that she's really not sure. To support her curiosity, Chitanda has exceptional powers of observation and memory, and for that to be unclear means that she must have been really tired last night. However, since I didn't see a shadow or whatever it was, I could only rely on Chitanda's memory, not matter how vague it is. I continued.

"What color was it?"

"I don't know. It's not because I cannot remember, but because it was just a shadow."

I tried to imagine what Chitanda saw, but I couldn't do it. The word "shadow" was just too vague.

"A shadow, huh. In other words, there was a light source, and you saw a human shadow against the light, right?"

"If what we saw was not a supernatural phenomenon, I think that would be correct."

"A light source..."

I turned to look at the main building again.

"A light source at night would have been the moon..."

My own voice was filled with doubt.

"I think so too. The moon was quite large last night. But something seems... Ah."

Chitanda, who was looking at the main building, raised her voice. That's right. Whether it was the moon or a searchlight, a shadow could not have been formed. All the wooden shutters of all the rooms in the main building were closed.

"Chitanda, what time did you sleep?"

"Er, around ten. We were all tired, and I had promised to take a bath with Mayaka-san this morning, so we slept early."

"What was the state of the shutters at that time?"

Chitanda thought for a while and answered.

"I think they were closed. I cannot say for sure, but the main building was pitch dark."

"Hm."

If the shutters were closed, there couldn't have been a shadow. This is becoming a hassle. I scratched my head. It's troublesome, but we would probably have to go to the main building and take a look at room seven, where the shadow was seen.

Chitanda said with a grin,

"How nice! It's just like a mystery! With this kind of pleasures, I'm glad we took this trip!"

You're the only one enjoying this, though.

We could easily enter the main building by using the connecting walkway. However, there was a rope tied at the end of the passage, and there was a card with the words "People unrelated to the construction work are prohibited from entering" hanging down from the rope. Chitanda was really hesitant to duck under the rope. Well, I guess it would be bad if we somehow got into some trouble. We should probably seek permission from someone in the inn.

However, if we told the owners that we were investigating the hanged shadow, it would be bad for Rie, who had told us not to tell anyone else. If we want to get permission, we should approach one of the Zenna sisters.

As luck would have it, at the exact moment, Kayo passed by us. When I called her to stop, Kayo's body stiffened in shock, but she relaxed when she saw Chitanda beside me.

"Yes, what is it?"

I turned to look at Chitanda.

"Eh?"

"Please handle this."

I'm bad with young, innocent kids.

"Okay. Kayo-san, we would like to enter the main building, is that alright?"

"The main building? Why?"

"I believe you heard it during breakfast, but we are investigating the hanged shadow that Mayaka-san and I saw. Could you please show us to room seven?"

I understand that honesty is a virtue and that you like approaching a problem head-on, but your phrasing probably needs some work, Chitanda. As expected, Kayo shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but I can't right now. Onee-chan... will get mad at me."

Well, it can't be helped. Come to think of it, it would have been difficult to ask to enter someone's house simply out of curiosity. I quickly gave up on physically examining room seven, and asked a question instead.

"Then at least tell us this. Is that room still used for guests?"

I had no ill intentions, but perhaps I said it too forcefully, Kayo retreated a little and frowned. However, she still answered my question.

"No. Guests only use the bathroom and the dining hall in the main building."

"Okay..."

"The second floor is used for storage... Can I go now?"

I nodded.

"Thanks. You were very helpful."

But Kayo turned tail and ran off somewhere before I could even complete my sentence. I folded my arms sadly.

"Looks like she doesn't like me."

But Chitanda just smiled upon seeing our exchange.

"Don't worry, I'm sure she's just afraid of big men. That's so cute! Ah, having a little sister would be great!"

She exclaimed ecstatically. Hm, cute, huh?

The sun was steadily rising, and it was getting hotter. I wiped my sweaty forehead with the back of my hand. Chitanda, however, with her superhuman resistance to heat, was unruffled.

"Is it a problem if we cannot enter room seven?"

"It's not so much a problem as it is a hassle."

I headed to the entranceway with Chitanda. Since we can't examine the scene from inside, I intended to investigate from outside. I was leaning over to take off my shoes at the entranceway meant for both guests and the Zenna family, when Chitanda said excitedly,

"Ah, that brings back memories!"

What Chitanda had found was two radio exercise attendance cards placed near the shoe rack. One belonged to Rie, who had written her name in large letters, while the other, which had no name, probably belonged to Kayo. Rie's attendance card was stamped sparsely for the start of the summer

holidays, but was empty for the later part. On the other hand, Kayo seemed to be exercising every morning without fail.

Chitanda picked up the two cards.

"Morning radio exercises... I haven't done these in two years!"

You continued doing this until the second year of middle school...  
Seriously?

I've never done this if you exclude the time when I was extremely young.  
When exactly did I set my heart on becoming an energy-saver?

We went out to the garden and were instantly surrounded by the humid air and the strong smell of greenery.

We looked up at where room seven was in the main building. The shutters were still closed. Chitanda invited me to look at the back of the building, and when I was heading there, I accidentally kicked up some water.

"Oops."

The muddy water that I had kicked up flew towards Chitanda's feet and stained her shoes.

"Sorry."

"It's alright."

The ground was still muddy because the annex was blocking the morning sunlight. I thought that some of the water was contributed by the plants in the area, but that did not seem to be the case. I noticed that the areas with exposure to sunlight were almost dry, meaning that quite some time had passed after the ground became wet. I asked,

"Chitanda, did it rain last night?"

"Yes. I don't know the exact time, but there was a passing shower."

We went around the main building. It was my intention to examine room seven from the other side, but the shutters there were also closed. However, both the east and west shutters had to be open for a shadow to be formed.

As I crossed my arms, I noticed Chitanda also crossing her arms, as if she was thinking about something. I was about to ask her for her thoughts when the window in front of us opened and Kayo spoke.

"Um... It's time for lunch."

I checked my watch. Indeed, it was about to be noon. Time to take a break.

Lunch was chilled ramen, which was delicious. It's not like we had to withstand high temperatures in this high ground, but I welcomed the refreshing taste. The six of us were sitting around the dinner table. Ibara asked a question while moving her chopsticks.

"So, did you find anything out?"

"No, not yet..."

I continued after Chitanda.

"We're still just starting to look into it. I do have a theory, though."

"Oh? Then let's hear your theory."

That would be quite difficult, for my thoughts on the matter were still vague and hard to grasp. I didn't respond, but Satoshi grumbled with obvious displeasure.

"What are the three of you talking about? We've been together for so long, and you're going to be so cruel as to leave me out of the loop?"

An exaggerated protest, as expected of Satoshi. I didn't really want to spend time explaining it to him, so I responded with a question instead.

"Out of the loop or not, where did you go? I haven't seen you all day."

"You're supposed to use a hot spring multiple times a day, whenever you feel like it."

Is that how it works? I don't think I'll dare to go to a hot spring after last night's incident.

I hadn't even finished half my plate when two people clasped their hands in succession.

"Thank you for the meal."

"Thank you for the meal."

It was the sisters, Rie and Kayo. Rie took her own table ware and headed for the main building. Kayo followed suit after a brief moment. Chitanda smiled happily on witnessing that scene. Apparently she found it to be charming.

"It must be wonderful to have a sister. I sure envy those two."

"Oh? Did you wish you had a sibling?"

"No, I wouldn't go so far as to say that I wish for one. Do you have any siblings, Fukube-san?"

Satoshi then started a discourse about his little sister. I've met her before, but she's an arrogant oddball who doesn't want to conform to society. The same can be said of my sister.

We finished lunch while talking about that topic. At that moment, Rie, who had gone to the main building, returned.

With a "Ta-da", Rie appeared in a yukata. It wasn't the kind of yukata worn after taking a wearisome, distasteful bath, but a yukata meant for parading

around at firework festivals. It was a light blue that can be said to have the color of water, and the pattern of waves and plovers embroidered on it looked pretty cool. Rie seemed to be extremely proud of it.

"What do you think of my yukata?"

"Wow!" Chitanda cheered.

"It's wonderful!"

"Yeah, it suits you. You look really grown-up in it."

Rie gave a huge smile on being praised.

"My parents bought it for me at the start of the summer break because my grades improved. Let's go to the fireworks festival tonight! I've been preparing so long for it!"

While the three of them were engrossed with the yukata, Satoshi took a sidelong glance at me and spoke in a voice that only I could hear.

"It does look good."

Knowing Satoshi's usual roundabout way of talking, I clearly understood what he was trying to say. I whispered back at him.

"Then what's bad?"

"The obi<sup>[8]</sup>. The obi is like the life of a kimono, but that one's an imitation."

I looked at it again. The butterfly knot was certainly floating strangely, but Satoshi's words seemed out of place.

"Why would it be radioactive?"

"I said 'imitation', not 'mutation'... The butterfly not is a separate part of the obi. It may be easy to fit on, but it's not in my philosophy to call that a yukata."

Who cares about your philosophy? It'll be noticed by the experienced eye, but otherwise no one would be able to tell the difference. How stupid, I thought as I yawned and stretched.

It was at the moment.

"...Hmm?"

I felt a presence. I turned back to look at the open sliding screen.

But I didn't see anyone. That's weird, I'm pretty sure I saw a human shadow flit by. Have I also been afflicted by the curse of the hanged shadow?

"What's the matter?"

I ignored Satoshi's question.

A human shadow, huh.

I left the room. It would be nice if I could find a room to calmly think. I noticed that Chitanda was following me. I wanted to tell her not to come, but an idea formed in my head. How about we go to yesterday's bath house? I turned around and suggested this to Chitanda, who smiled and nodded.

On the way to the bath house, I stayed quiet and gathered my thoughts. Observing my state, Chitanda also kept silent.

The hanged shadow. That's just a withered flower, a product of Ibara and Chitanda's mistaken observations. It'll be difficult, but they probably wouldn't mind me declaring it to be so. However, something is missing...

We reached the open-air bath. Before we parted, Chitanda spoke.

"Let's go back together."

I couldn't answer.

When I passed the counter and entered the changing room, I felt a sense of déjà vu. I understood the reason right away. It was because the placement of objects was exactly the same as last night. A set of clothes with a pair of cargo pants was placed in a basket by my feet. That would be Satoshi. But this was more mysterious than the hanged shadow. Wasn't Satoshi still in his seat when we left? Did he use a teleporter?

When I entered the bathing area, Satoshi was already immersed in the water, as expected. I stayed outside the bath and stared at Satoshi, who noticed even though he did not see me clearly. He then turned around and accounted for his presence.

"Well, if you slide down the slope behind Seizansou, you come out right behind here."

I was not at all surprised by that statement. It would indeed be Satoshi's style to slide down a slope just for a shortcut.

I immersed myself in the bath. I wiped my head with a tower, trying to clear the haze from my brain, which did not seem to be working. For the annoying problems the Classics Club has encountered, or in other words the questions that Chitanda brought in, the solutions had to be accepted by Chitanda. But no matter how much I rack my brain, I can't think of a way to explain the hanged shadow that would satisfy Chitanda.

The one thing missing was basically why. The true form of the shadow was not difficult to deduce, but if I can't explain why it was there, then an adequate explanation to Chitanda is impossible. I do have something in mind, though.

I traversed my memory speechlessly for a while. Seeing that I didn't stir an inch and perhaps thinking back to last night's incident, Satoshi broke the silence.

"Houtarou? Did you seriously get dizzy again?"

Satoshi, huh? He just might know something. I tried asking him.

"Hey, were there any events last night?"

Satoshi was taken aback at the sudden question, but his original smile immediately returned.

"Last night's highlight would definitely be you losing consciousness."

"I'm really indebted to you, but I won't repeat my thanks. Anything else?"

"Well, as you know, we were telling ghost stories last night. I had two flowers in each hand, with one flower to spare<sup>[9]</sup>."

Flowers, huh. When all's said and done, Chitanda would be the lotus flower and Ibara would be the thistle.

"No, I don't mean private events. Do you know any official ones?"

"Hmm, I'm not that sure about official, since I'm not a resident here... Well, there was the summer festival. Couldn't you hear the drums?"

Summer festival.

I see, so there was something like that... As I thought, there was a summer festival.

Satoshi would usually notice my satisfaction and would probably make fun of me. However, half his face was immersed in the water, and his eyes appeared drowsy and lacking in energy, so he didn't notice anything. I would answer if he asked me a question, but it seems that Satoshi didn't need to ask me anything. I got up from the bath.

I wore my clothes and went outside, but Chitanda hadn't left yet. The hot and cool sensations helped me put my thoughts together while I waited. Before long, Chitanda came out, and we went off.

On the way back to the inn, I started a conversation with Chitanda.

"That hanged shadow you saw... was probably just a yukata on a hanger."

"Eh?"

Chitanda was shocked by the sudden answer. I waited for her to digest my words, then continued.

"It isn't impossible to see the silhouette of a yukata as the shadow of a person, even if you aren't drowsy. If it was not a ghost, it would have to be some sort of clothes shaped like a dress that was dangling from the ceiling, right?"

Chitanda was speechless for a moment, then tilted her head, indicating that she couldn't accept that theory.

"But why would a yukata be there of all places? And it would be weird for someone to open the shutters specifically so we could see it hanging."

"It wasn't so you could see it."

I took a fleeting glance at the sky.

"It was to dry it. The yukata was wet. The windows were open to let the wind in so it would dry faster."

"Why?"

"The yukata was wet because it rained."

"No, I mean why was it hanging in room seven?"

"So no one could see it being dried."

"But we saw it!"

"No, it was to hide it from the rest of the family."

It seems that I've made no progress. I scratched my head.

In a beat, I started explaining my theory from the very beginning.

"The one who hung the yukata up to dry was Kayo.

"Kayo was envious of Rie's yukata and wanted to try it on. However, no matter how well the yukata fitted Kayo, it belonged to Rie, and I'm sure Rie wouldn't lend it to her. Didn't you notice? Rie wrote her name on her cup and radio exercise card, making sure everyone clearly knows what's hers. She's a possessive person. Furthermore, Kayo was afraid of Rie and couldn't possibly ask her to lend the yukata.

"But Kayo still wanted to wear it, so she secretly took it out. Fortunately for her, the obi was attached to the yukata, so she could put it on by herself. Also, since she's a daughter of the inn owners, I'm sure cleaning up after wearing the yukata would be her forte. Anyway, she wore it to the summer festival last night, at around eight. Well, she must have enjoyed herself."

"Kayo-san went to the summer festival? How do you know that?"

"I heard from Satoshi that there was a summer festival last night. As to why I know Kayo went there, it's because I noticed someone leaving the house last night, before eight. Kayo wasn't around for the ghost stories, right?"

This morning, Kayo was blaming Rie for telling the story of the hanged shadow. If they were together in the room when Rie was telling the story, Kayo wouldn't have said it only in the morning. Moreover, according to Satoshi, there were only three girls in the room. In his words, he had two flowers in each hand, with one to spare.

"I guessed so. When Kayo was having fun in the festival, she ran into some trouble."

Chitanda took a deep breath.

"It started raining.

"Based on the dryness of the ground, the rain probably abated after a short while, but the yukata was soaked. At that moment, Rie remembered that Kayo had planned to play with fireworks the next day. She knew that Rie was undoubtedly going to wear the yukata then. Kayo had to find a way to dry the yukata by then. She was probably scared stiff.

"However, if she dried it on the first floor of the main building, it might be seen by someone, and the annex was out of the question. She couldn't use the dryer that late at night, either. So, Kayo waited for everyone to fall asleep, then she snuck into the second floor of the main building to dry the yukata, in the most distant room.

"But bad luck befell her again. With the windows open, the moonlight made it look like a hanged shadow to you and Ibara. Since the moonlight came from the west, it was after midnight, probably around three or four o'clock.

"And even worse, we began to look into the hanged shadow. Just now, at lunch, the two sisters quickly left the room. Rie wanted to show off her yukata, but Kayo... She probably felt like she was on a bed of thorns."

I continued walking after explaining my theory. At that moment, I remembered Kayo stiffening at the sight of me. This must have been the reason. She must have been really frightened.

"Kayo returned the yukata in the morning. Quite early in the morning... For the exact time, you could check the radio broadcast schedule, since Kayo diligently participates in the morning exercise. She probably returned the yukata before that."

"....."

"We should probably keep this from Ibara. If it was somehow leaked to Rie, Kayo would be in big trouble. You never know what could happen."

Chitanda simply cast her eyes down speechlessly and continued walking.

While we were on that long, gentle slope, Chitanda eventually murmured without raising her head,

"But then... that would mean that those two don't get along."

That was a point I hadn't considered. Ignoring my bewilderment, Chitanda continued.

"For those two who can't even lend a yukata to each other, their relationship can't be described as close at all."

She said while giving me a faint smile. Her lips were curved, but her expression was one of sorrow. This is not the first time I've seen her like this.

I barely managed to open my mouth.

"Isn't that pretty normal, for siblings? Like my sister..."

"I..."

It seems that Chitanda didn't hear my words. It was almost as if she was talking to herself.

"I've always wanted a sibling. A respectable older sister, or a cute younger brother..."

We walked on clad in our yukatas. Summer hadn't ended yet. There were gigantic columns of clouds before our eyes, and it was somewhat disheartening to see them suddenly disappear.

As we caught sight of Seizansou, Chitanda finally continued her sentence.

"But I'm sure that I understood that the hanged shadow was no ghost. I probably also knew whether all siblings in the world were truly happy..."

I did not wish to hear more of this. Thankfully, Chitanda did not continue.

We slowly ascended the gentle slope which was surrounded by dense greenery. I knew it from the very beginning. The siblings that Chitanda mentioned were just like apparitions. When you observe closely, they turn out to be just withered flowers.

As the damp heat permeated my body, which had been in a hot bath a short while ago, I started sweating profusely. There was a figure on the hill who turned to face us. As we drew closer, the figure turned out to be Rie, who was waving vigorously.

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Combination of Nessie and Hamana
2. ↑ A kind of saltwater fish - [2]
3. ↑ This refers to Japan's Warring States period, when many different warlords fought each other for territory and power
4. ↑ Nobunaga was a powerful warlord who started the unification of Japan during the Warring States period in the 16th century
5. ↑ Refers to Azai Nagamasa, a daimyo who was married to Nobunaga's sister, Oichi
6. ↑ A Japanese drum
7. ↑ Refer to [Story 1: If I Have to Do It, Make It Quick](#)
8. ↑ Obi is a sash tied at the back of a kimono.
9. ↑ 兩手に花 means to be flanked by two beautiful women, but I decided to be literal here because Oreki mentions flowers in his next sentence. You can probably deduce that Satoshi meant there were three pretty girls with him.

# **Story 4 - Those Who Know Something**

# 1

Suppose that one day, I took a microphone and said, "Today will be sunny." Someone who heard me might think, "I guess Oreki Houtarou-kun is testing his microphone." But another person might think, "Oreki Houtarou-kun is broadly asserting that today will be sunny." Whichever deduction is valid, whichever deduction matches the truth, can only be said to be a matter of luck. To increase the chances of that, one would have to gather as much detailed data as possible, but usually it would be absolutely impossible to expect such information to fall into one's hands. Furthermore, even if one managed to collect data that goes into the minutest details, all that would achieve is a higher possibility for truth and theory to coincide, and nothing more.

It was the first day of November. Only Chitanda and I were present in the clubroom. It was that time after class in autumn when idleness flows around, when one does not give a thought about the dangerous, disturbing occurrences in the world like arson, robbery, counterfeit notes and assassinations. With my energy-conserving principle, for me to talk on and on indignantly just to make a point is uncharacteristic of me and can be attributed to Chitanda trying to praise me for my role in the Hyouka incident.

From her words, it was as if I had within me some sort of special ability to deduce the truth all the time. I don't mind being looked down upon and laughed at, but I can't ignore being praised highly. I added,

"To conclude, I don't mind if you call me lucky, but please stop making me out to be an amazing person."

Knowing my extremely gently and reticent personality, Chitanda was taken aback by my rare outburst and her eyes widened. But before long, she nodded and smiled gently, as if she understood my feelings.

"You're so modest, Oreki-san!"

Nope, she didn't understand at all.

It's been almost half a year since we entered Kamiyama High School. Since then, Chitanda's curiosity has found the abnormal in the everyday scenery with just one glance. It is certainly true that I've been involved in helping Chitanda understand the reasons behind those abnormalities. It would be a lie to say that I did nothing for the Hyouka incident and the Empress incident. Also, unbeknownst to Chitanda, I did a little work behind the scenes of the Juumoji incident.

But it would be best to set things straight right now.

"Chitanda, the ancients said some wise words."

"What did they say?"

"Theory and ointment will stick to anything.' Admittedly, ointment doesn't exactly stick on every surface, but that has nothing to do with the matter at hand."

I said seriously, but for some reason Chitanda elegantly hid her mouth with her hand and giggled. She turned to me as I felt a little morose.

"Oreki-san occasionally says phrases that are never used."

... Is that so? I hadn't noticed.

"But that's not the issue here," I wanted to reply, but Chitanda continued with a smile still on her face.

"I'm not sure why you would want to use that phrase, but... Ah, I get it. Let's assume that the reason you managed to find the truth so many times was not talent, but luck.

"But wouldn't you call the ability to reason out theories, or the ability to apply a plaster<sup>[1]</sup> to bridge the gap between clues a talent in itself? Even if a

sowed seed bears fruit due to luck, it would not be worth considering if the seed was not sowed in the first place."

I folded my arms and groaned. There was indeed reason behind her argument.

But I would not admit defeat that easily.

"So you're saying that I'm an expert in affixing plasters?"

"Is that wrong?"

I responded to Chitanda's gentle smile with the most composed one I could manage.

"Yes, sometimes I have no inkling of the logic behind my theories, myself."

My statement was immediately countered.

"That's because you don't use ordinary reasoning."

That's kind of true, but... I felt a little disheartened at being identified time and again with that trait.

But I firmly stood my ground.

"Then how about this, Chitanda. Come up with some sort of situation. I'll prove that you can't make a theory for anything so easily."

I haven't called for a contest against anyone before, but I can't back out now, when my life's at stake.

Chitanda's large eyes widened even more. Based on my observations of Chitanda thus far, it was mainly because of her immense curiosity about the game I proposed, rather than her amusement towards the situation.

"That sounds fun! Then... what should we go with?"

It was when those eyes were wandering around, searching for a question.

The speaker that was fixed on the top of the blackboard and used for schoolwide announcements crackled into life. Our eyes turned to look at it at the same time.

Without any preface, the announcement started.

"Anyone who, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, report to Shibasaki in the Staff Room immediately."

It was spoken somewhat rapidly. The announcement was then cut off without hesitation.

We dropped our gaze from the speaker at the same time.

"I wonder what that was about."

"No idea."

I said, while noticing that Chitanda's mouth was beginning to open and her head was slightly tilted. I thought that she seemed happy about something and predicted what she would say next. As expected, she spoke in a lively tone.

"Let's use that announcement! Please come up with a theory about what that announcement just now was about!"

Hm.

I arrogantly nodded.

"Fine, I accept your challenge."

I'll show you just what an untrustworthy guy I am!

## 2

"Let's write it down so that we don't forget."

As soon as I finished my sentence, Chitanda retrieved a notebook from her bag. She then took out a ballpoint pen designed to look like a fountain pen and flipped the notebook to a blank page.

"Anyone who, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, report to Shibasaki in the Staff Room immediately."

Chitanda's memory was scary. That was probably the announcement word for word. After writing it out in her elegant handwriting that could be used as a model for penmanship, Chitanda put the pen down, while I looked at the note and folded my arms.

"First, I need to know what everything means. Do you know what 'Koubundou' is?"

Chitanda nodded.

"The announcement mentioned that it's in front of the station, but to be more accurate it's a short distance away from the station. It's a small stationery shop that is run by an elderly couple and has been there for a long time."

"Have you gone there before?"

"Yes, but only once."

I was thinking about my own question, and realized that I haven't gone to a stationery shop recently, since it's easier to get stationery from a bookshop

or convenience store nowadays. However, there would still be shops that specialize in selling stationery, I suppose.

"Does it sell any special stationery, like expensive paintbrushes, or that strange sheet that Ibara uses for drawing manga?"

"That would be a screen tone... But no, it's a really small store, so it would not have such unusual goods. North Elementary is nearby, so it sells everything an elementary school student would need."

I see.

I looked at the words on the notebook again.

"Is Shibasaki a teacher here?"

Chitanda giggled.

"Oreki-san, have you always been bad with names? Shibasaki-sensei is a head teacher here."

Ah, now I remember hearing that name at the opening ceremony. There was a head teacher with almost no hair and another with an abundance of white hair, but I don't know which one is Shibasaki. Well, I guess it doesn't really matter.

Right, now there should be no more unknown words. "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." I subscribe to this idle life philosophy, but this is an important contest. I'll need to put some energy into this.

I examined the notebook for another ten seconds, then slowly opened my mouth.

"First..."

"First?"

"We known that Shibasaki is trying to call a student."

A forced smile formed on Chitanda's face, as if she was trying to laugh at a boring joke.

"Yes. I can see that too."

Her words seemed to indicate that she was trying to be patient, so I justified my thoroughness."

"This is a contest. I have to be careful about this."

I then continued.

"Let's call this person 'Student X'."

"... This feels like a real investigation!"

"At this point, we don't know if Student X refers to singular or multiple students."

If multiple students were being called, the person giving the announcement would have said "Everyone who shopped at Koubundou" or "Those who shopped at Koubundou", but that's quite a weak argument.

But my next deduction could not be doubted.

"Shibasaki probably intends to give Student X educational guidance. In other words, he's going to scold them for some reason."

On hearing that, Chitanda titled her head and stared fixedly at the words on the notebook. After a while, she looked up and tilted her head once more in doubt.

"Why do you say that?"

I answered confidently.

"Because a student will only get called to the staff room for something bad, based on my experience."

"Oreki-san...are you really taking this seriously?"

"I haven't been this serious since I entered this school. You might even say that this is the first time I've been so serious."

Chitanda sank into silence, so I added,

"Furthermore, if he wanted to commend them, he wouldn't use a phrase like 'Anyone who shopped at Koubundou and who knows something', which can refer to a good or bad thing. He would be more direct about it. No student would feel good being called out like that, myself included. The way he worded it, anyone who did know something might be too scared to go."

"That sounds right."

She agreed, huh. I was half-joking when I said that, though.

Time to move on.

I chased the thoughts around my head and arranged them in order.

"By saying 'Koubundou in front of the station', it indicates that Koubundou isn't a very well known store."

"Well, you didn't know it too."

"Yes, but X should know Koubundou. There's no need to intentionally say the phrase 'in front of the station'."

However, Chitanda promptly responded.

"That is because there are three stores with the name Koubundou in Kamiyama City. Besides the stationery shop in front of the station, there is also a shop selling Buddhist altar equipment near Kamiyama Commercial High School, as well as a bookstore by the highway.<sup>[2]</sup>"

Is that so.

What else, I thought as I folded my arms, lowered my chin, and stared at the words again. A groaning sound filled the back of my throat.

What would a normal school announcement be like? Obviously, it would clearly state the name of the student being called out, but what else is missing? As I thought along those lines, I was struck by a flash of inspiration.

"Whatever this student is being called for, it's urgent. Shibasaki's in a hurry."

Using a ballpoint pen, Chitanda pointed at the word "immediately" on the transcript.

"He did say 'immediately'."

"No, they always say that when they call someone. That's not what I meant."

I continued as Chitanda stared in puzzlement.

"There's a standard format for school announcements, but this one was done differently, so we know they're in a rush."

"Huh..."

"Let's say you wanted to call me to Classroom 1-A. How would you say it?"

Chitanda thought for a short while, then brought her hand near her mouth and cleared her throat.

"I see. It would be something like this. 'Oreki Houtarou-san from Class 1-B, please see Chitanda Eru in Classroom 1-A immediately.'

"That's all? Weren't there other announcement today other than the one earlier? Try remembering how they went."

Chitanda closed her mouth tightly and thought for a moment. Judging from the continual tilting of her head, I expected that she would take a while to

comprehend, so I divulged the answer, thinking that I should hurry.

"I'd say it like this: 'Chitanda Eru from Class 1-A, please see Oreki Houtarou in Classroom 1-B immediately."

"What's the difference?"

"I repeat. Chitanda Eru from Class 1-A, please see Oreki Houtarou in Classroom 1-B immediately."

A gasp escaped from Chitanda's mouth.

"It's not only for school announcements. Most announcements like this are usually repeated, because there's a high chance that they will be missed if they are only said once. However, this announcement was only read once. Since this differs from the usual format, we can say that they're in a rush."

Chitanda nodded grandly, indicating that she fully accepted that reasoning.

Having made the point that the announcer was in a hurry, I kept having the strange feeling of chess pieces falling one after another. Instead of finding out what that strange feeling meant, I went with the flow and continued with my deduction.

"And not just any rush. We can tell that this is an emergency."

"What do you mean?"

I suddenly realized that Chitanda and I were both leaning forward too much. Sensing the proximity of those huge eyes, I retreated and settled down.

"Because this announcement was made after school."

Chitanda, who was leaning forward, pouted in dissatisfaction.

"Please don't skip the steps in your reasoning."

"Skip! What a lovely ring to it!"

"Oreki-san!"

Hmm, that went badly. Chitanda was now looking at me with upturned eyes.

Well, it wasn't exactly my intention to skip the reasoning. I just felt that I would forget the points that i thought of if I didn't first state the conclusion. In any case, I should probably proceed with the explanation of my reasoning rather than account for my speech pattern. Imitating Chitanda, I cleared my throat.

"Doesn't that make sense? Regardless of the circumstances, it's inefficient to make an announcement after school. Kamiyama High does have a lot of clubs, but not all students stay in school and exert their energy on club activities. There is a considerable number of students who go home immediately after school. A normal announcement should be made at a time when all students can be assumed to be present, like during lunch break, or the time before and after home room. But they still made the announcement, after school, because..."

I stopped talking and thought for a while.

"Firstly, the reason behind calling out the student occurred after school. Furthermore, it's so important that they can't wait for tomorrow to do it. To exaggerate, Shibasaki made the announcement, betting on the possibility that X hadn't gone home yet."

As I spoke, I realized that my expression had stiffened. Chitanda had been smiling due to her enjoyment of the game, but her smile had disappeared, while her eyes were now filled with seriousness.

Chitanda spoke in a soft voice.

"Oreki-san... This smells like quina, doesn't it?"

Quina?

"...Chitanda, the common phrase is 'smells fishy'."<sup>[3]</sup>

"Eh? I can't say that it smells like quina? It's the plant that quinine is made of."

"The language council will get angry if you go around mixing up phrases like that."

I laughed it off with a Satoshi-style joke, but I was actually thinking the same thing as Chitanda. This game seemed to be heading in an ominous direction.

As I thought about this, another strange point appeared.

"Next deduction. Shibasaki doesn't want to make public whatever he wants to talk to X about. We can't tell if it's only for now, or if it'll never be publicly known."

"Because he didn't say why X was called out?"

That's certainly a way to look at it.

But here was a chance for me to show off.

"That's true, but there's another way to explain it more clearly."

Chitanda stared sharply at the note, as if that would dispel all her doubts. Since Chitanda's facial features were more gently, unlike Ibara's her look wasn't so intense, but it was still with a force that seemed like it could cut through paper. However, I poured cold water on her excitement.

"You won't find anything just by staring at the words. Or rather, there's something, although it doesn't seem like it."

"No, I don't get it."

I nodded at Chitanda, who had raised her head.

"Shibasaki is the head teacher. There would be one in every high school across the country, but educational guidance would be the job of the Student Counseling Department, even for Kamiyama High."

"That's true. Morishita-sensei usually makes this kind of announcements."

"The Student Counseling Department would have their own Counseling Room, right?"

"Yes, it's on the second floor of the main building."

Chitanda followed up spontaneously, probably trying to speed up the discussion. Being taken in by that reaction, I started speaking a little quicker.

"But X was called by the head teacher Shibasaki to the staff room. Isn't that an act that exceeds his authority? The head teacher, who should be in charge of the management of the school, bypassed the Student Counseling Department and called the student to go directly to him. This means that the problem is major enough that they need to keep it classified at an administrative level."

At least, it could be. The whole Student Counseling Department could have collectively collapsed to food poisoning or something, but we can ignore these special cases. After all, if we start considering that those involved in the incident were hit by unthinkable coincidences or that they had eccentric behavior, we might as well just declare that aliens are somehow connected. It would be best to assume that everyone in this case were normal human beings.

I temporarily closed my mouth.

In the silence that followed, Chitanda nodded a few times, probably ruminating on the discussion so far. After a while, she looked into my eyes.

With a stifled voice, Chitanda muttered.

"If we assume your theory is correct, that would mean that X-san is involved in something very bad..."

"You might as well say it clearly."

"Then..."

I nodded.

"The conclusion drawn from the other deductions thus far: X is involved in a crime."

# 3

X is involved in a crime.

I laughed at the improbability of my own words, and regained my composure.

That's right, what I'm doing with Chitanda right now is just a game. My theory doesn't have to be true, and anyway, didn't I agree to do this to prove that my deductions do not always match reality? I guess I'll just take it easy.

Perhaps noticing that my emotions had settled, Chitanda also seemed to be more relaxed. With a calm voice, she asked,

"So what might this crime be?"

I held out my hand to stop Chitanda.

"Wait. Before we get to that, I have an additional deduction. Assuming that all theories thus far have been sound, there are no police at this school, so there's a high chance that a related official is here."

"An organization related to the police?"

"There are many of them, like the District Public Prosecutor Office's Special Investigation Department, and the National Tax Agency. The high chance of someone from one of these organizations being here is because of something we touched on earlier... Do you know what it is?"

Chitanda's gaze fell to the ground as she wondered about it for a while, but she eventually gave up and shook her head. Seeing that, I nodded lightly.

"I believe it was near the end of our discussion about calling out someone after school. No matter how you look at it, it's illogical to make an

announcement after school, when many students have gone home. But they still made the announcement, so as mentioned earlier, it was because the reason for the announcement happened after school."

I unfolded my arms and pointed at a phrase in the notebook.

"However, if a crime did occur, it happened on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. Yet the announcement was made today, just now, and in a hurry. We can take this to mean that the investigators only just made the request."

"But they could also have made the request over the phone."

"That might be true, but it should be safe to assume that the investigators want to apprehend X. To do that, they would need to come here in person."

"Apprehend..."

Chitanda muttered with an anxious look on her face. Did she just regain her emotions after cooling down a few moments ago? It certainly wouldn't be impossible for Chitanda...

Chitanda asked with that worried expression,

"Oreki-san, do you mean to say that you think X-san is responsible for the crime?"

I couldn't understand the purpose of that question.

"What do you mean by 'responsible'?"

"I mean, do you think that X-san is not a victim or an eyewitness, but someone who is involved with the culprit?"

I see.

I answered immediately.

"That's right."

"....."

"If that's not the case, Shibasaki wouldn't have needed to be so flustered. He could have made the announcement the next day, when everyone was present, right?"

Chitanda nodded reluctantly.

Right, time for the crux of the mystery. Just like how both of us had looked up at the speakers at the same time, we looked down at the notebook in unison.

"So, what is that crime?

"Exactly what crime did X, who 'on October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and knows something', commit? What do you think, Chitanda? Does anything come to mind?"

Chitanda placed her index finger on her lip and immediately answered.

"Sadly, I would have to say that shoplifting comes to mind first."

Who or what is she even feeling sad for?

"Or... another possibility would be that the crime was committed at a completely different place, and the investigators learned of someone fitting the culprit's description shopping at Koubundou. Based on that testimony, they came here to search. In that case, the crime could be... just about anything."

Hmm, quite an interesting theory given the little time she had.

However, I shook my head.

"Besides shoplifting, none of the others are possible."

"Why not?"

"If we take your theory to be true, the investigators would know the particular characteristics of X. With that information, it would be strange for Shibasaki to call for someone who 'shopped at Koubundou and knows something'. Since the incident occurred at Koubundou, we can assume that X appeared to be shopping..."

As I said that, I felt that something was out of place.

As I tried to pinpoint the source of that feeling, I abruptly shut my mouth. Noticing my countenance, Chitanda also waited silently.

Was that announcement a message to the culprit to turn themselves in? No, that doesn't feel quite right.

"Theory: The investigators don't know anything about X."

"That's what you have been saying, right?"

"But they believe that X will reveal themselves after the announcement."

That's it, that's the part which is out of place.

If I were the culprit and I heard that announcement, I would be thinking along these lines: "The investigators still don't know I did it! I might be able to get away with it at this rate!" I would not appear in front of Shibasaki saying I did it.

What kind of circumstances would make the culprit turn themselves in after hearing that announcement?

I scratched my head lightly. I rested my chin on my hands and looked down at the notebook.

If someone felt remorse for their crime, they might turn themselves in. But in that case, X would have been caught already. There would be no need for today's announcement. What does that mean?

"Hmm....."

A sound escaped from my lips.

"Did you think of something?"

I did not answer, but instead looked at my watch. It was an exceptional product with both analog and digital display, as well as a calendar function, but these kinds of watches aren't rare nowadays.

"I see."

"What?"

"Let's put aside the question of what crime X committed for now. But let's assume that X regretted whatever they did, and apologized for it. In a letter."

Chitanda widened her eyes at the sudden logical leap. With a raised voice, she asked,

"W-Why do you say that? Did you really get that from the announcement just now?"

I countered with a question of my own.

"Chitanda, what's the date today?"

Chitanda was taken by surprise, but she didn't hesitate for long.

"It's the 1<sup>st</sup> of November."

I was aware that it was the first day of November, having just confirmed it with my watch.

I then pointed at the words on the notebook.

"Isn't yesterday 'October 31<sup>st</sup>', then?"

Chitanda tilted her head.

"Yes, that is true, but..."

"Didn't you notice? I didn't realize it until just now, but don't you find it strange? Why didn't Shibasaki say 'yesterday, at Koubundou in front of the station' instead?"

Chitanda gasped in surprise.

"Now that you mention it, it does seem unnatural."

"Why would he say 'October 31<sup>st</sup>', rather than 'yesterday'? That's because he had some script in front of him which contained the words 'October 31<sup>st</sup>', and he just read right off it.

"Now, what about the script? Why did the investigators know that X is involved, yet know nothing about them? Why did they believe that X would show up if they made the announcement? To phrase it differently, why did they think that X regrets what they did?"

I took a deep breath and paused for a while.

"Because X wrote a letter to Koubundou apologizing for what they did. It would be something like this: 'I'm really sorry, but on October 31<sup>st</sup>, I shopped at your store and committed a crime.' It would be unacceptable for a high school student to simply apologize, so it probably continued like this: 'I'll repay the damages, so please accept this and that.'

"The owners of Koubundou took that letter to the police. The police, or some similar investigation unit, came to Kamiyama High with the letter. This happened not long ago. And then Shibasaki, in a hurry, made the announcement while reading the letter. As he looked at the text, he said, 'On October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something'..."

"Wait a moment!"

A sharp voice broke through.

"According to your theory, X-san wanted to apologize to Koubundou, but didn't want to have the police involved if possible, right?"

Giving the letter of apology was not only to show remorse, but also to settle things quietly. I nodded.

"If that's the case, they would not have admitted that they were a Kamiyama High School student in their letter. It's strange that the police would know that. On the other hand, if they do not, they would have to request for announcements from all high school in Kamiyama City, and Shibasaki-sensei would not have been so rushed in his announcement. If there is the possibility that X is in another school, he would feel more at ease."

I see. That was sharp of her. I thought for a while.

"The police probably asked the owners of Koubundou if they might have any idea who did it. The owners then answered that it was probably a Kamiyama High student."

"...But how did they know?"

"It'd be obvious if X were wearing their uniform. Also, since you can get stationery at convenience stores nowadays, I don't think there would be a large crowd of people at Koubundou. Additionally, if X had done anything conspicuous at the time, the owners would naturally recall it."

"Anything conspicuous?"

I closed my mouth.

This part may be the key to figuring out exactly what crime X committed. In order to organize my thinking, I said my thoughts aloud.

"X did something to make themselves stand out. But that in itself wasn't a crime. They then committed a crime. But it was something that the owners wouldn't have immediately noticed if not for the letter. X regretted what they did. It was a deplorable crime. And whatever they did was enough to get the attention of the investigators. The crime X committed was..."

I glanced at Chitanda. Her white throat moved as she swallowed in apprehension.

I spoke.

"The crime was on a higher scale than petty theft."

"And that is?"

Time to press on.

I looked away from Chitanda's throat and looked at the part of the note which said, "Anyone who, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and knows something".

X was buying something. That has already been established.

At the same time, he was doing something conspicuous and was also committing a crime.

Koubundou carries equipment for elementary school students, so they probably don't have anything valuable.

That reminds me, the newspapers were crammed with disturbing reports of crimes, as usual. There was arson, robbery, murder, and...

I sighed deeply.

"Seriously..."

"Seriously?"

One high school student entered the shop that sells stationery to elementary school students in his free time. He placed a cheap item on the counter somewhat hesitatingly and took out a 10,000-yen note, thereby drawing attention to himself.

"X used a counterfeit 10,000-yen note to pay for his goods."

## 4

"But!"

Chitanda, who had kept silent and had not stirred an inch after my words, suddenly piped up. She then started talking on and on, her spell of silence having been broken with that one word.

"But but but that's impossible! It's unrealistic! It's illogical! This is a failure! A catastrophe!"

Seeing Chitanda's extreme vigor and sensing that she might just leap out of her seat and strangle me, I drew back my chair and retreated.

I stopped Chitanda with a hand gesture, while thinking that that was probably similar to calming down a violent bull.

"Ch-chitanda, please calm down. Ah that's right! I just remembered! This is just a game, right? You won't get anything out of it by being so serious."

"But it's impossible!"

Hmm. She used the word "impossible", instead of "unbelievable"?

I narrowed my eyes and asked Chitanda.

"What do you mean by impossible?"

Chitanda had both her hands on the table and was leaning over it, but she returned to her original position and coughed slightly, as if embarrassed by her own actions. She put on her usual expression and spoke.

"The counterfeit bills that have been used are 10,000-yen bills. You concluded that X-san used a 10,000-yen bill based on that news, right?"

I nodded.

"But there is no way X-san, a high school student, could have gotten their hands on one! Or even if they did, they should have been able to exchange it!"

"What do you mean?"

That was actually quite slow of me. I have no idea why I even asked Chitanda that question. Chitanda's face showed a flicker of irritation, but she continued.

"How did X-san, a high school student who does not sell anything, get hold of the counterfeit bill?"

I answered without giving it much thought.

"From an ATM, I suppose."

"It's no easy feat to forge bills good enough to trick an ATM or a bank! And if they were that good, it would be unusual for X-san to notice."

"Perhaps he received it as change?"

After saying that, I shut my mouth, taken aback by my own stupidity. I was fortunate that Ibara wasn't here. Who knows what mean things she would say about me? Since Chitanda was not Ibara, she looked at me and smiled instead of criticizing me.

"Exactly. It seems that you have realized. A 10,000-yen bill cannot be given as change. Apart from commemorative coin, the 10,000-yen bill is the largest bill in our country."

I finally understood why I asked Chitanda that question.

How did X get hold of that fake currency for him to be able to use it? A counterfeit bill is one made by an unlicensed source, and is made to be used in shops. When it does, it shouldn't be handed over to customers, and even

if it's passed in between shops, it would eventually go to the bank. That's where it stops.

With furrowed eyebrows, I nodded by a few degrees.

"Well, I get what you're trying to say. Even if X's father ran a business, received a fake bill and gave it to X as pocket money..."

Satisfied, Chitanda nodded.

"X-san would have told their father. They would have asked their father to exchange the bill."

Kamiyama High prohibits her students from working part-time, but even if X did do it, that doesn't change anything. If X received their payment by bank transfer, there is no possibility of them even touching the fake note. On the other hand, if X received the money physically, they should have been able to request for an exchange, given that the employer is not overly unjust. Just like for the possibility of Student Counseling Department collectively collapsing due to food poisoning, I did not really consider the case for X's employer or father being so cruel as to reject that request, because that would be too nonsensical.

Now, then...

"Perhaps they picked it up?"

"Picked it up? You mean that the fake note was left on the road?"

"The forgers might have disposed of it to get rid of the evidence, for example."

It was quite an absurd theory, but only in its basis, and I didn't really care too much.

However, Chitanda shook her head.

"That would also be unlikely."

I was about to ask why, when I realized something strange.

Assuming that X went to school on both days, he would have delivered the note to Koubundou sometime between the end of yesterday's school day and the start of school today. Even if he didn't, the time frame for the delivery of the note would be from yesterday morning to today's announcement. The time taken for both cases is way too short.

X felt guilty while he was using the counterfeit bill. If not, he probably wouldn't have regretted his crime and apologized so quickly. It certainly wouldn't be possible for someone who uses a fake note he just picked up on an elderly couple to earn some small change.

"Hmm. The method of obtaining the bill, huh..."

If you don't figure that out, your whole theory would be like a tower built on sand."

Hey, you mentioned that I say rarely used phrases, but aren't you just the same?"

Even as I laugh it off, I have to appreciate Chitanda's focus. It might be a small thing, but as they say, a little leak will sink a great ship. How did X get hold of the fake note, and why did he have to use it?

Or is the theory that I've built up completely wrong, as Chitanda is saying?

A murmur escaped from my lips.

"10,000 yen, huh."

That's definitely not that large a sum of money that people would dream about it. But then again, it's also an amount that one would regret losing<sup>[4]</sup>.

... I see. It's an amount that one would give up only with painful reluctance. I folded my arms.

"Chitanda, do you like money?"

Chitanda was a little flustered by the question, but she still answered.

"Yes, I suppose. I'll have to say that I like it rather than hate it."

"Would you be troubled over throwing away 10,000 yen?"

"I don't think so."

As if this was an important matter, Chitanda drew closer and added solemnly,

"... But only if it were not from an illegitimate source."

You sure are protected, Chitanda. People have killed for less, even in Japan.

But even as I thought this, I could understand what Chitanda was saying. If the 10,000 yen was rightfully mine, I definitely wouldn't want to lose it. If I did accidentally misplace it, I would even clean out the drains in the city in an attempt to find it. But if it were "illegitimate money", or in other words if it was money that was picked up, stolen, or earned from gambling, I would probably give it up as easy money. As they say, "Ill-gotten gains are soon spent."

That can be the only reason why X felt guilty and yet still used the counterfeit bill. He did not want to waste his own money. In that case, that 10,000 yen was not from an illegitimate source. Also, X is not a forger, or the accomplice of one. If that's the case...

"As I thought, X received the bill from someone."

Chitanda, who was staring at the notebook, looked up.

"And they received it as rightful money. If they did not get it as a salary or allowance, then there's only one possibility... It was given back to them in return for money they had previously lent.

"I'm sure X felt troubled after realizing that the money received was fake. They probably thought something like 'It was my money so why did this

happen?" In any case, you can't really blame them for feeling guilty while wanting to use it at a shop run by an elderly couple."

As I finished, Chitanda placed her fist near her mouth and thought for a while. She eventually put down her fist and nodded, but she suddenly shook her head as she thought of something.

"But that doesn't change anything! X-san should still have been able to exchange the fake note!"

I replied calmly.

"Really? The counterfeit bill is like the Joker in Old Maid. No one wants to be holding it. In that case, I'd say this situation fits:

"Yo X, here's the money I borrowed from you the other day.'

"Ah, Y-senpai? Thank you very much. You could have returned the money later, though.'

"It was 10,000 yen, right? Here.'

"Thank you.'

"But to their surprise it turned out to be fake."

Chitanda didn't even grin at my solo act. Feeling awkward, I continued.

"Y, whom X lent the money to, was someone higher in social standing. That's why they couldn't object when Y gave them back a counterfeit. X could have noticed right after receiving the money, but Y could easily feign ignorance. Thus X got hold of the fake note under these circumstances."

I crossed my legs and continued.

"There was still the question of whether X is a single person or a group of people, but based on all this, we can say that X is only one person. It would be far too unnatural for two or three high schoolers to buy cheap stationery with a 10,000-yen bill together."

Chitanda still remained silent, making me wonder if she was actually listening.

There's still one more point that should be examined, I thought as I spoke.

"... So what about Y?"

"Y got hold of the counterfeit bill. Perhaps he got it from a Z higher up on the social ladder. But at some point it would have to return to the forger, a shop or the bank, as intended. We can group everyone above Y into Y as well, and then we have the question: Who is Y? An unscrupulous shopkeeper? The forgers themselves?

"In the messy trail caused by the counterfeit notes, the only way out was to turn to a lone high schooler who fell to a sudden impulse. The police got involved with X in order to trace where the bill came from."

I sighed deeply and shrugged jokingly.

"That concludes my deduction."

I noticed that Chitanda was deeply seated in her chair, which was quite strange. Her palms were resting on her knees, her back was straightened, and she had a blank expression on her face. She was probably shocked by the conclusion, or tired out from the game.

But even so, I spent all that time and effort talking, and she doesn't say a word? How mean. I left Chitanda to her sullen silence and gazed out the window at Kamiyama City, where the color of autumn had begun to show. Since Kamiyama Station is somewhere over there, Koubundou should be in that area too, right?

Chitanda's muttering reached my eyes as I stood there.

"Anyone who, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, shopped at Koubundou in front of the station and who knows something, please report to Shibasaki in the Staff Room immediately."

She then spoke earnestly as I turned around.

"We've certainly come a long way from this."

"Yeah..."

I smiled and stretched.

"It's game over, then."

Chitanda raised her eyebrows at the word "game". Focus returned to her eyes.

Chitanda's head tilted slightly.

"Oreki-san."

"What? This is just a game, you don't need to take it seriously."

"No, that's not it, but if that was a game, I have the feeling that you started it to prove something... What was it again?"

Ah.

Now that I think of it, I did want to do something like that.

I also tilted my head, to about the same angle as Chitanda's. After school, at the Geography Lecture Room, two people shrugged together.

"What was it?"

"I wonder."

"If you can't remember, there's no reason I would."

"... Then how about we try to deduce what that was?"

Chitanda's lips had slackened, and while her large eyes were equipped with seriousness, I could see that she was smiling. Ah, whatever. I smiled the

largest smile I could manage and spoke.

"Oh, give me a break."

The next day.

As I flipped to the third page of the newspapers, this article caught my eye.

"Caught for Possession of Counterfeit Currency"

The subheading read,

"23-year old gang member first to be arrested in a series of incidents, Kamiyama Police reports."

I believe we started that game yesterday because of some maxim. Both Chitanda and I completely forgot about it as we were so caught up with the game, but now I remember what it was.

That was "A horse comes from a gourd"<sup>[5]</sup>, right?

... Yeah, I think so.

Well, for memory to match the truth, one will need a lot more than pure luck, I suppose.

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Plaster and ointment have the same pronunciation in Japanese.
2. ↑ If you're interested, the name of the Buddhist equipment shop is written as 広聞堂 and the name of the bookstore is written as 光文堂.
3. ↑ The phrase "smells fishy" in Japanese is きな臭い. きな means quina and 臭い means smelly. Chitanda's mistake was that she split the phrase into the two parts.
4. ↑ 10,000 yen is roughly worth 80 USD
5. ↑ Japanese idiom meaning to reach a wild conclusion.

# **Story 5 - Sappy New Year**

# 1

There's this axiom that goes, "What you do over the new year, you repeat all year." When I was young, during the period when I was busy preparing for my high school entry examinations, I was so afraid of that myth that I took a break from studying on New Year's Day itself. That was quite a long time ago... No, that's not true. It was only last year.

Now, in the darkness, I wondered if the alternate saying "What you do on New Year's Day, you repeat all year" was true. As they say, "The whole year's plans are made on New Year's Day." To befall a disaster early in the very first month of the year. This kind of thing should be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, and definitely not a yearly event, right? I wouldn't call myself a superstitious person, but if someone said, "Disaster will strike again for the impure", I would probably just go for a purification ritual<sup>[1]</sup> obediently.

I could sense Chitanda thinking about the question I had just asked her regarding the old saying.

"Well... I don't think that superstitious belief would be true. If it were, then if you didn't do anything on New Year's Day, then you wouldn't do anything all year. That seems too unreasonable."

Accepting that explanation, I heaved a sigh of relief. My worries having disappeared, I felt liberated.

However, although I couldn't see her emotions in this pitch black environment, but I could tell that Chitanda was deadly serious when she added,

"But Oreki-san... I'm more curious about the situation we're in right now, rather than the remaining 364 days ahead of us."

I know.

I understand the serious situation we're in. But Chitanda, couldn't you let me escape reality for a little while more?

The wind blew in through the cracks, so cold that it was as if our cheeks were being cut. At the same time, those small cracks brought in a little light into the darkness. It seems that my eyes have gotten used to the dark.

I could now see a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long prole probably used for housekeeping, and a cardboard box of which contents I was unaware of. As well as Chitanda, who was wearing a kimino and a troubled face.

And also, the four walls that surrounded us.

We were currently in the grounds of Arekusū Shrine, which was of prominent scale, even in Kamiyama City. To be precise, we were in a corner of the compound which received hardly any light from the lanterns outside and was not easily spotted by people. There was a dilapidated outhouse there, and we were in it.

The problem was not the place being an outhouse or that it was run-down.

A single door<sup>[2]</sup> was the only exit and entrance of this outhouse. But right now, it was closed, and locked with a bar... from the outside.

On the night of the first of January, Chitanda and I were trapped in an outhouse in a corner of Arekusū Shrine.

The wall and roof had probably gone past their service life a long time ago, but there was just one spot in the outhouse that was brand new and firm. The door, and only the door was sturdy, being made of shiny aluminum. It's a great thing to have, if you're considering from a theft-prevention perspective. No matter how much we pushed or pulled, it would only shake and clatter a little.

A late grumble escaped from my mouth.

"How did we get in this mess?"

"I wonder. Perhaps..."

Even in the darkness, I felt that Chitanda was smiling.

"It was because you drew a bad fortune?"

I sighed deeply.

Could that really be the reason?

## 2

The incident began when Chitanda gave me a call on some day close to New Year's Eve.

"Oreki-san, do you have any plans for New Year's Day?"

I thought for a while.

When I was an elementary school student, I used to go for a shrine visit every New Year, as my sister liked these kinds of annual events. She could have gone by herself, but she always had to drag me along. I was fine with accompanying her to the nearby Hachiman Shrine, but it was terrible when my sister was taking her university entrance examinations. I was ordered to pray for her to pass her exams, and she brought me on a long, arduous journey to Tenmangu Shrine that took us a few hours. As I recall, while my sister asked me to pray for her, she didn't buy a single amulet for herself, and instead amused herself with a game where she would continuously draw fortunes until she obtained an "Great Blessing"[\[3\]](#).

When my sister went to university, she started flying off to a remarkably larger range of places, and thanks to that, she stopped bringing me along, and the need for me to attend annual events disappeared. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. I have to do it, make it quick. Therefore, I had no plans at all for New Year's Day.

"Nope, not really."

Chitanda's voice became more cheerful.

"I see. Then would you like to visit a shrine with me?"

"...It wouldn't be Tenmangu, would it?"

"Eh? You want to go to Tenmangu Shrine? That's pretty far away."

Yes, quite.

Did I just get mistaken for a Kanke<sup>[4]</sup> fan? Chitanda lowered her voice, as if she was trying to wait and see how things would go.

"If you're fine with it, would you like to go to Arekusu Shrine?"

Arekusu Shrine isn't far away at all. If it's not snowing, it would only take a few minutes to cycle there. But I wasn't really interested in going there. Arekusu Shrine is the largest shrine in Kamiyama City, so it would be really chaotic during the New Year. I would be betraying my energy-conserving principle if I tried to squeeze into a large crowd in such cold weather. I passed the telephone receiver to my other hand.

"Is there something there?"

"It's not exactly something, but..."

Chitanda said, as her voice became more lively.

"Mayaka-san is working part-time there."

Ibara? I tried to imagine Ibara working in front of the confusing crowd of people at Arekusu Shrine on New Year's Day.

"....."

"Ah, you laughed."

Yes, I did. Working part-time at a shrine during the New Year would mean putting on white clothing and make-up, and Ibara looked inappropriately under-aged for that. I replied,

"I bet she looks bad."

"That's mean, Oreki-san."

While Chitanda was criticizing me, her voice was filled with mirth. If my impoliteness caused Chitanda to laugh, Ibara must have joked about her own appearance earlier.

"Fukube-san will be going too, so I thought you might want to go too."

Satoshi certainly wouldn't want to miss seeing Ibara in that costume.

I see. Making fun of Ibara would be fun in itself. But it would be in bad taste to visit a shrine simply for that purpose. Well, I suppose it would be fine to go there to pray for peace and good health in the coming year.

"And..."

"Is there something else?"

"It's not really something else in particular, but..."

This time, Chitanda lowered her voice, indicating her bashfulness.

"... I would kind of like to show off my kimono too."

If I were to reject Chitanda's request, I'm positive that the reason would be none other than the cold weather. Obviously, it is cold in winter, and while I could endure it, I wouldn't want to pay for my sins later on.

But then again, the new year is the most suitable day for a change of heart. The Japan Archipelago was currently being surrounded by a powerful cold front, so after sunset, Kamiyama City would become atrociously cold.

I put on the white trench coat that I usually wear, settled for a beige muffler and gloves, then slipped a heater pack in my pocket. Even so, my teeth wouldn't stop chattering. Thinking that it was because of my unprotected feet, I chose a pair of laceless boots that looked like they were made of leather. I glanced at the television while going out, and noticed that today's temperature was apparently the lowest recorder this winter. I did not see a single cloud when I looked up at the sky, but the stars were scattered so

crisply that I go a little annoyed. This serene atmosphere only helped to foster the coldness I was feeling psychologically.

I was waiting by the stone archway outside the shrine. Even at this time, Arekusū Shrine was filled with throngs of people, but it was still possible to walk without bumping into others, and joining a crowd would stave off the cold. Compared to the chilly sky, the road to the shrine, which was lined with blazing lanterns, looked a lot warmer.

The multitudes of people milling around were wearing jumpers and coats and seemed to be withdrawing themselves in order to reduce their exposed areas. Although it was so cold, not one of them had a grim face. There were a few small groups of people who, upon meeting their acquaintances, exchanged new year greetings. But I still couldn't find Chitanda.

Am I too early?

It's certainly not appealing to wait for someone in this temperature, I thought as I checked my watch. At that moment, a black taxi stopped outside the archway. The back door opened, and with a "Thank you very much", a girl got off the taxi. Her kimono was a quiet shade of red that shone like starlight and radiated like a bonfire. She had something like a black coat on top of that kimono, and held a light purple purse in her hand. It was decorated with a golden string, embroidered to look like balls. The girl's hair was tied back in a bun, and she had an ornamental hairpin that was shaking around. Lastly, she had a sho bottle<sup>[5]</sup> wrapped in some white paper, probably a gift to the shrine.

As expected of New Year's Day, people are wearing such flowery stuff.

As I had that thought, the person turned out to be Chitanda.

I didn't think she would arrive by taxi. So taxi services still run on New Year's Day, huh. While holding that worthless thought, I looked at Chitanda, who turned to look at me with a smile.

"Did I make you wait?"

"No..."

"Happy new year."

"Ha-happy new year."

"I hope we can get along as well in the coming year."

"As do I. Please overlook my flaws."

That was bad. Having suffered a psychological attack, I could do nothing but give a stupid reply. Chitanda must have overlooked my hesitation, for she slightly raised her arms and lightly waved her sleeves.

"I'm here to show off!"

The kimono was based around the color red, so it would probably fit in the "elegant" category, and yet it did not shine glaringly at all. It was certainly a bright piece of clothing suitable for the New Year, though I find it strange that it doesn't seem too heavy on the eyes when Chitanda is wearing it. The kimono was flowery, but at the same time, mellow. In the past, whenever my sister put on a kimono, all I could think was, "What's with this tomboy?"

Since Chitanda was wearing a black coat, I could only see the front design of her kimono. It was of butterflies flying on a red background, with an embroidery of a flowing river near the hem. Or is that supposed to represent the wind?

I was unable to give a comment, but it seemed that Chitanda was satisfied with just showing off. She didn't even seem to be waiting for any reaction from me. With her left hand holding her bag and her right hand holding the bottle, Chitanda looked at the road to the shrine.

"Shall we go, then?"

Chitanda's clogs made a clacking sound as we walked towards the shrine. As I looked at her back, I thought that I should have at least said "You look good in it" or something like that.

We walked on, the clack-clack sound blending with the slight commotion around us.

As expected, the cold wind wasn't so bad when we were surrounded by the crowd. The stone paving stretched out ahead of us as the lanterns' light caused human silhouettes to appear under the night sky. I suddenly realized that the bottle Chitanda was holding seemed to be really heavy. It's dangerous to have both hands occupied in a congested area. When I told Chitanda that I would carry it for her, she had no reservations.

"Thank you very much. Please."

"What's this?"

"A bottle of sake."

I guessed as much. There wasn't a chance that it would be soy sauce.

"Our family is friends with the shrine caretakers. I'm here to pay them a New Year's visit."

"Running errands so early in the new year? Sounds tough."

"I was even busier during the day. I spent the whole time putting on my best behavior while my relatives came to visit."

An image of Chitanda putting on her best behavior surfaced at the back of my mind. She was dressed gaudily, had her face powdered, lipstick applied, and was sitting properly by the side of the seat of honor, not moving an inch.

I'm not sure if that would be considered to be good behavior, but I knew that the Chitanda family was a considerably large and old one, and I'm not just talking about their estate. The person next to me was an only child of the Chitanda family, so she sometimes has to socialize at a level I could never hope to understand.

I just thought of something strange. Why would a shrine visit be designated to be at night, when it's so cold? I was certain that it was due to Ibara

getting the night shift, but it seems that the errand of the Chitanda family's only daughter was also a factor.

"I only had a small piece of mochi, so I'm feeling a little hungry right now."

Chitanda said as she put her hand on her stomach. There was a refined, light purple obi<sup>[6]</sup> there, probably to match the color of her purse.

"What did you do?"

"I experienced the life of a hermit crab."

"Eh?"

It was really cold today.

It was simply way too cold in the morning, so I couldn't help but decide to learn to live like a hermit crab.

In other words, only my head was out of the kotatsu<sup>[7]</sup>, and I passed the time while becoming inseparable friends with a bowl of tangerines. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I was living like a snail. My father was visiting someone for work, and my sister had left the house for some unknown reason, so I was able to conduct my biological studies to my heart's content.

I passed the time by reading a novel, eating some New Year snacks whenever I got hungry, and sorting out New Year cards when I felt like it. Before I knew it, the clock struck noon and it became the afternoon of the first of January. I turned on the television and carefreely watched this "New Year Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle" until the day ended.

Looking back, I felt quite ashamed of myself for sharing about my laziness from the first day of the year. I didn't really want to touch this subject any more, so I changed the subject somewhat unreasonably.

"What's Satoshi doing?"

Chitanda didn't seem to mind the sudden shift in topic at all.

"Mayaka-san is probably giving Fukube-san a call right now."

Besides Classics Club-related work, Ibara calls Satoshi for many other purposes. You could say that it's because she likes talking to Satoshi, but there's a more practical factor at work. Basically, it's because Satoshi and Ibara carry mobile phones, while Chitanda and I don't<sup>[8]</sup>. I've been thinking that I should get one soon, but since I don't have the dough, it's impossible for the time being.

The road finally approached a steep flight of stone steps. Thankfully, this wide flight of steps had metal railings on both sides as well as the center. But when I looked, there wasn't a single old person using the railing to ascend or descend the flight of steps.

The lamps that were on the pathway to provide some flickering light were absent from the stone steps. Instead, there were white flags with the words "Arekusu Shrine" placed at intervals by the side of the steps. I could see traces of snow here and there on the slope beyond the flags.

"Be careful Oreki-san, it's slippery here."

Chitanda spoke as she went on ahead.

Right after reaching the top of the stone steps, we passed through another archway. Arekusu Shrine was huge, and had a few times the commotion at the pathway. I suppose it was too much to hope that it would be filled with a calm atmosphere, what with everyone celebrating the coming of the new year.

There was a large bonfire in the center of the grounds, and I could only see the shadows of the people who had formed a ring around it. It would be natural to yearn for fire under this cold sky, but perhaps the bonfire was too strong, for most people had their backs towards it. The only people who extended both hands to the flame were kids who were noisily frolicking around. I also noticed a few hands holding onto paper cups. Seems like someone's giving out hot drinks somewhere around here.

On the right was the shrine office, which had been converted into a shop selling charms, amulets and the like. It seems that the peak hour of the shop has passed. While there were many people there, the scene wasn't one of chaos. Ibara's probably there. When I looked away from the shrine office, I noticed a small, red archway in an inconspicuous location. Seems like there's a shrine for Inari<sup>[9]</sup> here too. In contrast to the white flags all over the place, there was only one red flag with the words "Number One"<sup>[10]</sup> placed in front of the red archway. There was also a small outhouse at the back. For a shrine that was built discreetly, there were quite a lot of people praying there, perhaps because businesspeople also came here to pay homage to Inari.

The sho bottle was starting to feel heavy in my hands.

"Do I put this down somewhere?"

I held the bottle up slightly. Chitanda shook her head, thought for a while and spoke.

"Shall we say our prayers first?"

To get to the main hall, we had to go up another flight of stone steps. Thankfully, it was a small and had a more gradual incline. It was only about ten steps, but the top half was congested with worshipers. Chitanda and I queued up behind them.

We went up one step every one or two minutes. There was a horizontal line at the front, and people there would drop their monetary offerings, clasp their hands and walk off. It was only when the whole line had dissolved could the next batch of people walk up for their prayers. It certainly looks like they are praying from the perspective of humans, but to the gods, wouldn't it look like requests are being conveyed in conveyor-belt style? The standard prayers like "I hope I will live in good health" or "I wish for world peace" aren't so bad, but those complicated prayers like "I wish Grandpa would recover from his illness, but it doesn't have to be immediate. Also, I wish my children will do well in their examinations. Specifically, I would like them to give up on private education and be

accepted in a public school" would take a herculean effort for the gods to even understand.

While I was on this ridiculous train of thought, it became our turn. I threw five yen into the monetary offering box, which had a unusually large white cloth. Hmm, I guess this wish should be fine.

May this year be easy on my energy reserves.

With that, the main event of the shrine visit was over. Now all we had to do was put down the sake bottle, tease Ibara and head back home. Well, it's cold. As I was thinking of throwing myself into the crowd of people purchasing amulets, Chitanda rolled up the sleeves of her coat.

"Where are you going?"

"Aren't we going to see Ibara?"

"Yes. I'll be entering the shrine office to greet the priest. We can meet Mayaka-san from inside."

There were a few red-faced men gathered outside the shrine office. There were men in their forties, and the oldest was seventy to eighty years old. They were probably shrine parishioners who had come to help out.

Chitanda cut through them without a hint of bashfulness and opened the lattice door, while I shrunk myself and followed Chitanda. I also thought that I looked pathetic, but then again, I hadn't socialized with adults before.

"Excuse me!"

Chitanda shouted to the back of the room, but no one appeared. They were probably busy. Chitanda shouted two or three more times, and a white-haired man finally arrived. This man was also red in the face and looked somewhat offended. With a throaty voice, he asked,

"What is it?"

Chitanda gently bowed.

"Happy new year. I'm Eru, here on behalf of Chitanda Tetsugo, who offers his wishes to you for a happy new year."

Contrary to his sullen appearance, the man smiled.

"Ah, Chitanda-san's daughter! Please come in. I'll call the caretakers."

"Thank you for your hospitality."

I'm Oreki, tagging along. Sorry for intruding.

The man led us to a huge hall, which was the size of tens of tatami mats. It was surrounded by sliding doors, and the ceiling was quite low, in contrast to its large area. There were many daruma stoves<sup>[11]</sup> in the room, and I could see the red flames from their small windows. Also, there were tens of low tables arranged for men and women to sit as they please and peck at their food or drink sake. Bursts of laughter continuously rang out, giving the room a warm feeling.

"Shall we wait in that corner?"

"Yeah, fine."

It was probably too early for the banquet, since there were quite a few empty seats. Chitanda and I headed to a table in the corner. Before sitting down, Chitanda remove the black coat that was above her kimono. I thought it was just a coat, but seeing it under the bright glow of the electric light, it seemed like the cloth had a somehow twisted texture, and the design was shaded off. Chitanda noticed me scrutinizing her coat.

"Is anything the matter?"

"No, I was just thinking that your coat has a very unique texture."

Chitanda smiled.

"Thank you. It's made of crêpe<sup>[12]</sup>."

The story of Mito Koumon<sup>[13]</sup> flitted past the back of my mind.

I also took off my trench coat. Mine was a cheap coat, so I didn't care how it was handled, but Chitanda removed a hanger from the lintel and hung up her coat.

Before long, a sliding door opened and a young girl appeared, wearing a white robe and a scarlet hakama<sup>[14]</sup>. She had long hair that was tied at the back, making her look like a miko<sup>[15]</sup>, but her small spectacles didn't really fit her appearance. That flaw aside, I found it strange that this girl seemed to be used to wearing these clothes. I couldn't imagine her being a part-time worker. That would be my first time seeing a real miko, then.

I know that she's young, but I wonder what's her age. Not even twenty, I think. On seeing Chitanda, the girl headed straight for us. Soon afterwards, the miko in the scarlet hakama and Chitanda, who was in a red kimono, were sitting properly facing each other. Only now did I notice that Chitanda's sleeves were also decorated with beautiful flying butterflies.

Chitanda's head bowed first.

"Happy new year. May this year be even better than the last."

The miko replied politely.

"Happy new year."

"My father sends this bottle of sake. I hope you accept it."

Ah, it's this. I held out the sho bottle. The miko bowed while pressing three fingers of each hand on the floor.

"Thank you very much. We accept."

"No, it's just a trifle."

As I ran my mouth without thinking, Chitanda couldn't help but giggle.

"Oreki-san, I'm supposed to say that."

Yeah, I just realized that there's no reason for me, who was only holding it because it was heavy, to be humble over the Chitanda family's gift. Crap, I was caught up in the unfamiliar atmosphere and said something stupid.

As I became disconcerted, the miko spoke.

"We don't accept mere trifles."

Chitanda replied with a mirthful voice.

"Come now, please accept it anyway... Trifling as though it may be."

I finally noticed that the miko's lips were curved slightly upwards. It seems that Chitanda and this miko are acquaintances who are close enough to joke around with each other. Come to think of it, all those polite greetings were probably all a joke too. I worried so much for nothing.

The miko asked.

"You're from Class B, right?"

I was indeed from Class 1-B in Kamiyama High School.

"Yes."

How does she know my class? I was starting to suspect something, when she asked her second question.

"Is Fukube-kun not with you?"

She even knows Satoshi! Is this the power of Shinto? The shrine maidens of Arekusuru Shrine must have the power to see others' pasts! She must even know that I spent the whole day lazing around!

It seems that my inner unrest was shown clearly on my face. Chitanda whispered into my ear,

"That's Juumonji Kaho-san."

Who?

"She's from Class 1-D."

I looked at the miko in front of me again.

She had a calm bearing, and was taller than average, so I didn't think that it was impossible. I certainly thought that she was below twenty, but...

"We're in the same year?"

I shrieked hysterically without thinking.

Chitanda and Juumonji Kaho laughed out loud.

If she's in Class B, she would be in the same class as Satoshi. Naturally, she would know him.

The two clad in traditional Japanese clothing exchanged words closely. But Juumonji was in the middle of some work. She got up, as if realizing something.

"Well, I'll see you next time."

Juumonji said while exiting the room. Chitanda called out to her retreating figure,

"We would like to see Ibara Mayaka-san. Is that alright?"

"Ibara... Oh, her? Hmm, I guess it should be fine. You can go through this passage to the back of the shop and check on her."

I was a little shocked to hear someone involved with the shrine actually call it a "shop". Should that really be called that? Not that I was holding some sort of romantic expectations, but... Chitanda and I stood up, and opened the sliding doors, as directed by Juumonji.

When we entered the corridor, a slight commotion reached our ears, so we immediately knew where the shop was. Chitanda, who was wearing a tabi<sup>[16]</sup>, smoothly shuffled her feet and advanced down the corridor. My feet, on the other hand, were unbearably frozen by the coldness of the floorboards.

We gently opened the wooden sliding door at the end of the corridor.

Curse-breaking arrows, bamboo rakes, darumas and amulets. Those were some of the items on display at the shop. There was a total of three people dressed up as shrine maidens at the counter to deal with the customers. But is that many people really necessary for this period of time? I think two would be sufficient. Chitanda had bent her knees, leant inwards and was about to thrust her head through the doorway to search for Ibara, but she didn't get a chance. When we opened the door, we immediately knew that the one closest to us and obviously more free than the others was undoubtedly Ibara. Like Juumonji, she was wearing a white robe, a scarlet hakama and had her hair tied up at the back.

Wait a minute, that's strange. Ibara doesn't have long hair. That must mean that it's a wig, then. Would I have thought the same if Ibara had actually grown her hair and tied it up?

"Mayaka-san."

Chitanda smiled. Ibara abruptly turned around, smiled as she saw Chitanda, but scowled as she met my eyes. In front of the customers, Ibara didn't raise her voice. Instead, she moved her reddened lips slightly and warned in a low voice,

"Don't look."

What a mean thing to say at the start of the year. Why would you take up this part-time job if you don't want to be seen wearing the costume?

"Happy new year."

Ibara nodded in response to Chitanda's whisper. She then scanned her surroundings, and seeing that there were no customers, leaned only her upper body towards the door.

"Happy new year. That kimono is so nice! You look beautiful!"

"Thank you very much."

"Is it a formal kimono?"

"No, it's a common one. I'm keeping my formal kimono for college."

Common? Is that the "common" from "common sense"? That means it's for general use, right? Has the English language taken over the world of kimonos too?

"My shift ends in an hour. What are you going to do?"

"I think I will be a guest in the main hall. What about Fukube-san?"

"He came in the day. But he went home to watch some drama, 'New Year Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle', I think it was called? I think he'll be back soon."

While they were talking, there wasn't a single customer going up to Ibara. Come to think of it, there were no goods displayed in front of Ibara's seat. I asked,

"What are you selling?"

"Fortunes. I'm also in charge of lost kids, lost and found, and breaking change."

The fortunes could be drawn by the customers themselves. All they had to do was place a hundred-yen coin on the offering stand covered with paper, and it seemed that the rest was self-service.

Ibara must have followed my train of thought, for she insisted forcefully,

"I was busy in the day."

It seems that she's admitting that she's free now.

Ibara certainly wasn't lying when she said she was busy in the day. There was a tray next to her filled with items like phones, wallets, keys and foldable umbrellas.

"The shrine parishioners patrol the area, and if they see anything that might be valuable on the ground, they bring it here. There were also many lost children. That's why I was busy in the day."

Even if you didn't emphasize it, I wouldn't think that you're slacking on your job. Not in the slightest.

Changing the subject, Chitanda spoke.

"A fortune sounds like fun! May I draw one?"

Chitanda, who had been leaning over, stood up. As she turned back, Ibara called out.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Going around to the front..."

"It's alright, you can draw it here."

Having gotten permission from the salesperson, Chitanda retrieved her wallet from her purse, and took out a 100-yen coin. The wallet looked like it was made of leather, so it was probably expensive. Ibara, however, had laid eyes on Chitanda's purse.

"Ah! That purse is really nice too! It looks so elegant!"

"Ufufu."

Having received praise for her personal effects, Chitanda smiled joyfully. I found that to be surprising.

Chitanda seemed to have a different set of values from that of other girls her age, so I felt that it wasn't like her to show honest feminine reactions like "feeling happy after her bag was admired". Of course, those were just my arbitrary thoughts. Thinking that I can deduce everything about someone with the little information I have about them would be committing the sin of pride. I should turn over a new leaf this year.

Indifferent to the extremely unreliable decision that I just made, Ibara was deep in thought about something. She muttered,

"Yeah, I suppose purses would normally be like this..."

Well, the linen drawstring bag that Satoshi always carries around definitely wouldn't be considered elegant.

It's my first shrine visit in such a long time. It can't hurt to draw just one fortune. I took out a 100-yen coin, and dropped it into Ibara's hand after Chitanda. Ibara placed the two coins on the offering stand, and held out the hexagonal cylinder towards us.

"Here you go... May the gods' divine protection be with you."

That seems a little wrong, I think.

Chitanda was the first to draw a fortune. She opened the starched paper tensely. Before I had even opened mine, Chitanda shouted excitedly,

"Wow! It's a 'Great Blessing'!"

That's auspicious, but she should probably wait for me to check that there's nothing bad written on my fortune before rejoicing about hers. I opened my fortune.

"....."

"What's wrong, Oreki-san?"

"Nothing. Looks like this is going to be a great year."

The sleeve of Ibara's white robe fluttered as she pointed at me.

"You've drawn a 'Future Blessing'<sup>[17]</sup>, right?"

Is that really shown on my face? I sighed and showed my fortune to the two girls.

*The ear of grain that reaches the heavens  
Is pecked at by the birds  
And shows signs of being bent by the wind.  
Good fortune does not reach the body.*

And in large text,

*MISFORTUNE*

# 3

It is rare to draw a "Misfortune". It is auspicious to get something rare. Ergo, drawing a "Misfortune" is actually a sign of good luck.

The conclusion that can be drawn from that perfectly sound Modus Ponens<sup>[18]</sup> is that this bodes well for the new year. We returned to the guest hall, leaving behind Ibara, who was looking at me like I was an abandoned puppy.

Chitanda, on the other hand, was beside herself with joy.

"What would a 'Misfortune' be like? I'm curious!"

Chitanda exclaimed as she grabbed my fortune and stared at it intently. Her first subject of curiosity in the year was actually about the text on a bad fortune I drew. I couldn't help but respond to that excessive innocence.

"Are you that happy about my misfortune?"

Chitanda tilted her head in puzzlement, as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Didn't you mention earlier that you don't believe in these kinds of things?"

Yeah, I did, I think.

If I had to choose between believing and not believing in superstitions, I would have to say that I don't believe in them. But it would be a lie to say that I have never been drawn into believing in certain things, thanks to some rare cases. As I was thinking deeply about this, Chitanda's face suddenly drew near, denying my chance to reply to her question.

"Wh-What is it?"

"I am sorry."

Her head abruptly bowed down.

"That was just a show of courage, right? You're actually quite worried about it."

I couldn't think of any words to say regarding that statement.

"Just give it back."

A person swiftly walked past my field of vision as I reached out to retrieve my fortune. Juumonji was going down the corridor with quick steps and a tense face. Chitanda held out the fortune.

"Ah, of course. Thank you for letting me see it... But, what should we do about it?"

"Nothing at all."

It can't be helped. The only thing that can be done is to dispose of it somewhere in the shrine, but I would feel so awkward doing so. I could just tie it on a sakaki<sup>[19]</sup>, I suppose. Juumonji walked by again. She could probably tell us a suitable method to deal with it.

"....."

I thought that she had left, but she returned again. Unable to let her walking around pass unnoticed, Chitanda called out.

"Kaho-san."

Juumonji did have some errands to do, but it didn't seem like she was so busy that she had to fight for every second. She stopped when she was called, dropped her firm expression and put on an apologetic one.

"I'm sorry, Eru. I didn't bring you any tea..."

'No, that's alright. Did something happen?"

Juumonji's lips slightly slackened. I had already learned that that was her way of smiling. In these circumstances, it would be a wry smile, I suppose.

"Well, sort of. One of our part-timers tipped a pot. We're currently remaking all the dumpling soup and sweet sake for the guests."

"I see."

Chitanda's eyes widened.

"Did they get burned?"

"No, they're fine. They escaped with an amazing backstep."

With such strong reflexes, how did they tip the pot in the first place?

Although there were somewhat less shrine visitors at night compared to the day, there were still quite many of them. Sweet sake was definitely still needed. Furthermore, the pot was tipped when the banquet was about to begin, which explains why Juumonji had to run around the guest hall.

Chitanda did not hesitate at all.

"I'll help."

She was about to stand up, but Juumonji stopped her. Was it impossible for Chitanda to help?

"No, you don't need to."

"Why is that? I think my cooking should be fine..."

"I know that you can cook, but do you plan on going into a kitchen wearing that?"

Chitanda took a long hard look at her own clothing. It was a kimono that was red all over, an elegant piece with dancing butterflies and flowing wind. As expected, it was impossible to cook while wearing that. It seemed that Chitanda also understood.

"Is there anything else I could do, then?"

Juumonji thought for a moment and swiftly came up with a decision.

"Could you go to the warehouse and get some sake lees? You should see them on your left when you go in."

"On my left, got it!"

Chitanda immediately stood up and wiped her sleeves. Then to me, she asked,

"I'm sorry, but could you please help me look after my purse?"

No matter how much of an energy-conserver I am, I can't just sit by while Chitanda helped out in her kimono.

"I'll go as well."

"Sorry for your inconvenience, and thanks for helping."

With those parting words, Juumonji left the guest hall with haste. Chitanda held on to her own purse.

After some consideration, I concluded that it was just a small matter. I probably don't need my trench coat for something like this.

At the entrance, Chitanda asked me a question while I was putting on my boots.

"She said that it was in the warehouse, correct?"

"Yeah."

These boots were difficult to put on, as might be expected from something cheap. There was a buckle, but the hole was small, so I could only continuously force my foot in. I succeeded in putting on my left boot, and answered while squeezing my right foot into the boot.

"It's behind the Inari shrine, I believe... Right, my boots are done."

I opened the door. As the freezing wind hit my face head-on, I suddenly regretted agreeing to help out.

Not even a second had passed before I started longing for the daruma stove.

The number of worshipers hadn't changed much. The number of silhouettes surrounding the huge bonfire in the middle of the grounds hadn't decreased, either. There was probably still some sweet sake left, for there were still many people holding paper cups.

"I guess that's it."

I said, pointing at the outhouse. Since Chitanda was wearing wooden clogs, it was probably difficult for her to move quickly, so she followed behind.

As we drew nearer to the outhouse, we could clearly tell that it was really dilapidated, even in the semi-darkness of the night. The wooden walls and ceiling looked totally unstable. It looked like it would collapse if you gave it a good kick, like in a comic. Was the Arekusu Shrine that strict with its finances? Or was it perhaps unnecessary to rebuild an outhouse in a corner of the grounds? Although the red "Number One" flag for the Inari shrine was just nearby, there was a white "Arekusu Shrine" flag in front of the outhouse, leaving an extremely shabby impression. Furthermore, it seems that the flag picket was too short, so the flag couldn't stand stably on its own, and as a result the top of the flag had to be tied to the eaves of the outhouse with a vinyl string. That's seriously run-down.

But there was one part that was shining with a radiance enough to catch one's eye. It was the door, which was made of aluminum and was mostly likely brand-new. It was probably just replaced, the evidence being the fact that the remains of the previous door were still there. It was locked by a wooden bar, of all things. The bar was supposed to be put through the handles of the door, then it would be fixed with a padlock. However, on

New Year's Day, with an unspecified large number of people moving around the shrine, the padlock was unlocked. They were probably careless, or perhaps magnanimous. Then again, there's probably nothing worth stealing in that outhouse.

After removing the bar, we opened the door and entered the outhouse.

"I hope there's a light..."

But we couldn't find a switch for an electric lamp. Come to think of it, the outhouse didn't seem like it was connected to any power cables, so it would naturally have no electric lighting.

"She said that it would be on out left upon entering, right?"

But this instruction caused a great deal of bewilderment to the two of us, because the only thing on the left of the entrance was a wall.

"Perhaps she made a mistake, and it's actually on the right?"

"No, I don't think Kaho-san would have made that mistake."

"But it's definitely not on the left."

I turned to look at the right side of the outhouse. We were in a building without light at night. We couldn't see anything in the absolute darkness. However, I said,

"It's not there, I think."

"That must mean..."

"Maybe it's further in?"

I reached out with my hand in the darkness and shuffled forward. It would have been quite dangerous if I hadn't done that, although it would have been much better to wait for my eyes to get accustomed to the dark. I gradually advanced to the inner part of the outhouse, trying to feel for the sake lees, but there was no positive response from my hand.

"I thought it would be an easy job, but it's turning into a pain..."

"Erm, Oreki-san..."

Chitanda, who was suddenly right behind me, called my name. A gust of wind blew the aluminum door shut, causing the light outside to be unable to enter.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know how to say this, but..."

Indeed, it did seem difficult for her to voice it out, as she was holding her purse with both hands and fidgeting restlessly. I continued groping in the darkness, while thinking that it was rare for the usually direct Chitanda to be so hesitant.

"This is an outhouse, right?"

"Right. You could also call it a shack."

"You are searching for the sake lees as requested by Kaho-san, right?"

"What else would I be doing?"

"I'm sorry if I misunderstood, but, erm, this is an outhouse."

I sighed.

"Yes, but what about it?"

In the darkness, Chitanda shook her head and for some reason, spoke in her smallest voice.

"No, the warehouse."

"Huh?"

"It's in the warehouse. That was where Kaho-san told us to get the sake lees. This is an outhouse, but the sake lees are in the warehouse."

By inverting her word order in her second explanation, Chitanda finally gave me a complete picture of what was happening.

I was at a loss for words. I instantly thought of hitting my head and saying, "Oh, man! I got it wrong since I don't have a warehouse at my place!", but I couldn't really say that, so I gave up on putting that idea to action. Instead, I replied quietly,

"You noticed from the beginning, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but I was not sure of myself. I do know that there is a warehouse behind the shrine office."

"You could have told me earlier..."

It's common for people to hide their embarrassment by finding fault with others. Well, I'll apologize later, but we have to hurry. The sweet sake's running out, and more importantly, it's too cold.

It was at the moment when we changed direction in the darkness.

We could hear a drunk voice outside the shack.

"Hey, the bar's off."

Then, an inauspicious thud sounded.

"Eh? That was..."

Chitanda still didn't realize it. I immediately raced to the door, or rather, since it was too dark to actually tell, the place where the door should stand according to my memory. I felt the cold sensation of the aluminum doorknob.

But then...

The door would only shake and clatter a little. I turned to look back at Chitanda. I could not clearly see her outline, but I imagined her tilting her head worriedly.

"What's wrong?"

She probably couldn't see it, but I shrugged anyway.

"We've been locked in."

## 4

"Hey, Chitanda, would you say that the phrase 'whatever you do on New Year's Day, you repeat all year' is true?"

I asked, and I could sense Chitanda thinking about the question.

"Well... I don't think that superstitious belief would be true. If it were, then if you didn't do anything on New Year's Day, then you wouldn't do anything all year. That seems too unreasonable. But Oreki-san... I'm more curious about the situation we're in right now, rather than the remaining 364 days ahead of us."

The wind blew in through the cracks, so cold that it was as if our cheeks were being cut. At the same time, those small cracks brought in a little light into the darkness. It seems that my eyes have gotten used to the dark.

I could now see a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long prole probably used for housekeeping, and a cardboard box of which contents I was unaware of. As well as Chitanda, who was wearing a kimino and a troubled face.

And also, the four walls that surrounded us.

A late grumble escaped from my mouth.

"How did we get in this mess?"

"I wonder. Perhaps..."

Even in the darkness, I felt that Chitanda was smiling.

"It was because you drew a bad fortune?"

I sighed deeply.

Could that really be the reason?

...No, that can't be it. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the old man was drunk, so he locked the door using the bar without checking if there was anyone inside. I said the other reason, or rather, the root cause of our problem, aloud.

"Sorry. It was all because of my stupid mistake."

Chitanda shook her head.

"It's okay. Neither of us imagined that we would get locked in."

That might be true, but I hadn't apologized for my mistake yet.

We might be locked in, but fortunately, we weren't trapped in a soulless factory or the school premises in the summer. This outhouse is on the edge of the grounds, in a place that is hard to notice, but those praying to Inari shouldn't miss it. If we shout, it should be simple to get someone outside to help us remove the bar.

"I'll try calling for someone. I'm going to shout as loud as I can, so you might want to cover your ears."

I certainly couldn't get Chitanda to shout. I practiced getting my voice out a couple of times.

"Ah, wait."

I was troubled about what I should actually shout. A competent high school student wouldn't go "Helllp mee!!", right? "Heey!" would be good enough, I suppose. Anyway, I just need to shout loud enough to get someone to come over and help. I took a deep breath and was just about to yell, when...

"I said, please wait!"

A white thing suddenly reached out in the darkness, and then a soft object covered my mouth. Startled, I swallowed my words, focused my eyes to my front and saw that Chitanda was using her palm to cover my mouth.

Surprised, I darted my eyes about, while Chitanda leaned over and used her left hand to roll up her right sleeve, with her right hand still firmly on my mouth.

"I'm sorry, but please wait."

There was an unusual graveness in her tone, causing me to nod unconsciously. However, what was the basis for asking me to wait? Removing her hand from my mouth, Chitanda asked,

"If you yell right now, what do you think will happen?"

Although I didn't know what was going on, I answered anyway.

"Someone would come over here?"

"And we would ask them to take the bar off the door."

"Yeah, and they'll probably help us."

"And they can open the door."

"Yeah, they can."

"And how will they interpret this situation?"

I couldn't reply immediately.

I finally realized what Chitanda was so afraid of. If I had been trapped together, with Satoshi, or if Chitanda had been locked in with Ibara, there would be no problem. However, that was not the case.

Would the kind person who removes the bar from the door understand our situation, given that the two of us are in an unnoticeable outhouse at the corner of the grounds in the middle of the night?

After a brief moment of silence, Chitanda spoke in a voice so soft that it was difficult to catch.

"It would be absolutely fine if our rescuers were people who do not know me at all. However, the parishioners patrolling the area know me well."

I recalled an old man's reaction upon hearing Chitanda's name at the shrine office.

"If we are rescued by one of them... they would definitely get the wrong idea. Moreover, the sake lees are in the warehouse, not the outhouse, so we do not have room for explanation. Oreki-san, I'm here today representing my father. It would be a different story if it were another time and place, but it would be troubling if rumors of me being seen with you in an outhouse in Arekusu Shrine on New Year's Day spread..."

I groaned.

Just by listening to her explanation, one would think that she cares too much about her reputation. Or that she would like others to think that she's such a person. But I would think that way only because I'm Oreki Houtarou, merely a plain high school student.

On the other hand, Chitanda belonged to a different world. She's acquainted with the son of the Tougaito clan, who have a great degree of influence in educational administration, as well as the daughter of the Irisu clan, which runs the largest hospital in Kamiyama City. They not only have a senior-junior relationship in school, but are also quite good friends. Furthermore, Chitanda is representing her father on New Year's Day in giving a bottle a sake to the Juumonji clan, which runs the Arekusu shrine.

That's a world that I'll never understand. I don't know if Chitanda's worry, that raising our voices now would lead to rumors, is a valid concern or a needless anxiety.

For a short moment, I felt that it must be quite lonely to be in that world.

I let out a short sigh.

"Fine, but what should we do?"

While there were many cracks here and there on the walls, there were none at all at the door, so it would be impossible to unhinge the bar from the inside.

"In any case, we have to get help from outside, and as soon as possible. If someone really needs something from here and opens the door, they would definitely get the wrong idea. Come to think of it, who would understand our situation?"

"Only Kaho-san..."

"...and Ibara, I suppose."

"Now that I think about it, we should have shouted immediately when the bar was placed on the door, but it was so sudden that I could not react in time..."

Chitanda's downhearted voice suddenly turned bright with hope.

"But that's alright!"

"Oh, you thought of a good idea?"

"Yes!"

She was awfully confident of herself. Did she really have such an eye-opening solution?

I could imagine her smiling in the darkness.

"It's simple. We just have to give them a call."

Well, that wasn't really a jaw-dropping proposal...

"It's certainly simple, Chitanda, but I don't think there would be any public phones in a place like this."

"What are you talking about? Are you joking? Of course, we use a mobile phone."

My head hurts. The wind from the cracks was penetrating my bones.

"I see. It's a good idea. Please go ahead."

"Ah, but I don't bring a mobile phone around."

Are you serious? You're just confused about this situation and forgot that you do have one, right? Right? I spoke in a subdued voice.

"Me neither."

And the, silence fell once again.

"Oh no! What do we do?"

It's a little late to be foaming at the mouth only now.

Besides shouting for help, would there be other ways to escape from this outhouse? I tried thinking for a while.

Is there a way to remove the bar from the inside? I should think this through seriously, without immediately dismissing it as impossible.

First, to consider the structure of the closed door. This door has no key, so if you push it hard enough, it would open a bit. However, it would open only up to the bar.

In the short moment I had to observe while entering the outhouse, I noticed that there were metal fixtures shaped like the character 匚 installed on the door and walls. Obviously, I don't know the details of these fixtures, like whether they were installed using nails or screws, but it can be assumed that they were fixed well and will not fall off even if we knock on them. Also, there is a wooden pole through these fixtures. That would be the bar.

This means that the bar slides horizontally through the fixtures. If the bar fits vertically or in some weird position, we could probably be able to force

a gap in the door somehow, then use that gap to lift up the bar. But it would be impossible for a bar that fits horizontally.

In conclusion, it is impossible to remove the bar from the inside.

However...

"There's more than one way to open the door."

Upon hearing my mutterings, Chitanda reacted with an "Eh?" I waved my hand at the door.

"For example, we could take the entire door off its hinges. Depending on how it was installed."

In the darkness, I focused on the point where door met wall. There were two hinges, one near the top and one near the bottom. Well, that's how a door is usually fixed.

The problem with these hinges is that to remove them, we would need a screwdriver to loosen the screws, and on top of that, the door has to be open for that to be done. With the door closed, the screw heads are blocked by the edge of the door.

The plan to remove the hinges is also impossible.

"Besides that..."

"Erm, Oreki-san..."

Chitanda whispered in a bitter voice.

"Hmm?"

"I forgot that you don't carry a mobile phone, which is why I asked you not to yell... But now the situation's changed. We should just call for someone. At this rate, you'll..."

What will happen to me? Chitanda was being really unclear.

"You'll catch a cold!"

Indeed, my entire body was shivering from the cold. I had assumed that retrieving sake lees would be an easy job that wouldn't even take a minute, so I didn't wear my trench coat. With only my sweater on, it was painful to be out in this weather, but it's not like I would die from the cold.

"But you're still worried that someone will misunderstand after seeing both of us together, right? If we completely run out of options, I'll resort to calling for help. Until then, I'll try to think of some other way."

"Oreki-san..."

Chitanda lowered her head. I didn't know if Chitanda could see me in this dark room, but I smiled the biggest smile I could manage.

"Well, it's not that bad. We can't remove the bar or unhinge the door, but there are still four ways to escape that we haven't considered."

"Wow! That many?"

"Yeah."

I started counting with my fingers.

"First, break the door. Second, break the wall. Third, dig a tunnel under the wall. Fourth, make a hole in the ceiling."

Having counted off four fingers, only my little finger was left pointing outwards. Chitanda kept silent, but that silence seemed to say that she was tired of my jokes.

Except that I wasn't joking at all. There's a phrase from a Sherlock Holmes book that I borrowed from Satoshi: "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however unreasonable, must be the correct way." Or something like that<sup>[20]</sup>.

I pushed against the wall with my fist.

"All of these can be done if we try hard enough, I think. The door might be sturdy, but the wall it was fixed on is brittle. If we kick it a few times, the area around the hinges should give way.

"Also, the wooden walls have corroded, so if we use the tools here, we could break through without much effort."

"Wh-What?"

As expected, a voice of restraint rang out.

"These are all no good! No matter how old this outhouse is, it's still part of the shrine!"

"No good huh. I guessed so."

The shrine owners would probably get angry at us. Even if that doesn't cause us that much trouble, if we made too much noise, the parishioners would rush over, and it would defeat the purpose if we're seen escaping. In that case, breaking through the ceiling would also be out of the question. That leaves...

"How about the tunnel-digging operation, then?"

Thankfully, in this outhouse there were shovels that had sharp edges and looked reliable. Furthermore, there were no floorboards on the ground. Ah, that must be the reason for this abnormally cold temperature, because with no flooring, the coldness from the ground is directly transmitted to us.

"...Shall we begin digging?"

"How long would that take..."

I think we should be out by morning. Assuming I don't collapse in the midst of digging.

There's no use changing the direction of the escape plans. This is an outhouse, so it contains a few tools. However, a tool that could possibly help us escape has not yet appeared in this present stage. Besides the broom

and shovel, there was also a long metal pole used for housekeeping or attaching flags, as well as a platform for a taiko. The cardboard box turned out to contain a large quantity of teacups... What should we do with these?

The wind continued to enter through the cracks in the walls.

In any case, it's probably impossible. There's no way we can get out without opening the door, since this outhouse doesn't have a single window. But as we wait longer, it would become more difficult to come up with an excuse if a third party does come to rescue us. If we wanted to get help by shouting, we should have done so much earlier. I realize that I keep thinking if I can do anything more to get us out of this situation. Would that be considered willpower? No, I don't have that kind of spirit. It's just that I felt that Chitanda's fears are real, and I just wanted to be considerate to her, I suppose. Ahh, but even so, there's so much space outside!

Yearning for freedom, I took a peep at the outside world through a crack.

while it was a small hole, it unexpectedly provided a wide field of vision. My eyes were immediately drawn to the huge bonfire. How nice it would be to be there, where it's so warm! I wonder if there's still any sweet sake left, though. Our failure must have caused some trouble for Juumonji.

The shrine visitors were clearly in a very different mood compared to us. I could see a drunk elderly man approach the outhouse. That would be one of the parishioners, right?

"Ah, he's coming over!"

Only then did I realize that Chitanda was also peering at the outhouse world through a different hole in the wall. The crack I was looking through was around my waist, but Chitanda's was around her eye level. As I was leaning over, my hand was right next to Chitanda's purse.

The elderly man did not come all the way to the outhouse. I thought he was headed this way to go to the Inari shrine, but he crouched to pick up something, then turned around and went back the direction he came from.

"What was that all about?"

I muttered, and Chitanda replied in a voice that lacked confidence.

"He picked up something that looked like a mobile phone strap."

"You could see that?"

"I think so."

"At this distance? And at night?"

Her reply was exceedingly earnest.

"I can see quite well in the dark."

So Chitanda possesses night vision in addition to her 20/20 vision? She not only has excellent eyesight, but she also has sharp hearing and sense of smell. On top of that, she's good at cooking, so she probably has a good sense of taste, too.

I lost sight of the elderly man as we were talking, but Chitanda could still track his whereabouts. She spoke after a short while.

"Ah, he went to hand it in."

"Hand it in? Where?"

"At the shrine office. Ah, there's too many people, I've lost sight of him."

At that moment, a stroke of inspiration flashed in the back of my mind.

"Hey, Chitanda... Is it okay if I break the wall just a little?"

## 5 (side B)

"New Year Drama Special - The Winds of Change: Odani Castle" was really entertaining, with its unprecedeted direction. What I found really amazing was the opening scene at the Battle of Okehazama. While other dramas would depict Imagawa Yoshimoto to be a master fencer, he was shown here to be a hero unparalleled in history, and cut down the Oda army even in the rain, beating them hands down. That would make Mouri Shinsuke, the warrior who took Yoshimoto's head, an unparalleled hero as well. When I saw Yoshimoto and Shinsuke clash swords amidst mountains of corpses and rivers of blood in the opening, I was laughing so much that my stomach hurt, and that was when I realized that this drama was actually a comedy<sup>[21]</sup>.

I shouldn't have jumped to that conclusion so quickly, as there were some unexpectedly good parts in the drama. As I hummed the theme song, I idly returned to Arekusu Shrine. I flipped open my phone on a whim and read Mayaka's message again.

"Chii-chan and Oreki have arrived. They're waiting at the shrine office."

Well, she probably shouldn't send a message while doing part-time work.

I swung my bag around as I walked down the path to the shrine. With light steps, I ascended up the stone stairs, and with a sidelong glance at the crowd of people looking to buy amulets, I entered the shrine office.

I met Juumonji-san as I opened the lattice door. Of course, she was in her miko costume. Compared to her, Mayaka was unable to hide the pretension in her costume.

I guess I was lucky to immediately bump into an acquaintance, but I'm not that good with Juumonji-san. I started off with my usual lively greeting.

"Ah, Juumonji-san. Happy new year!"

Contrary to my expectations, she followed up with a question.

"Fukube-san, have you seen Chitanda?"

Chitanda-san? Isn't she here?

"I just got here, so I haven't."

"I see."

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly. Did something happen?

"Sorry I can't take you there right now, but go on inside. There's a stove in the main hall."

With those parting words, Juumonji-san shuffled into a corridor. Well, I have to be thankful that I've been allowed to come in.

I suddenly felt like taking a peek at how Mayaka was doing from the back door. Although this was my first time in the building, I had a general idea of which direction to head in. I don't look like one of those people serving sake, but I put on a face that said, "It's natural for me to be here!" and no one commented about my intrusion.

"It should be around here," I guessed as I slid open the door. Jackpot! Mayaka, clad in her scarlet hakama, was sitting in a proper position, close enough that I could reach out and touch her, and had a slightly tired expression. It must be tough to endure the cold for so long, but it'll be over in thirty minutes.

In the day, the store was bustling with activity, so she couldn't really talk with me, but it looks fine now. I whispered secretively,

"Mayaka."

"Fuku-chan..."

Is it my imagination, or is Mayaka blushing? If it's the latter, I kind of understand the reason. She's still embarrassed about her costume. It would be good if she could get used to it after wearing it for so many hours, but that's not really possible, since Mayaka is still Mayaka this year.

I had already wished her a happy new year in the day, so all I said for now was, "Good work." She was probably tired and didn't have the energy to even force a smile, so she only nodded in a childlike manner.

But then, probably having just thought of something, Mayaka's actions were filled with vigor once more, and she picked up a handkerchief from the lost-and-found tray.

"Hey, Fuku-chan, do you recognize this?"

It was a laced handkerchief that looked pure white, but actually wasn't. It could be considered to be pearl-colored, I suppose. It also looked expensive. I don't think it would be found anywhere, but it didn't strike me as particularly special or impressive, even after being asked if I could recognize it.

"Not really."

I shook my head. Mayaka muttered in a vague voice.

"I think Chii-chan had something like this..."

Come to think of it, it wouldn't be strange for Chitanda-san to use something like this. Of course, she wouldn't bring this to school, though.

I smiled.

"Well, it's good that you have an idea of who the owner is. You can ask Chitanda-san when she returns."

Mayaka forced a weak smile and replied, "Yeah, that's true."

## 5 (side A)

"Help doesn't seem to be coming..."

Chitanda, who was looking through the cracks, murmured. I groaned.

"I thought we were on the right track with the handkerchief, though..."

The wind penetrating the outhouse was growing stronger. As they say, you reap what you sow. I had broken part of the wall with the shovel. Due to that, more wind was blowing in. It's cold. Really cold.

I actually only chipped off a small bit of the wall, and I was only enlarging a pre-existing hole. It was now only large enough for Chitanda to stick her small hand out.

It is impossible for us to escape from this outhouse by ourselves.

I had drawn that conclusion earlier. While it was built in a barely noticeable place, there were still people milling about. It's not possible for us to get out without anyone seeing us if by using proper, acceptable methods. If only this room had just one window. It would then be possible to somehow dislodge the bar and open the door.

If we can't escape by ourselves, the only way was to call for help, but we could only contact Ibara or Juumonji. Both Chitanda and I don't carry mobile phones, but sadly, it doesn't seem that humans, even with their wisdom, will ever get rid of this primitive method of communication in this fast-paced, information-oriented society.

Thankfully, Ibara's part-time job as a miko included being in charge of the lost-and-found. As Ibara mentioned, the parishioners patrol the grounds, pick up anything that looks valuable and deliver the items to her.

In other words, if we drop something of monetary value, it would have a very high chance of making its way to Ibara.

There has been nothing wrong up to this point. The item that we dropped was picked up by the parishioners and sent to the shrine office, which was all according to the plan.

However, the problem was still not solved. We've established a method to send an item to Ibara, but we have no way of conveying our message for Ibara to help us.

I muttered,

"As expected, we can't do it with just one handkerchief."

We chose to drop Chitanda's handkerchief. It was our first choice as it looked valuable enough to be picked up and delivered by the parishioners, and Ibara would know who it belonged to.

Chitanda distanced herself from the wall.

"Yes, Mayaka has seen that handkerchief many times already, but it's not really something that leaves a strong impression..."

Even if we assume that Ibara knew that the handkerchief was Chitanda's, it would be difficult for her to make the logical leap and deduce that we're trapped in an outhouse. We would have to give Ibara the train of thought:

"This item was picked up near the outhouse. Why would Chitanda Eru be around that area? Wasn't she at the main hall? Ah, this has to be a serious problem!"

So it's impossible to do this with only one handkerchief, huh?

Then it's time for my next move. What would be the perfect object that would tell Ibara about our predicament when she sees it?

## 6 (side B)

The banquet had started in the main hall.

there were many empty seats, and I'm not the type of guy who gets bashful when doing something alone, but since I was bored beyond boredom itself, I immediately pulled out of the hall.

There was no other destination except for Mayaka's place. I didn't want to be a hindrance to the part-timers. I thought about the two people working with Mayaka, but I felt at ease after exchanging some words with them. Apparently, Mayaka had made a declaration to the two of them.

"I'm aiming to go out with that guy," she said.

The three shrine maidens-for-hire must have gained a feeling of solidarity after working with each other for a long time, for the two of them were supporting Ibara vehemently. I wonder where those girls came from. They're not Kamiyama High students, I think.

As soon as I slid open the door, I could see Ibara beckoning me to enter. But if I stepped out of the threshold of the door, I would be in full view of the customers. No matter how few customers there were present now, I couldn't do that. Instead, I stretched my neck as much as I could.

"Fuku-chan, look at this!"

She produced a foldable wallet with two denim surfaces. Ah, I've definitely seen this before.

"Isn't that Houtarou's?"

"Yeah. That idiot must have dropped it."

"Well, Houtarou's a guy with many chinks in his armor."

Houtarou might think that he backs up Chitanda on many things, but that's only one exceptional case in my memory. Houtarou has actually caused Mayaka and Ibara to worry quite a few times already during our normal club activities. I remember the time when we all went to the hot spring this, I mean last, year thanks to Ibara's connections, Houtarou actually fainted after being in the hot water for only a short time.

Anyway, it would be just like Houtarou to drop his wallet. But if that's the case, I'm starting to doubt that Chitanda is the owner of that handkerchief.

"This is strange. Here, take a look."

Mayaka said as she opened the wallet. It's improper to look into others' wallets! Even so, I concentrated on staring at the wallet. This is...

Mayaka accurately summed up the state of the wallet.

"It's an empty wallet."

There was nothing in the part used for keeping notes, as well as in the part for coins. Not a single yen.

"Isn't that strange? Oreki came here for a shrine visit. He would at least be holding a monetary offering."

"Nah, that's not weird at all. He could have used all his money as an offering."

"Him? Are you serious?"

No, I think that would be unlikely. Then again, he could have had some really intense wish. I pointed at the wallet.

"What's strange is the card slots. Houtarou would usually carry around a point card or membership card, but there's none here."

"Ah, yeah, that's true."

"So this wouldn't be Houtarou's wallet, right?"

But Mayaka strongly rejected that theory.

"No, this is definitely his wallet."

"... Why do you think so?"

"Because this was tied to the wallet at the metal fixture usually used to attach a metal chain."

Mayaka removed a scrap of paper from her purse. It was a small, crumpled piece of paper.

I knew what it was when I received it. It was a fortune.

"Take a look at it."

I unfolded the fortune... and burst into laughter.

"Misfortune! Misfortune! Man, Arekusū Shrine sure is nasty. To think they actually have bad fortunes!"

But Mayaka didn't laugh at the bad fortune. A wry smile surfaced on her lips, but her voice was dead serious.

"That's the fortune that Oreki drew. It also said something like 'Pecked at by birds' or something like that. Oreki dropped his wallet while his bad fortune was tied to it."

I see.

I furrowed my eyebrows. As I had suddenly fallen into silence, Mayaka was worried.

"Fuku-chan?"

"... This means..."

I gulped in awe.

"Because Houtarou tied this inauspicious fortune to his wallet, on top of dropping it, its contents were also removed!"

That's really unfortunate of Houtarou, to suffer hardships so early in the new year.

This is the power of a fortune. It predicted Houtarou's calamity so accurately. I should also make use of this power.

I retrieved a 100-yen coin from my own wallet.

"Mayaka, let me draw a fortune too."

## 6 (side A)

"Help isn't coming, huh... Tchoo!"

Chitanda sneezed.

And I had thought it would be fine since it wouldn't be cold at all. How wrong I was. Being a guy, I've never worn a kimono, but no matter how you look at it, it can't have the best insulation.

"You alright?"

Chitanda gave a troubled smile in response to my mundane question.

"Yes... I should have worn my Michiyuki..."

"Michiyuki?"

"Yes, that black clothing made from crêpe."

Ah, that coat. So it's called a Michiyuki, huh? It did seem very Japanese.

"I also regret not wearing my trench coat."

"It's certainly gotten pretty cold..."

Pretty's a total understatement. To be precise, we're reaching our limits soon. If I didn't have a heater pack in my pocket, I would have definitely given up and shouted for help.

Now, my pocket held various items, besides the heater pack. A 1,000-yen note. Some small change. And a point card for the CD shop.

It had been a momentous decision to throw down my wallet. I had thought that throwing out Chitanda's wallet would have been the better solution. If I tied my bad fortune to Chitanda's wallet, Ibara would understand the situation and would probably judge it to be an emergency.

However, I refrained from using that method. Chitanda's wallet wasn't the one that she normally used when buying bread from the canteen, but was a part of her New Year costume. I had taken a glance at it while she was paying for a fortune. Chitanda's wallet today was made of real leather and looked expensive.

I thought that if we removed the wallet's contents, it wouldn't be so painful if it were stolen instead of returned, but that was naive of me, as Chitanda's wallet was packed. If anyone besides the patrolling parishioners found the wallet, they would definitely go through its contents. That would be a problem.

Having no other choice, I emptied my wallet, and to show that the wallet belonged to Oreki Houtarou, I tied my bad fortune to the wallet. Since it was a piece of paper, I wanted to write "Help", but unfortunately, no matter how much I wracked my brains, I could neither find any writing equipment, nor think of any substitutes. I did think of scratching out "Help", but the creases from tying it to the wallet would make the word unreadable. I could have inserted the paper inside the wallet, but then Ibara wouldn't be able to tell that it's my wallet just by looking at it. I was at a dilemma as to which option I should take.

In the end, it seems that I chose the wrong one. The wallet undoubtedly got delivered to Ibara, but help still didn't arrive. Ibara should have suspected something after receiving Chitanda's handkerchief, followed by my wallet, but... It hadn't made her think of leaving her post and checking on our situation.

"Sorry, Chitanda. We might not have any other options."

I was somehow in a self-sacrificial mood and felt like giving the freezing Chitanda my clothes to wear, but I was also cold. If I removed this sweater, I would probably get hypothermia or something.

Chitanda returned with a smile.

"No, it's my fault for being selfish and dragging you along with me."

"You're not being selfish. It's your responsibility, right?"

"... That might be true, but that's no excuse for getting you caught up with this. Let's just call for help. We'll just have to put up with any rumors that spread."

I was filled with chagrin, having to give up after enduring the cold for so long. But we've exhausted all possible means. Since we can't think of anything else, we shouldn't delay pointlessly any more. I nodded.

However, at the very last moment...

"Ah, I imagine Fukube-san is already here, too."

Chitanda's lamentation reminded me of what I had forgotten. Of course! Satoshi's probably here already. He said that he would revisit the shrine at this time, so it would be natural for him to be here.

AT first, I thought of the physical ways to break out of the room. That proved to be too difficult, so I considered trying to contact Ibara. But Ibara wasn't the only person we could contact. There was also Satoshi. Satoshi would understand!

Ah, but we don't have the tools!

"Chitanda, do you have some sort of string?"

Chitanda faltered after receiving my sudden outburst.

"St-string?"

"About this long... Something around 50 cm would do. That will definitely be enough to convey our situation."

Chitanda started feeling around her body to search for a string.

"How about my sandal strap?"

"Too short."

"Ah! There's a drawstring on my purse!"

I shook my head.

"That's no good, since we'll be using your purse."

Unable to understand, Chitanda tilted her head in doubt. Well, I'll save the explanation for later.

"How about your bootlace, then?"

"Ah, right! There's that!"

With a spirited disposition, I looked down at my feet, but was immediately disappointed. If I was wearing normal sneakers, that would work. However, I was wearing laceless boots today. It's not like i was trying to look good. It's just that I was afraid the grounds would be slippery from all the melted snow. Boy, was I seriously unlucky for that decision to bite back at me here.

"If we absolutely must..."

Chitanda gently touched her obi.

"We could use the string on my obi."

"Is it long enough?"

"Yes."

Chitanda nodded, and for some reason, looked away. Not caring about the small details, I spoke.

"Is it difficult to remove?"

"Well, yes, it is. It will take quite a bit of time."

At that moment, a bout of uneasiness passed by.

"Erm, Chitanda, I'm not familiar with kimonos, but..."

"....."

"Will the kimono be fine after you take off the obi string?"

The answer to that question took a long time to arrive. Chitanda cast her eyes downwards and spoke in a small voice.

"The obi would kind of come off..."

"Come off? We can't do that then!"

"I guessed so. Since it would be difficult to fix..."

That's not the problem here. Even if we manage to get help from Satoshi, if he sees Chitanda's kimono in a mess it would be... Let's just say that it wouldn't look good. It would make all that caution we've practiced up to now absolutely pointless.

"Is there any other string here?"

Think.

This outhouse contains a bamboo broom, a metal shovel, a long pole for housekeeping, a platform to support a taiko, a long rod laid out horizontally, as well as a cardboard box, which is filled with a large quantity of teacups, all with the same design. We've reached this situation where we have nothing but the aforementioned items, but what we really need right now is just one string... If we had a blade, we could cut off the linen string fixed at the end of the broom. Would I be able to cut it by swinging the shovel? I don't think so, but it's not long enough anyway.

As if she couldn't take the silence, Chitanda timidly asked,

"Er... Why do you need a string to get Fukube-san to help?"

More importantly, where's the string? I'm about to freeze soon.

## 7 (side B)

Mayaka shrieked hysterically.

"Why!"

A lost object had been delivered yet again. This time, it was a purse. Not the cheap kind that I use, but an elegant purse that a woman in a kimono would carry.

Mayaka was shocked because that purse belonged to Chitanda. Apparently, Chitanda had taken out that purse before I arrived, and Mayaka clearly remembered that it looked like that. A handkerchief, a wallet, and now a purse. The two of them had lost that possessions three times in a row. Is that the consequence of Houtarou's "Misfortune"? Incidentally, I have a "Middle Blessing". I'm a little disappointed, but if I look down the scale, I do feel a sense of superiority.

"This was also picked up near the outhouse. What are those two doing?"

It was light purple in color, was tied with a plaited cord, and was decorated with balls. That's nice. But it's clearly not something a guy would carry, so I shouldn't compare it with mine.

"And there's some dirty string tied around this, too..."

That line caught my attention.

"String?"

"Yeah, look."

Mayaka held up the purse. Indeed, there was a string tied around at the bottom. A purse that was tied at both ends. My eyes widened.

Th-this is...

I suddenly jumped up to my feet from my sitting position, causing Mayaka to look up in surprise.

"Wh-what is it, Fuku-chan?"

"Mayaka, where is the outhouse?"

"It's over there, near the Inari shrine."

"I'll be right back!"

With quick steps, I left the shrine office. As I ran with all my might under the starry night sky, only one thought crossed my mind.

Houtarou, Chitanda-san, I'm coming to help!

## 7 (side A)

"Satoshi would understand. The meaning of a purse that's tied up at its opening and base."

Since I had done what needed to be done, I was free to give Chitanda an explanation. To be precise, I was explaining while being barely conscious after being driven to the wall by the cold.

"Because he knows a lot of trifling things."

Chitanda was also shivering from the cold. But it seems that her physical suffering was being outweighed by her curiosity. She drew closer and urged me to carry on.

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"The purse is a bag. If the opening and base are tied up, it means that the insides are trapped. This implies that we're 'trapped like a rat'."

In the darkness, a white head tilted in puzzlement.

"I...see?"

She clearly doesn't understand yet. I smiled.

"I didn't come up with it. It came from an episode in history. You know the Battle of Anegawa, right?"

Chitanda, with her exceptional grades, was strong when it came to memorizing details from the textbook. She answered smoothly,

"The Battle of Anegawa was fought in the year 1570, between the Oda-Tokugawa coalition and the Azai-Asakura coalition. Oda Nobunaga won

that battle."

"It's a famous story from just before that... Do you know the Siege of Kanegazaki?"

Since this didn't appear in the textbook, Chitanda, even with her superior grades, did not know about it. She shook her head.

I then gave a concise explanation.

"When Nobunaga was attacking Asakura, Nobunaga's brother-in-law, Azai, betrayed him. Nobunaga's sister sent a small bag tied at both ends to Nobunaga, who was at the front lines. Upon seeing the bag, Nobunaga realized that his sister was trying to convey the message that he was 'trapped like a rat'. I don't know how much of this actually happened, though."

This explanation made me seem very knowledgeable, but I only knew about this from the manga I borrowed from Satoshi. I read it at the hot spring inn during the summer holidays, I believe. I also watched that same story unfold in the "New Year Drama Special - Winds of Change : Odani Castle" in the afternoon. I did doubt if just one bag would work, and I thought that perhaps putting the effort to write a letter would be better... Anyway, if it doesn't work now, it'll be extremely troubling for us.

Well, it should be fine. In any case, Satoshi would be free, and like us, he would definitely go over to see Ibara. He should understand when he sees the purse. He's the one who lent me the manga, and he also watched the New Year Drama Special earlier. He's the type to be easily influenced by something he sees. If he sees the purse tied at both ends, he'll definitely think back to that historical episode.

"I never knew that such a story existed..."

Finally convinced, Chitanda nodded deeply, as starlight illuminated her profile.

Since the wallet was also picked up and sent to Ibara, I could rely on the patrolling parishioners to deliver the purse as well. If not, I wouldn't have

been able to throw the purse out.

But in order to get the message across, we needed a string to tie around the base of the purse. It's impossible to convey the message using the purse alone, no matter how you look at it. However, we couldn't find a suitable piece of string to use in the outhouse. Without the tools, it would just be an empty theory. And then I realized that I was following a mistaken assumption... The string that we needed to find was not necessarily inside the outhouse.

The walls of this shack are brittle. Using the shovel, I broke off a corner of the wall, while apologizing in my heart. This brought the number of small holes I made to two. Since the hole was just small enough to put a hand through, Chitanda consented tacitly,

After that, I climbed onto the taiko platform. My aim was to get to the area near the ceiling of the outhouse, right under the eaves.

I pushed my hand out of the hole to get the string. A white "Arekusū Shrine" flag was placed near the outhouse, as if cuddling up to it. The flag pole seemed to be too short, so to stabilize the flag, a vinyl string was used to tie it to the eaves of the outhouse. I was aiming for that string. As expected, the solution was waiting outside the outhouse.

This way, I managed to produce the message "trapped like a rat". The rest is up to Satoshi. Well, it should be fine.

The door clattered. And then, a loud voice sounded.

"Houtarou, are you there?"

Chitanda stared at me with widened eyes, as if not being able to believe it. I shrugged and replied,

"Thanks for helping, I was about to freeze to death."

"There's some hot sweet sake waiting for you in the shrine office. Right, I'm opening the door."

Sweet sake, huh. It was the reason we got in this mess, and I don't think I want to see a cup of it right now.

Clatter, clatter, clunk. The aluminum door slowly opened.

Illuminated by the moonlight and the blazing bonfire, Satoshi smiled.

"Yo. Happy new year!"

"Hey. Sappy new year."

Buffeted by the winter wind, Chitanda sneezed.

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ [Shinto purification ritual](#)
2. ↑ As opposed to a double door
3. ↑ Refers to the best fortune one can draw at Shinto shrines for a few yen
4. ↑ Refers to Sugiwara no Michizane, a scholar, poet and politician who is revered as the God of Learning
5. ↑ A 1.8-liter bottle usually containing sake
6. ↑ A sash for traditional Japanese clothing
7. ↑ A low table covered by a heavy blanket, with a heat source underneath
8. ↑ Note that this story is set in 2001, so mobile phones aren't so ubiquitous.
9. ↑ Inari is the god of harvests, wealth and fertility
10. ↑ Refers to the highest rank given to a shrine
11. ↑ A daruma is a round doll that will always return to upright position when tilted. A daruma stove is a stove that looks like a daruma
12. ↑ Silk, wool, or synthetic fiber with a distinctive crisp, crimped appearance
13. ↑ Mito Koumon is an old Japanese drama. The main character, Tokugawa Mitsukuni, proclaimed himself as "a crêpe merchant from Etsugo"
14. ↑ A type of traditional Japanese clothing, tied at the waist and falling to the ankles, worn on top of a kimono
15. ↑ Shrine maiden
16. ↑ Japanese sock with a separation between the big toe and other toes
17. ↑ A future blessing indicates that you will have good luck in the future, with the implication that your luck right now won't be very good
18. ↑ A philosophical argument that goes like this:
  - 1) If A, then B.

- 2) A
  - 3)Therefore, B
19. ↑ A sacred Shinto tree
20. ↑ The actual phrase is: Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth
21. ↑ Satoshi probably found it amusing because Yoshimoto's men were said to have fled upon seeing the Oda army marching on them in the rain, so the mountains of corpses and rivers of blood were extremely inaccurate

# **Story 6 - The Case of the Hand-made Chocolate**

# 1

Today, it is common knowledge that there is more than one perspective to any topic. In this age, it is impossible to survive as a middle school student while being unable to consider the opposite viewpoint. But then again, if you take this one step further, that would mean that while we are under the impression that we know the things around us like they were flesh and blood, we just can't say for sure, and that is exceedingly bad for our psychological stability. So instead of pursuing the truth, we go for plan B, which is not looking into the authenticity of things above a certain depth, or in other words, we believe. This way, we can finally shake off the evils of duality and lead a perfectly normal life.

But recognizing everything in one's surroundings yet disregarding all inquiry would be a totally different problem. While believing in something is unavoidable, we should not accept things blindly. This is also common knowledge. To not accept it is unforgivable. While my personal principle does not draw a clear line regarding that belief, I wouldn't look down on people who do.

This was my follow-up to the tongue-tied Satoshi's lame excuses in this crucial moment. We were at a stairway entrance in Kaburaya Middle School after the day's lessons had ended. It was a little late, so there were only a few sparse figures of students. It had already turned dark on the other side of the open glass door, and the cold February wind blew in intermittently. Satoshi turned to look at me as if I had just saved his life, and gave me a thumbs-up.

"Ah, Houtarou, you do understand, right? The phrase 'To not accept it is unforgivable' was really interesting. Because, look, what if it were home-made cookies? You can't simply buy some cookies over the counter, decorate it with fresh cream or something and say, 'Voila, home-made

cookies!', right? That's why, I basically, um, don't harbor any ill intentions, but..."

It was not every day that you could see something cause Satoshi to be so incoherent. Fukube Satoshi. He's someone I've known since I entered middle school, and our friendship is quite deep. He's short, gives off a weak image, and has a face that does not exude dignity or strength in the slightest, but in reality he's quite a courageous guy... But not this time. The opponent's too strong.

The person who had ambushed and cornered Satoshi was a small female student who could pass as an elementary school student. Her name is Ibara Mayaka. She has been in the same class as me since first grade in elementary school. This is only my opinion, but her appearance has not changed one bit in the nine years I've known her, if you discount the changes in her size. In addition, while we may have strong affinity, we have exchanged close to zero words with each other. Even now, Ibara doesn't listen to my words. With her head cast downwards, her left hand on her waist, and her right hand holding a present wrapped in red wrapping paper, Ibara let out a sigh and spoke in a low voice.

"Basically, you're trying to say this: For something to be called home-made chocolates, they have to be made from cacao beans. A chocolate plate that is melted in hot water and reshaped is not considered as home-made chocolate. So my Valentine chocolate is not home-made. That's what you mean, right?"

It was the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2000 AD. Saint Valentine's Day. It's the day when chocolate sales skyrocket, and it is absolutely ordinary for advertisements to be manipulated if there is profit to be earned. In fact, doing it in February is a smart move. I'm sure that many people would like to believe that the last chance to confess one's love is right before the season of farewells<sup>[1]</sup>. They certainly wouldn't think that this arrangement was planned.

This wasn't Ibara's first time confessing her feelings to Satoshi. In each of her previous attempts, Satoshi simply evaded the subject. But with today

being Valentine's Day, that was impossible. Ibara was serious about it. Having been hit by Satoshi's careless words, she was seething with anger.

Her demeanor was still fairly stable, but I wonder what kind of light those downcast eyes were holding. Those were eyes that would even scare off a fierce god, I thought, but then again, I'm only having these nonchalant thoughts because I'm not involved in this. Satoshi, being the person concerned, took the full brunt of Ibara's stare, but he still managed to give a reply.

"I wouldn't go that far, but..."

"But that's what you wanted to say, right?"

"Well, put simply, yes."

Ibara raised her head, as her rage spewed forth.

"I see! So that's what you're trying to say! I, I took all that trouble... Just for Valentine's Day! Fine! I get it! If that's what you want..."

Without pause, she ripped apart the red wrapping paper in one breath to reveal a heart-shaped chocolate wrapped in cling film. She then tore up the cling film, opened her small mouth as wide as she could, and chomped down on the chocolate, which had gone hard due to the cold February wind. With a crack, the pointed bit at the bottom of the heart was bitten clean off and chewed noisily by Ibara.

"I'll definitely do it, got that?"

Both of us were taken aback by Ibara's unexpected actions. A few male students who just happened to pass by peered at us, probably curious about what was happening, but then soon retreated, knowing full well to let sleeping dogs lie. With the chocolate she had taken great pains to make destroyed, Ibara glared at Satoshi. She now had a scary expression that was neither anger nor sadness, just pure burning combativeness. Ibara thrust the broken heart at Satoshi.

"Remember this, Fuku-chan, I mean, Fukube Satoshi!"

"Wha-What?"

Stunned, Satoshi asked without thinking. Ibara replied with a sonorous declaration.

"Next year! The 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2001 AD! I'll make a masterpiece that even you'll accept, and cram it right into your face! You better remember it!"

Beginning to cry, Ibara rushed down the corridor. Her retreating figure faded at the staircase and soon disappeared. When I looked back, I saw that Satoshi had an awkward expression on his face, but he shrugged as if that was usual. I asked,

"Is that alright?"

"Perhaps I was a little mean..."

"Wasn't she crying?"

"Mayaka? Nah, she'll be fine."

Satoshi said as he removed his shoes from his locker. I did the same and shrugged, deciding to forget about Ibara. Her caustic words were probably just a channel for her to vent her grief, I thought, but then again, I'm not involved in this matter.

More importantly, Ibara was planning to give Satoshi home-made chocolate next year, but I wonder if that would really work out. After all, there are only a few days to the high school entrance examinations. Both of them are aiming to get into Kamiyama High School, but if one of them messes up, they'll be separated, and as they say, out of sight, out of mind. However, I also have to prepare for the exams, and I don't have the luxury to worry about them. The cold February wind blew in once again, causing me to shiver uncontrollably.



## 2

... That's what I remembered about what happened last year.

Come to think of it, I was slightly more indifferent about it last year compared to this year. It's most probably because Ibara and I were really estranged at that time, so it couldn't be helped.

All three of us graduated from Kaburaya Middle School and entered Kamiyama High School together without a hitch. Then, for some reason, all of us chose the same club activity. I think of Satoshi as a friend, and Ibara obviously liked Satoshi, but the three of us are fundamentally not a close group of friends who would hang out together. The fact that all of us entered the mysterious, meaningless Classics Club one after another would be, if put poetically, a practical joke of fate; if put prosaically, the end result of a course of events.

Speaking of the club known as the Classics Club, just the three of us would be absolutely inadequate for its activities. In the Geography Lecture Room, which the Classics Club borrows, there are four members. The last one is the most hard to please.

That difficult person raised her voice, breaking my peaceful reminiscing.

"Eh? What did you mean by that? I'm curious!"

I turned back, and the first thing to come into my sight was long, black hair. I couldn't see her face since her back was facing me, but I could still tell what facial expression she was having right now. When she says the usual "I'm curious!", her large eyes, the only part of her that betrayed the impression of a Yamato Nadeshiko [2], would widen even more, and her cheeks would become slightly red. Thanks to her extreme curiosity, the Classics Club has been able to function as a club without boredom over the

last year. Since I would actually prefer boredom to work, that troubled me to no end.

Chitanda was having a face-to-face conversation with Ibara in the middle of the classroom. I was flipping through a book nearby, but probably thinking nothing of me, the two of them were exchanging words at their usual volume. If I hadn't shifted my attention to the matters of the past, I would be directly receiving the contents of their conversation. Not that I wanted to eavesdrop, but I could hear Ibara's reply.

"I mean, chocolate remained as a drink for 4,000 years not because the South American people did not have any ideas, but because they lacked the technical means."

Seems like those two have been conversing about chocolate this whole time. It would be more accurate to say that Ibara was lecturing Chitanda, though. That's probably the reason why I suddenly remembered about Valentine's Day last year. Last year..., yes, about one year has passed since then. It was now February in the year 2001 AD. To conserve electricity, the heaters in school could not be set about 16 degrees, leaving much to be desired. While I must commend their efforts to save energy, I hate being cold.

But as if thrusting aside the cold, Ibara was talking with ever-increasing amounts of enthusiasm.

"After the Spanish conquistadors brought chocolate to Europe, some time was needed for it to spread as a luxury grocery item. That's because after pulverizing cacao beans, all that could be produced was a sticky liquid with more than 50% fat content. In a time when coffee was readily available, they didn't want to drink something like that."

"I cannot tolerate caffeine, so I cannot drink coffee, but..."

After a short pause, Chitanda continued.

"A drink with a 50% fat content does not seem to be good."

"Well, it seems like she's tried drinking mayonnaise before.

"It was actually quite bad for digestion."

"But it still spread, right?"

"It became really widespread after people started adding sugar to it. It even became a drink superior to coffee for the English. Moreover, because of its high caloric content, it was often used for medical purposes. It was quite a high-class beverage at the time."

"It was used as medicine?"

"Yes, as an aphrodisiac."

I could sense Chitanda tilting her head.

"Eh? How do you spell that?"

Ibara was about to answer, but then she stiffened, and the conversation stopped temporarily. I raised my head, which was buried in my book, to take a peek at Ibara's expression, and noticed a distinct flush on her face. She was having a hard time trying to spell the word she had brought up without thinking.

"To hold a meeting<sup>[3]</sup>, then..."

"To hold a meeting, then?"

"Anyway!"

Ibara forcibly changed the subject. I was about to laugh at her disconcerted manner, but somehow managed to stifle it. I know how to spell it, I think.

"For the chocolate drink to be edible, it wasn't enough to simply squeeze the oil out. A method to add an alkali had to be developed in order to neutralize the acidic content and cause the oil to break down."

This technical discussion seems to have piqued Chitanda's curiosity, so Ibara's attempt at changing the subject was a success.

"Alkali? I've never heard of adding that to food... except for Chinese noodles."

Ibara continued in a somewhat relieved manner.

"However, even after doing that, the beans still had a crunchy texture, causing it to be distasteful, so they had to be crushed even more. Chii-chan, how small do you think the grains are?"

The diameter of chocolate grains? I've never considered it before. The book in my hands suddenly seemed uninteresting, and I started thinking about Ibara's question, but I couldn't imagine how small they would be.

In contrast, Chitanda hummed quietly and answered the question.

"I see. I've only heard this from the people who sell what at home, but the diameter of wheat flour is 40 to 50 micrometer. Are chocolate beans that small?"

But Ibara shook her head as if she prided herself on having this knowledge.

"I've heard that they're actually 20 micrometers in diameter!"

"... That's amazing!"

Is that a figure I should be surprised at? With no means of comparison, I could not understand at all. Is 20 micrometers that different from 50 micrometers?

... Ah, is it because there's a difference of 2.5 times?

Chitanda nodded a few times with eager admiration.

"That sounds like a difficult number for a mortar and pestle."

"Just like how you can't make ice cream without an ice cream machine, it's impossible to make chocolate from cacao beans using household equipment."

"That's a shame. Fukube-san wants chocolate made from cacao beans, right?"

Ibara let out a small sigh upon hearing those words.

"I didn't know last year that chocolate was so difficult to make, but neither did Fuku-chan, so it's fine."

"It's fine, you say..."

As Chitanda gave her reply, a smile appeared on Ibara's face. No, not the refreshing kind. To exaggerate, it would be something like this: "As her throat rumbled, I shuddered, and couldn't stop cold sweat from forming on my back. A dark enthusiasm caused twisted pleasure to spread on her lips." With clenched fists, she looked up at an oblique angle and announced,

"I'm going to make the best home-made chocolate ever! If Fuku-chan still complains, I'll lock him up and slowly explain all this to him with additional data. If that doesn't work... I'll just shove it into his mouth!"

One shouldn't incur a woman's enmity. If it's wrong to generalize about women, then I would say that I wouldn't want to provoke Ibara's resentment. Her words might be exaggerated, but they can't be treated as a joke. Unfortunately for Satoshi, the little joke that he used to reject the chocolate last year is still hanging over his head, and now it has turned out like this. Well, as they say, you reap what you sow.

As expected, Chitanda had also been pulled in by Ibara's tenacity, and was using her hands to soothe Ibara. She then asked a question to return the conversation to its original track.

"So what are you making? I know many types of candies you could make with chocolate, but..."

Having decided a long time ago, Ibara answered immediately.

"I plan on making one with a heart-shaped mold."

"Eh? But that's..."

"I know that it's quite plain, but last year's was a failure. I'm going to make sure he accepts this time."

Just when they had finally gotten to the main point, Ibara suddenly leaned forward. Chitanda also responded by drawing closer, such that it was as if their foreheads were about to collide.

"So, I want to make the best chocolate. I'll need things from a Western-style confectionery. Chitanda, do you know of any shops that sell that kind of stuff?"

For some reason, Chitanda lowered her voice and answered,

"Let's see... There should be a store that sells ingredients for professionals near the wholesale market. We could try that place."

Ibara also replied in a small voice.

"Could you take me there?"

"Of course. Would this Sunday be fine?"

"It's settled, then... and make sure you keep this a secret from Fuku-chan."

"My lips are sealed."

And thus the two girls shared an unbreakable promise.

I'm fine with it, but I'm a guy, and on top of that I'm also Satoshi's friend... If they deemed me trustworthy enough to refrain from informing Satoshi, I certainly wouldn't feel bad about it, but either way, it seems that I wasn't counted as one of the room's occupants. As I was having this thought, Ibara called out, as if having just noticed my existence.

"Ah, Oreki."

"... Yeah?"

I answered as if I had also just noticed Ibara. Without minding my tone, Ibara gave a rare gentle smile.

"Make sure you don't say anything either."

"Sure."

"If you do..."

I already agreed not to! So please, stop staring at me with those eyes!

After school the next day. Ibara and Chitanda were holding another discussion about chocolate in the Geography Lecture Room. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I decided to head home.

I exposed the front of my trench coat to the February wind and joined the flow of people going home from school. Come to think of it, last year, when I was still in middle school, I would immediately start my journey home after school, no matter how early the lessons ended. My everyday life was devoid of purpose. I would reach home early, but I wouldn't have anything to do. I tried to think of ways to spend the time after school, but to no avail. Actually, with regards to the characteristic of a daily life lacking in purpose, this year was exactly the same as last year.

Following the crowd to the main street, I left the narrow footpath on the bridge and entered the shopping district. The winter sun, which was weak at the best of times, became even more unreliable when it came to evening. Only now did I realize that the figures of my schoolmates had grown sparse. It's probably not because of the cold, but there were simply no people around. Instead, there were only cars driving past continuously.

With a sidelong glance at a dry goods store, a boutique, and a hairdressers', I proceeded along the tiled walkway. The sound of the flowing wind was

mixed with the sound of electronics. I had gotten to the game center next to the hairdressers'. I was just walking past when I suddenly realized something. Out of all the bicycles lined up outside the shop, I recognized one of them. There was no doubt that this mountain bike, which had a worn-out cloth added to its left grip, belonged to Satoshi.

I checked my watch. It's not like I wanted to go in and have a few games, but I had no reason to hurry home. According to my motto, which is "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick.", there was only one course of action... I should continue my journey home.

But the automatic glass door in front of me suddenly opened, and out came Satoshi. He probably noticed me inside, so he came outside to intercept me. Wearing his usual inextinguishable smile, he lifted a hand.

"Yo!"

"Hey."

Taking a glance at my expression, Satoshi spoke.

"Hmm, you don't seem to be in a rush."

Since that was obvious, I didn't reply. Satoshi pointed at the game center.

"You passed at just the right time. How about it? A game for old times' sake? I've created the sure-kill Satoshi Special, but it just isn't the same playing against the CPU."

He was challenging me to a game. I yawned.

"I haven't played for such a long time, though."

"Me too. But Houtarou, according to a report by the Central Education Commission of Inquiry, kids these days seem to be playing games all the time. If so, it would be a educational problem if one doesn't have an interest in games as a child."

Shrugging at that joke, I advanced to the shop. I had no reason to refuse.

The game center, which I hadn't been to in a long time, was illuminated way too bright, as if that was part of their plan to promote their image. I remembered it as a place heavy with cigarette smoke, but there didn't seem to be any smoke at all now. In exchange, there were also fewer people around. The small machines had been pushed to the back of the shop, while larger machines that I hadn't seen before were throwing their weight around in the center.

It's been a really long time. I wonder how long it's been since the last time I was here. I've almost never entered the game center on my own. That would mean that the last time I came here, I was most likely with Satoshi. We used to play here often last year..., no, it was two years ago.

I didn't recognize all those games displayed on the monitors. Well, it's understandable for someone who hasn't gone to a game center in two years. As if having entered a strange land, my eyes kept wandering about. With a backward glance at me, Satoshi smoothly advanced to the inner region of the shop, and turned around when he reached a game machine.

"How about this? You remember this, right?"

Satoshi had chosen a game that even I had seen before. To be precise, I used to play it with Satoshi quite often. There were two machines designed to look like cockpits placed next to each other. It was a game that simulated a robot battle. Even after two years, or an even longer period of time, this machine was still here. Satoshi held both his hands wide and raised his voice.

"Spraying shells and shooting beams! This is definitely a man's kind of romance, so I can't invite Mayaka."

"She probably wouldn't join you even if you invited her to some other game. Right, I'll accept your challenge. Although I don't think I can control it well."

"Nah, you'll remember it immediately. Please go easy on me."

With those last words, Satoshi smoothly slid his small figure into the cockpit. Shortly thereafter, I could hear stirring techno music coming from inside the machine.

I placed my shoulder bag outside the machine and removed my trench coat to reduce my weight, and entered the other cockpit. I inserted a 100-yen coin into the slot, and challenged Satoshi to a match. Satoshi's robot was the same as the one he used two years ago, a robot which specialized in mobility and was exceptional in aerial combat. It had a sleek form, a cannon built into its right arm, and a beam cannon protruding out of its body. I also chose a robot that I used in the past, one that followed the Battleship Giant Cannon Principle<sup>[4]</sup>. It was a bulky machine with a low center of gravity. It held a smooth-bore cannon in its right hand, and had two laser guns on its shoulders<sup>[5]</sup>.

After the two machines had been displayed on the monitor, the computer automatically selected the stage. It was the deck of a flying aircraft carrier. According to my vague memory, this stage had few obstacles, making it disadvantageous for Satoshi, whose robot was based on evading attacks. Well, that still doesn't make up for my two-year handicap.

"Get ready," a synthesized voice announced. The interface consisted of two joysticks and five buttons. "Go."

The match was made up of three rounds. In the first round, Satoshi was probably showing some consideration, and I was somehow allowed to spend the first half of the allotted time to get used to the controls. When there were only ten seconds remaining, I pressed a button at random, and a laser unexpectedly scored a direct hit on Satoshi's robot, which was in my direct range. At that moment, I heard some strange sounds like "Pikyaa" or "Higyaa"<sup>[6]</sup> coming from the next machine. There might be no other customers around, but it's still quite embarrassing. Satoshi's light-armored machine stalled after taking the hit, and the round was over.

Before the second round began, Satoshi quickly emerged from his cockpit and thrust his face into mine.

"So how is it? You still got it?"

"Yeah, I remember most of it. Let's go."

"OK, I won't go easy on you!"

I heard Satoshi slip into his seat as the second round began. Satoshi's machine disappeared from my line of fire immediately, meaning that he was serious now. At that instant, I made my machine move forward, and a blue flame erupted at my previous position. I rotated around to search for the enemy machine. I squeezed the trigger as soon as I saw a figure appear right behind, and fired the cannon on the right arm. But before the projectile hit, the target disappeared from my field of vision yet again. His machine's speed was incomparable to mine.

Yeah, it was always like this, I recalled as I took evasive action for the time being. To be precise, I was making my machine move in one direction. Satoshi's robot was now flying in the sky. Machine gun bullets rained down like in an air strike. It's alright if I get hit, though, since my robot has thick armor.

When we were middle school students, there were only two ways for the fight to end. My machine would either decimate Satoshi's at the beginning of the round, or Satoshi's mobile robot would run circles around my machine until the time ran out. Satoshi would win most of the time, and he would often laugh and say, "You were trying to end the match too quickly, Houtarou."

For an instant, I could see the enemy machine right in front of me, flying in the sky. With the situation worsening, I naively aimed and fired the lasers, but the target dived down, avoiding the laser. While I was in the firing position and unable to move, Satoshi pointed his robot at me and used his strongest beam cannon. It was, of course, a direct hit. He then took the initiative and sprayed me with the machine gun to end the fight.

The third round.

As the metallic voice shouted, "Go", I immediately dashed forward to reduce our distance. Satoshi, in an unguarded moment, retreated without a plan. If I took this chance to continuously fire the smooth-bore cannon, I should at least hit once. That would deal a fair bit of damage to Satoshi's weakly armored robot.

But Satoshi was not the average player. I thought that he was focused on escaping, but he actually stood his ground and fired his beam cannon. Our distance was too small, so I couldn't react in time. My robot took a shot and toppled over.

While I was trying to get up, Satoshi seized the opportunity to bombard me with all his equipped firearms. An aggressive play. I could either dash out of the barrage or use my thick armor to withstand it.

"Hmm...?"

As I hurriedly moved the joysticks, I suddenly felt that something was off. Was it like this when I played with Satoshi the last time?

No, it's clearly different.

Satoshi's play style wasn't like this. Now, we were wearing out each other's armor with our respective firepower, as only a small amount of time remained. Satoshi read me and pulled off an amazing dodge on my cannon shot. At that moment, Satoshi's robot was closing the distance between us. I could see a slender form approach rapidly on my monitor.

But with that straightforward movement, I could easily hit his machine with my laser. I readied my finger on the trigger. At that moment, I remembered.

That's right, Satoshi's play style was "Victory Above All". He would do anything in order to win, and when he was in a disadvantageous position, he would retreat and wait for an opportunity. When he could win just by stalling for time, he would only run away, but when it was his turn to attack, he would go all out. That's not all. He would also sometimes use system faults and bugs. Anyway, Satoshi was a person who only wanted to win. When he lost, he would blame his bad luck, sulk without concealing his

rage, and be really sore about it. The reason why I distanced myself from the game center was largely Satoshi's implacability, but it would be unpleasant if I told him that to his face.

What's the meaning of this head-on charge, then? ... Could it be a trap?

But I had realized it too late. I had already squeezed the trigger, causing my robot to go into a laser-firing position. If Satoshi stopped, escaped to the skies and fired his beam cannon, it would be game, set and match.

But Satoshi didn't take that course of action. Instead, all I could see on my monitor was a sword of light sliding out of his machine's right arm. A melee attack? A reckless move, to charge at me from so far away to try to cut me down.

Before the blade scythed down my robot, the laser connected at point-blank range. Satoshi's machine flipped and was blown away.

The set count was 2-1. I won.

Before the words "You Win" disappeared from the monitor, Satoshi unexpectedly peered into my cockpit. I was wondering what kind of expression he would have on his face, but it was just an anti-climatic, usual smile. He talked on and on excitedly.

"Man, that was a good game. Was it really two years since you last played, Houtarou? That was some amazing joystick handling back there. They say you'll never learn how to ride a bicycle, swim or ride a horse, but controlling a robot should be added to that list too, right?"

That's how Satoshi is, always having something frivolous to say without pause. Not unhappy at winning, I smiled.

"I really hadn't played in such a long time, so I became a beginner again. That victory was just luck."

I replied.

As the winner, I was given the right to play against the computer. Satoshi pointed at the monitor, indicating for me to continue with the game. I played half-heartedly and lost appropriately.

With a backward glance at the Game Over screen, I was about to exit the cockpit when a can of coffee appeared before my eyes. I looked up from my half-rising posture and noticed that the owner of the hand holding the coffee was Satoshi. He said,

"Here's your prize. Enjoy!"

That can of coffee was a can of hot black coffee. Without hesitation, I accepted it and pulled the pull tab.

"What's up with the generosity toady?"

"It's also compensation for unreasonably forcing you to accompany me."

"Were you really concerned about that?"

"As if!"

A can of coffee would definitely be hot, but I'm actually not very good with hot things. I leaned on a nearby machine and sipped just enough coffee to wet my tongue.

Satoshi wasn't being unnatural at all. Rather, he was in a good mood. However, that Satoshi-like behavior ran contrary to my memory. He's being like this even though he lost a game. Why that was the case, I had no idea at all.

"Hey, Satoshi. At the end of the third round."

"Hmm? Yeah, you totally got me there."

"Why didn't you fly up? If you had attacked me from the air, I would have lost... or rather, why go melee?"

Satoshi shrugged in a frivolous manner.

"When using giant robots, melee battles are the ultimate romance. It really feels good when you see them clash and slash at each other, you know? Well, being countered by a giant laser also makes a good picture, so I'm satisfied with the result."

Satoshi spoke nonchalantly. If that was true, Satoshi chose romance over victory... or in other words he lost in the name of fun.

That was a Satoshi-style loss. A suitable defeat for a spurious man of the world who pursues fun instinctively. It's not at all strange for the Satoshi I knew.

But then what was that recollection I had earlier?

"Right, moving on to the Satoshi Special 2! I'll show you the legendary yakuman<sup>[7]</sup> 'Iipinraoyue'!"

I continued slowly sipping my coffee, while Satoshi inserted a coin into the mahjong game next to me. As I watched Satoshi try to force a single-colored hand<sup>[8]</sup>, two images appeared in succession at the back of my mind.

One was of Satoshi hitting the machine after losing. The other was of Satoshi giving a can of coffee to the winner.

### 3

Judgment day had arrived, even as many humans fervently wished for its delay. Time doesn't stop, and neither does the calendar. If you refuse to accept it, you could just travel at the speed of light. No one's stopping you.

It was the 14<sup>th</sup> of February. The phrase "Saint Valentine's Day" was written clearly as the day's event on the calendar that I had received from a nearby shrine on New Year's Day. I woke up in the morning and noticed a decorated box placed outside my room. Guessing that it was another of my sister's lame jokes, I opened the lid and found a bar of chocolate, as well as a note with untidy scrawl inside the box. I read the memo... "I present to you one bar of chocolate. From Oreki Tomoe with warm and tender pity."

Out front kick. I gave the box a good kick towards my room and headed to school.

There was no change from the usual at Kamiyama High School. Since students were allowed to wear their cold-weather clothes, the road to school looked livelier compared with other seasons, with people sporting coats and jumpers. I entered the school, which was not filled with the smell of sweets. It was a calm start to the fateful day.

During lunch, I was thinking about buying some walnut bread, so I headed to the canteen and entered the gigantic crowd of people. After securing the last loaf of bread, I escaped from the crowd, and that was when I noticed that Chitanda was also buying something alongside all those jostling students. Regardless of personality, her looks fulfilled the conditions for a daughter of a wealthy family, so it was amusing to see her mix with the common crowd. Probably having noticed me, Chitanda pushed her way through the mass of school uniforms. Eventually, she emerged and called out to me.

"Hello, Oreki-san."

"Hey."

As Chitanda adjusted her scarf, I noticed that all she had in her hand was a drink in a paper pack. Although I should mind my own business, I was interested, and asked,

"Chitanda, is that all you're having for lunch?"

Chitanda cast her eyes down shyly.

"No, I had prepared a bento. It's just that... recently, I have been quite hooked onto this."

She held it out for me to see, and it appeared to be a green tea milk drink. Putting aside the strange combination, I wonder if there's any caffeine, which Chitanda cannot take, in green tea... I suppose there's the placebo effect. I should keep quiet about this.

It would be a bother for us to loiter in front of the canteen in the middle of the chaos, so we walked away. Our classrooms were just next to each other.

In the tedious walk back, I asked about Ibara.

"So what happened to Ibara's chocolate in the end?"

A slight smile surfaced on Chitanda's face, as she answered with pride.

"We decided to use Cote D'or. I thought using Nestlé would be good enough, though."

We continued walking in silence for a while. Seeing that I wouldn't be getting an explanation, I asked,

"What are you talking about?"

"...Ah, sorry. We decided to use a Belgian brand. We were thinking about using the Swiss one."

She continued.

"It was a really difficult choice. We bought all kinds of chocolate from the store, and tasted all of them. It was a rare experience, but there was just so much chocolate! To be honest, I would like to avoid chocolate for a while."

She giggled. I imagined Chitanda and Ibara facing each other in the Geography Lecture Room and biting into chocolate piled on a table, and smiled. I bet the chocolate mountain which was almost touching the ceiling would fall down to earth in a twinkle.

"After indulging in so much chocolate, wouldn't you two get acne?"

"I was fine. Ibara had one on her cheek, but she hid it with a plaster."

An then Chitanda spoke as if she was seeing a dream.

"Mayaka-san made the heart-shaped mold all by herself. I never knew that she could make such handicrafts! And she even added a detailed engraving. Although Cupid is facing the wrong direction, it's still really cute! Unfortunately, the wooden frame is not very compatible with chocolate, so the texture might not be so good."

"It seems that her experience in the Manga Research Club has honed her skills to the point that she can make smooth cuts. I never used you could use a chisel for this, though."

"Mayaka-san has amazing concentration. So that's what it means to put your heart and soul into something... Isn't it lovely?"

As far as I can tell, Ibara's strong point was definitely her ability to pour her heart and soul into something, or in other words, her concentration. If Chitanda is the person to be absorbed in something, Ibara would be the one to specialize in it. By the way, Satoshi is a guy who finds satisfaction in pursuing many interests at the same time, and needless to say, I hardly show interest in most things. Moreover, to Ibara, this chocolate was her revenge match, so she would work really hard for it.

"So has she given the chocolate?"

Chitanda shook her head in response to my question and frowned slightly.

"It's quite a shame. It would be better for her to give it to him herself, but... Mayaka-san was planning to pass Satoshi the chocolate after school in the club room, but she could not draw out of the Manga Research Club."

"What, then?"

"She's going to leave the chocolate in the club room and call Satoshi there, I guess. Even if it is not done after school, the Valentine ritual will be complete as long as it is on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, so I thought that there would be another way, but..."

Hmm. Chitanda was constantly feeling disappointed about it, but throwing out the chocolate as if it was nothing seems like quite a refined method. I'm sure that Satoshi would prefer it that way.

Chitanda suddenly turned around, as if having just thought of something. I faced Chitanda, who had a serious look on her face.

"Ah, right, Oreki-san. It's Valentine's Day today."

"....."

She lowered her head airily. When she looked up, clarity had returned to her expression.

"In my family, we do not give year-end gifts or Bon Festival gifts to those we are truly close to. So I apologize for failing to pay my compliments with a Valentine chocolate."

...Is that so.

I had never imagined that anyone would group Valentine chocolates and year-end gifts together.

Probably having overheard our conversation, a passing second year student quickly overtook us with a face that betrayed a smile. As I watched his figure recede, I was actually thinking of kicking his ass as hard as I could.

After school, as I was stuffing my shoulder bag with my textbooks and other miscellaneous items, I was visited by Satoshi. The drawstring bag he always carried around had been filled until it swelled into the shape of a right-angled parallelepiped. What does he even put in there? He swung his bag around in a circle and asked,

"What are you going to do now, Houtarou?"

I decided not to go to the Geography Lecture Room as it would be absolutely foolish to do so. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, and I was about to answer as such, but when I looked out the window, I saw that the sleet that had started earlier was increasing in intensity. My boots and coat were both waterproof, and I did bring an umbrella, but...

"I'll wait until the sleet stops or turns to snow."

"Here?"

I thought for a while. The heating had been turned off, so it was cold. Furthermore, a person waiting for the weather to improve and killing time alone in a classroom on Valentine's Day after school would probably be a bother to others who might have other purposes for the room. Even I could be considerate for something like this. Even so, as I mentioned earlier, it would still be really stupid for me to go to the club room.

"Nah, I guess I'll head for the library."

As if he had been waiting for me to say this, Satoshi nodded, retrieved a book from his bag and handed it to me. It was a duodecimo-sized<sup>[2]</sup> hardcover, and its title was one that was popular ages ago. If my memory isn't mistaken, its story went like this: A man and woman were leading an ordinary life, but a small malaise soon escalated into a catastrophe from

which there was no return, as the shadow of death swept through the streets! I'm not a fan of horror, though.

"You sure are reading weird books... I don't feel like reading it even if you recommend it, though."

"I never told you to read it. Just help me return it, please. It's almost due."

Instead of answering, I inserted it into my bag along with a loose leaf. Without stopping my preparations for going home, I asked,

"You're going to the club room, then?"

"Yeah, I suppose," he replied absentmindedly. Finding this strange, I spoke.

"Seems that Ibara isn't going."

Not having expected me to know that, Satoshi put on a surprised expression.

"Wow, you caught wind of that fast... was it because of Chitanda-san?"

I muttered in response,

"Apparently, she had to go to the Manga Club."

"That's what I heard."

"Chitanda was feeling really disappointed about it, that Ibara..."

Satoshi interrupted my words and went into a monologue.

"Currently, the Manga Club is having a little internal discord. The latent antagonism was actualized after the Cultural Festival, and now the Manga Research Club is split into two factions fighting for leadership: the impressionists and the naturalists. If the conflict gets worse, it would be difficult for the Manga Research Club, which has a long tradition, to avoid splitting into two. The naturalists are outnumbered by the impressionists

three to one, and that's kind of sad, in my opinion. Mayaka's the ringleader of the realists, so today's meeting is probably related to that conflict."

I felt that the forced change in subject was rude, but paying it no heed, I asked about the unfamiliar terms.

"Impressionists and, what was it again?"

"Naturalists. The two factions are also known as the character-oriented group and the story-oriented group. Apparently, they're arguing as fiercely as clashing swords. I would totally like to join if I could.

He was speaking as if he was really enjoying himself. You could say that he was much more interested in this scandal compared to the event of February 14<sup>th</sup>. Well, in any case,

"You just made up the names of those two factions, right?"

Satoshi shrugged mischievously.

"Some might say that the admiration for the proponents have not yet stopped."

With that line, he swung his completely shrivelled drawstring bag. I quit Satoshi's company, and left the classroom carrying my shoulder bag and trench coat. Satoshi followed after me. Since the pathway to the Special Block and the road to the library were at opposite directions, we would part outside the classroom.

"See you next time, Oreki-kun."

Satoshi said in a theatrical tone. I responded with a little joke.

"Good luck."

"Whatever for? Seriously."

It's obvious. For the opponent of the return match, of course.

The library was surprisingly empty. I was expecting it to be filled, with it being after school in bad weather.

I inserted Satoshi's book into the return box and placed my shoulder bag on a nearby seat. I headed for a bookshelf to search for a suitable book I could skim through to kill time and returned with a collection of photographs taken at scenic and historic places in South America. There were also collections with pictures from Europe and Central Asia, but I chose South America as a form of respect to the place of origin of chocolate.

First were the usual Mayan pyramids. In the Guiana Highlands filled with greenery, the countless cavities drilled into the pyramids were a strange sight to behold. I turned the page, and the next picture was a weird plant with fruits you could mistake for human faces attached to the trunk. The caption read, "Theobroma Cacao. Theobroma means 'food of the gods'." The book didn't mention what language that word came from.

As I examined the photograph, I unexpectedly noticed that I was actually aware of the significance of this day. But, if I'm caring about Valentine's Day, it would be a lie to say that I wasn't interested in Christmas. Then again, I have no recollection of having such thoughts on the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month before last. If I were to think back on whether there was anything impressive on Saint Valentine's Day, it would be my casual interest in Ibara's return match, as well as receiving a chocolate first thing in the morning. It might be thanks to it that I became aware and wondered if it was the 14<sup>th</sup> today.

But I can clearly proclaim that this doesn't mean that my expectations of receiving chocolate was higher this year compared to last year.

So, for example, let's assume that right now, as I'm looking at a photograph of the remains of Machu Picchu's drainage system, a person with a flushed face approaches. That imaginary person would be a female student, of course. She says, "Please accept this!" and presents a heart-shaped chocolate. How would I feel at that moment?

Naturally, I would undoubtedly be ecstatic.

But I believe that joy would be akin to the happiness one would feel when being unexpectedly recognized as a singular human being. That feeling is not materially different from having one's crudely drawn picture win a prize at a citywide competition by chance. To express it more eloquently, it would be like saying, "I don't entirely understand what's so good about it, but I'll accept this public acknowledgement with thanks."

I can only say that I doubt I would feel happy over the development of so-called "love".

My main belief is in energy conservation, with my motto being, "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." That belief gives me my laziness. But apart from that, it also gives me a trifling point of view of human relationships.

The reason why I feel at ease at the Classics Club is that Satoshi, Chitanda and Ibara don't cling to one another. Even if Chitanda does destroy my tranquility with her curiosity, she wouldn't go so far as to pull me along forcibly if I seriously don't want to be involved. In fact, during last year's "Hyouka" incident and "Empress" incident, Chitanda didn't say that she needed my cooperation no matter what. She is certainly good at pressurizing me, but she wouldn't push to have her own way. If she said something like "That is your duty" or "It is natural that you do that", or cried while pleading and pestering me to help, I would have probably quit the Classics Club.

But how do you handle a love affair with that attitude? Would one be able to expect that style or force it from the subject of the love affair?

.....It is a common saying that living organisms exist to pass their genes on, or in other words, to bear offspring. Love would then just be the sublimated desire to propagate. From that point of view, I could be said to be incomplete as a living organism. But since I'm also a human being, I don't need to go out with someone just because of biological needs. That's why I don't worry about myself being an incomplete organism.

Speaking of desire, it would be enough for me to say that I desire the chocolate. I like spicy things, but I'm relatively fine with sweet things too.

I was thinking about this while looking at a bright orange poisonous frog which inhabits a dense forest.

"I've finally found you, Oreki-san."

Having my name called all of a sudden, I turned around to see Chitanda's face being surprisingly close. After colliding into the line of vision of her huge eyes, I looked away without thinking.

My throat hurt in the dry winter air. I coughed once.

"Now that you've finally found me, do you need anything?"

"No."

"....."

Chitanda took a glance at the deserted library and spoke.

"I thought that if you were here, Fukube-san would be here too."

So she was looking for Satoshi, huh?"

"We don't stick together forever, you know."

"That was what I thought, but... Do you know where Fukube-san is now?"

As I was about to respond to the question, I realized that something was strange. Satoshi was heading towards the Geography Lecture Room. But if that was the case, Chitanda wouldn't be here searching for him.

"He didn't reach the room?"

Chitanda nodded slightly.

"He seemed to be a little late, so I came here to check on him. Since this concerns Mayaka-san, I don't think he would forget, but perhaps something happened..."

Hm. I checked my watch. I don't remember the exact time, but I think it hasn't been thirty minutes since Satoshi announced that he was going to the club room and parted with me. The time now is a little before five. The sun was starting to set, so I understand Chitanda's anxiety.

But that's just Fukube Satoshi. It's inexcusable to make others wait, but it's just like him to wander off for half an hour or so.

I flipped a page of the photograph collection and answered with a distant view of Mexico City in front of me.

"He's quite loose with time, but he did say that he was going to the club room. You should wait for him a little longer."

"The exact time was not decided, so I cannot say that he's late. I understand, I will try waiting for him."

The soft ending of Chitanda's sentence seemed to project her worry, but with that, she turned her black hair around and left. Damn that Satoshi, he just can't let anything proceed smoothly. I was thinking that it was about time for me to go home, so I looked out the window, but the sleet wouldn't end. Having no choice, I pushed my chair further in and proceeded to the next page.

## 4

The sleet only ended after I had completed my simulated experience of South America from Mexico City to Rio De Janeiro. I returned the photograph collection to its bookshelf, and was about to put on my white trench coat when a visitor arrived.

The sliding door was suddenly flung open.

"Oreki-san!!"

With an improper level of energy for a library, where one should be quiet on principle, Chitanda drew nearer. I was about to tell her to not make so much noise, but when I scanned my surroundings, I found that the only people left in the library were myself, the student librarians and the head librarian, Itoigawa-sensei.

Chitanda's countenance was different compared with the last time she was here. Now, her lips were pursed tightly, and her eyes, which were huge even under normal circumstances, were wide open. Seems like something bad has happened. Satoshi also appeared from behind Chitanda, swinging his drawstring bag. He had a drained expression, and I could feel that his usual high tension had cooled down quite a bit.

"Houtarou, you're still here?"

"I said that I would be here until the sleet ended, didn't I?"

I looked at the two of them one after the other, and said to Chitanda,

"It seems like you have something for me this time, but I'm just about to go home."

Chitanda nodded once slightly, then nodded once more deeply.

"Ah, yes, I understand that it is quite late. But I would really appreciate your help."

"Sorry, but can't it wait till tomorrow? Whether I help you or not, you can tell me about it tomorrow."

I said and was about to leave the library.

But before I could, Chitanda blocked my path. I unconsciously frowned, and Chitanda spoke with downcast eyes.

"I apologize, but at least hear me out... It's my fault. I carelessly left the clubroom door open. I've done something horrible to Mayaka-san..."

..... It appears that this isn't simply a manifestation of Chitanda's usual curiosity. Her fists were clenched tightly, and her originally white skin had become all the more pale. Perhaps because she was disconcerted, or due to some other reason, her legs were also trembling slightly.

I asked Satoshi a brief question.

"What happened?"

"Well, it's not really anything significant, but..."

Chitanda's voice, which was supposed to over Satoshi's words, was small and weak.

"The chocolate..."

"The chocolate?"

"Mayaka-san's home-made chocolate was stolen! And she put in her utmost effort to make it!"

I looked at Satoshi. He shrugged, as if to say "This sure is troubling" and nodded.

Ibara's chocolate? Stolen, you say?

Ah, I see.

Again, that's...

..... It's been 10 months since I entered Kamiyama High School and joined the Classics Club. Over that period of time, I've been coerced to act as an intermediary for Chitanda's problems, which was probably comparable to three years' worth of middle school troubles.

My experience in dealing with all that has not crushed my energy conservation motto. But it's true that I have gained a degree of adaptability for when I have to move.

I probably looked as if I had consumed a bitter bug. With that expression, I put my arms through the sleeves of my trench coat and said,

"Let's go. We'll look for it."

Ah, and the sleet has already stopped. But this would be the social obligation of a livelihood, I suppose. In my case, Ibara and I aren't close, even though we've known each other for such a long time. I wonder what kind of expression she would have if she found out that her chocolate got stolen. I definitely wouldn't want to see that!

After all, I'm not a fan of horror.

We crossed the connecting bridge and moved towards the Special Block.

The Geography Lecture Room was on the fourth floor. As we were about to go up the stairs,

"Hold it!"

A voice rang out, stopping me in my tracks. Satoshi thrust his palm out at me.

I didn't even get the chance to wonder what the problem was, for the flight of stairs I was about to ascend had a yellow and black vinyl rope strung across it. For the past few days, various places in school were being waxed sequentially. Under the rope was a note that said, "Just waxed. Usage of the staircase is prohibited."

There are two staircases. We went to the other one and ascended it. As we were moving from the third floor to the fourth, a first year student with a perm called out.

"Excuse me, is this level?"

It seems that he had been sticking a poster to the notice board. It read, "Handicrafts Club Graduation Works Exhibition. Venue: Communications Building Classroom 1-C" I half-heartedly answered that it was fine and was about to hurry on, but Satoshi spoke up behind me.

"It's too low."

Now that I think about it, the right side does seem to be lower. Behind Satoshi, Chitanda also gave a response.

"That poster is trapezoidal, but that is intentional, right?"

The craftsman... I mean the handicrafts club member<sup>[10]</sup> took a step back from the poster, stared at the poster fixedly, then spat out in a small voice,

"Oh, what the hell."

He then took out a cutter knife and a ruler, tore off the poster and sat on the floor. His skillful work thus began.

Praying for his success, I headed for the Geography Lecture Room.

The door was unlocked. I stopped upon entering the room, and tried to endure the cold. It's probably so cold because I was in the warm library for a long time, but even so, it's freezing here.

Chitanda approached a chair that was in the middle of the room, and put her hand on the table in front of it.

"It was placed here."

I see. Indeed, there was no chocolate on the table now.

Before I said anything, Chitanda summarized the situation straightforwardly.

"The chocolate was wrapped in red wrapping paper. There was no ribbon or anything like one tied around it. As for its size... it was heart-shaped, so it took up a large space."

She held out her hands to show the chocolate's width, increasing the gap little by little until it reached the size of her waist. She then tilted her head and reduced the size of the imaginary chocolate by just a bit.

"It was this big."

It seems that Chitanda not only had keen senses, unfailing memory and excellent observation skills, but also possessed extraordinary spatial recognition. Even so, that's a gigantic chocolate.

"What about Ibara?"

"I have not told her yet. It may seem cowardly, but I plan to try looking for it first before telling her."

Chitanda continuously stroked the table, as if doing so would cause the chocolate to return.

"The chocolate was here when I went off to look for Fukube-san. In other words, it was here until 4:45 on my watch. I returned to the clubroom when it was a little past 5 o'clock. If only I hadn't left the door unlocked for those fifteen minutes..."

Her last sentence was so inaudible that I almost could not catch her words. This is pretty natural for the kindhearted Chitanda, but it seems that she has

taken quite a shock.

"But, well, Chitanda-san, you aren't the manager of Mayaka's chocolate, so you don't have to agonize about it so much."

"But I feel that it's inexcusable to Fukube-san..."

"As I said, it's not your responsibility. If you're in the wrong, then I'm even worse for being late."

That was unexpected. I thought that Satoshi was the cold-blooded type of guy, unable to show this kind of consideration. As for me, while I'm a person with a hot heart and not a cold-blooded person, I decided not to add any awkward words to the exchange.

I surveyed the room. The Geography Lecture Room did not possess any special equipment. As for normal classroom objects, it had a teaching platform, a blackboard, tables, chairs and cleaning equipment. With only these items, it would be easy to search for anything.

However, there were over forty tables. I knocked a nearby table with my fist.

"Are you sure that it isn't in this room? What about the drawers below the tables?"

"Nope, I checked this room with Chitanda-san earlier. There's no doubt it isn't here."

Yeah, I thought so.

But wait a minute.

"Didn't Chitanda confirm that the chocolate was missing on her own?"

In response to that question, Chitanda answered.

"I found Fukube-san while I was returning to the room so we entered together."

"It was in that staircase. I met Chitanda-san on the landing between the third and fourth floor."

I see. That staircase, huh.

..... A flash of inspiration hit me. I turned around my trench coat. I don't like walking round and round, but our destination was close. Chitanda asked a question as I was leaving the room.

"Where are you going?"

"How long has that craftsman been there?"

I spoke as I left the clubroom. The two of them followed behind.

"Who do you mean by craftsman?"

"Oh, that guy with the perm. He was sticking the poster on the wall."

"... You mean the Handicrafts Club member."

There was a slight pause as Chitanda thought for a while.

"He was just unrolling the poster when I met Fukube-san."

"That's convenient."

Satoshi probably understood my purpose with that sentence, but I'm not sure about Chitanda, who can be unbelievably slow. Just to be sure, I added,

"If the craftsman was there the whole time, he'll probably remember the people who used the staircase. Because of the waxing, this staircase is the only way up here."

"Ah... That's true!"

Chitanda's voice, which sounded quite depressed earlier, sprang out like a shining ray of light. But in contrast, Satoshi was solemn.

"Any possibility that the craftman was the thief?"

"None."

"Huh?"

"Would anyone loiter around the area worrying about the straightness of his poster after committing a theft?"

We went around the girls' toilet and down the stairs. The craftsman was still in front of the notice board, using his cutter knife. When he noticed us, he unrolled his poster.

"How is it now?"

Chitanda took one look and cut him town mercilessly.

"It now looks like a parallelogram with no regular angles."

"....."

"More importantly, we have a question for you. Do you remember who passed by since you started work?"

The craftsman seemed intimidated by Chitanda's earnest look. He turned to the two of us, who were at the back.

"Did something happen?"

I was wondering about how to answer him, but Satoshi gave a quick, easy reply.

"Just some trouble. We suspect that those who passed by here might be the culprit."

"Hmm..."

It seemed like he didn't comprehend that explanation, but the craftman answered without caring about it.

"Yeah, I remember."

"H-how many people were there?"

The craftsman grinned at the enthusiastic Chitanda.

"Three people."

Three people? That means...

"Who were they?"

Erm, that's really slow of you, Chitanda. I tapped her shoulder. After the young lady turned around, I pointed at the both of us in succession.

"Two of us with Satoshi makes three."

I looked at the craftsman to confirm that statement, and he nodded.

"Are you certain about that?"

The craftsman assured Chitanda,

"I'm pretty good when it comes to remembering faces. It's also not like I was so focused on sticking the poster that I didn't notice anyone passing by."

I turned around , and Chitanda tilted her head.

"What does this mean?"

I stole a glance at Satoshi and answered.

"It means what it means. The person who stole the chocolate was on the fourth floor, and is still on the fourth floor... Satoshi."

"Mm? What is it?"

"What clubs use the classrooms on the fourth floor of the Special Block?"

Satoshi was puffed up with pride.

"So you're finally using me as a database. That's nice of you. Hmm, there's the Classics Club, Light Music Club, Acapella Club, Astronomy Club, as well as... Yeah, the Philosophy Club should also be on the fourth floor, although it has zero members."

He continued,

"Seems that you're actually serious about this. That's rare."

I considered yelling, "I'm doing this for your sake, you ungrateful bastard!" but I was tired, so I relented. Furthermore, Chitanda was also there, so I definitely can't say all that.

"So we should be able to get it back, then... But why would they do such a thing?"

Chitanda asked, probably having some room for curiosity after feeling hopeful. Now, that would be the biggest problem.

But for now...

"For now let's be utilitarian; save your questions for later. Now let's check out the remaining clubs, it might turn out to be smoother than expected."

"That would be great."

Chitanda nodded, and politely expressed her gratitude to the craftsman before going up the stairs.

We checked out which clubs were still here, and it did turn out well.

The light music club was borrowing some hall somewhere and were preparing for their live performance without hesitation. As for the Acapella Club, it was customary for them to practice in the Courtyard. Moreover, it's probably impossible to move their tongues in this cold weather, so they

could have just all gone home. Nothing needs to be said about the Philosophy Club, so the only clubs currently on the fourth floor of the Special Block were the Classics Club and Astronomy Club. Chitanda frowned.

"So the Astronomy Club did it....."

"Let's see how it goes."

I said as we headed to the Astronomy Club's room, Electives Room 5. Satoshi muttered en route,

"The Astronomy Club, huh. That person might be there."

"Do you know someone there?"

Satoshi nodded to Chitanda's question.

"It's someone both of you should know. Sawakiguchi-senpai is in the Astronomy Club."

"Oh, you mean her, That is reassuring... right?"

That would make the situation even more delicate, I think. Sawakiguchi Misaki. I remember that name. She was involved in the "Empress" incident which occurred in the final stages of summer last year. After that, she was in the Astronomy Club team which faced off against the Classics Club during the Cultural Festival, but they self-destructed. I'm pretty certain that she tried cooking bananas in dashi<sup>[11]</sup>.

There was only one classroom surrounded by the Geography Lecture room and Electives Room 5. If the Astronomy Club members really stole the chocolate, it wouldn't even take them twenty seconds.

We stood outside the classroom and we could hear raucous laughter from within. The three of us looked at each other. Chitanda nodded and knocked the door.

"Hmm? Come in!"

I recognized the voice that responded.

Chitanda opened the sliding door.

We were greeted with warm air blowing on our faces. It was against school regulations for students to change the temperature settings on the school's heaters, but with this stirring warmth, you could tell that the Astronomy Club didn't know about that rule. A bespectacled guy's vision would turn complete white immediately upon entering the room.

There were a few students sitting in a circle. One, two, ....., five people in total. They had stuck some tables together, and had scattered some sort of paper on it. For some reason, there were also ten dice lying nearby. The boy to girl ratio was 3:2. In the summer-like warmth of the room, all the boys were wearing their uniforms, and one girl was wearing her sailor uniform.

The girl not wearing the sailor uniform, and the apparent owner of the voice, was, as Satoshi mentioned, Sawakiguchi. She must like that hairstyle a lot, since her hair was, like all the other times I've seen her, done up in dango shapes on the sides of her head. The dango were caramel brown and were wrapped in stylish black laces. But, she was wearing the unrefined school regulation jersey.

When Chitanda's eyes met Sawakiguchi's, her head lowered by about fifteen degrees, and she smiled.

"Good afternoon, Sawakiguchi-san. Please return the chocolate."

I was wondering if I should cover Chitanda's mouth, or slap the back of her head, but thankfully, Sawakiguchi apparently did not catch that erratic opening.

"What about the chocolate? Hm, if I remember correctly, you're Chitanda, right?"

"Yes, I'm Chitanda Eru."

"You here for?"

Just when Chitanda was about to blurt out something weird again, Satoshi swiftly cut in.

"It's an emergency. We were calling on Senpai in the hopes of receiving your assistance."

It was a ludicrous way of putting it, but a childlike smile spread on Sawakiguchi's face. I guess it's easy for the two weirdos to communicate with each other.

"Hmm. Will this take time?"

"We should be done in three minutes."

During that exchange, I examined the interior of the room once again. The bags and winter clothes of the Astronomy Club members were randomly strewn around the group of tables. They came in different shapes and sizes, but there were five bags and five sets of winter wear. There was also a sack, but based on past experience, it belonged to Sawakiguchi. The Astronomy Club members were all staring at me with dubious expressions, probably wondering what was going on. It seems that we intruded at an interesting moment, for there was a guy with an unreservedly sullen face.

Sawakiguchi lightly nodded two or three times, then made an announcement to the Astronomy Club members.

"I'll be gone for a while. Before charging in, if the draw difficulty is three and below, you can buy it for an extra 50%."

Sawakiguchi got up from her seat and was showered with booing from the Astronomy Club members.

"50%!"

"Three and below, but there's nothing left to buy..."

In response, Sawakiguchi spoke.

"Shouldn't you be grateful that I'm allowing for resupplies at this crucial moment? If anyone cheats, he'll take the penalty and pay double the price."

She waved her hand and went out into the corridor. Chitanda bowed politely again.

"I apologize for troubling you at a busy moment... but what were you doing?"

Sawakiguchi gave a short reply.

"Oh, SF."

"Science fiction?"

In addition to my casual question, Satoshi asked,

"Space fantasy?"

"It's called Star Fighter<sup>[12]</sup>, I think. In any case..."

Sawakiguchi threw a glance at me, tiptoed until she could see the top of my head, and folded her arms.

"That trench coat's pretty cool."

Satoshi followed her lead.

"That's right, senpai. As expected, you do have quite the eye! That's Houtarou's one good set of winter clothing, and it looks as if it could be concealing a Thompson machine gun! Frightening, isn't it!"

I would hide one if I could. It would come in handy when I'm playing the straight man to your dumb jokes.

Chitanda politely called out at Sawakiguchi, who was still staring intently at my coat.

"Erm, senpai."

"Ah, right. So? Did something happen?"

"Yes."

Chitanda nodded and turned back to glance at me.

By putting on the brakes here, Chitanda has shown that she has changed a little over the last ten months. She's not good with saying things indirectly. This straightforward approach has come to fruition quite a few times, but right now, we're suspecting the Astronomy Club members of theft.

Accusing them directly might turn the situation sour. Aiming to prevent that outcome, I stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Sawakiguchi-senpai."

"You're... Yeah, you're the detective Oreki-kun."

I was slightly displeased by the baseless nickname, but I swallowed it down and pointed to the Geography Lecture Room.

"Actually, we've had a Valentine chocolate stolen from our room."

Sawakiguchi's gaze became stern. But, this is where the deception begins.

"So, we are searching for anyone who saw the thief. Did anyone use the corridor from 4:45 to 5 o'clock?"

I couldn't tell if the petty trick of sidestepping the search for the suspect and instead looking to gather eyewitnesses worked. With an interested smile, Sawakiguchi spoke.

"A stolen Valentine chocolate, huh? It shouldn't be a love thief, but there are people who would do this kind of elegant things, right?"

What exactly is so elegant about this? I wish I could show her Chitanda biting her lip in regret after the chocolate got stolen.

Sawakiguchi turned her head.

"4:45 to 5 o'clock? Sorry, but we were really fired up just now, so I don't remember the time at all. However, some of them left their seats... Nakayama, Yoshihara and Oda, I think. I was the one who told them to, though."

Three out of five people, huh. I could sense Chitanda's expression clouding over.

But there's still one more thing to narrow down our search.

"Was there anyone who packed their bags and left to go home?"

"Why do you ask? No one did that."

"Ah, is Oda-san that girl over there?"

"That's girl's Nakayama."

As expected, even Sawakiguchi seemed sullen after the succession of questions. While preserving the playful atmosphere, she put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

"For your information, no one here came in with a chocolate. You can think that it's a lie, Detective-kun, but that would be a little unpleasant, right?"

Sawakiguchi declared, and suddenly opened the door to the classroom. She then raised her voice and asked the people inside,

"Did any of you guys catch a glimpse of something that looks like chocolate in this room?"

Laughter rose from the male members of the Astronomy Club.

"Senpai, could you not ask something so depressing?"

"Wish I could say I have!"

Sawakiguchi pointed to them, indicating that they were the proof.

"So, is that all you wanted to ask? Are we done?"

As I had expected, she had stopped being friendly. Even with that small trick, we still drew her suspicion in the end. Well, I have no choice but to say that I can't do anything about that. Based on my beliefs, I tend to dislike quarrels, but..... Seriously, this is such a troublesome conversation.

I at least managed to maintain my civility and bowed to Sawakiguchi-senpai.

"Thank you for your help, senpai. I apologize for saying something so rude."

"Ah, whatever."

With those words, Sawakiguchi went back to Electives Room 5 without turning back. I don't know if it was just my imagination, but the sound of the closing door seemed louder than usual. Shortly thereafter, a remarkably cheerful voice shouting, "Alright, let's continue!" could be heard from the room.

Chitanda looked at the closed door and me with a sorrowful expression.

"Oreki-san..... Sawakiguchi-san is mad at us, right?"

"Of course she's mad."

".....But! We have to get Mayaka-san's chocolate back!"

I turned around. Even Satoshi's expression was clouded over. His usual smile had almost disappeared, and had somehow taken on a self-deriding tone.

"Houtarou..."

It seems that he wants to tell me something.

Paying him no heed, I suggested heading back to the Geography Lecture Room for the time being. It was getting pretty dark outside. I guess it's time

to bring this to an end.

## 5

The Geography Lecture Room was a corner room with windows on three sides, so it's easy for cold air to steal in. I lowered my head as the oppressive coldness seemed to exert a force from above.

"It's cold."

I muttered without thinking and received some warm replies.

"Is that so? I feel that it's fine."

"You're the only one here snugly wearing your coat, and you're complaining about the cold?"

No, it's seriously freezing here.

I glanced at the window and found that it was white outside. I thought that the sleet had stopped, but it had turned to snow. I've heard of White Christmas, but would this be called a White Valentine? It somehow sounds like a brand of white wine.

I sat down at a nearby table. Standing in front of me, Chitanda spoke with a voice that betrayed her fatigue.

"What should we do, Oreki-san? I don't want to believe that the Astronomy Club did it, but..."

Instead of answering, I replied with a question.

"Is there any way to reach the fourth floor besides going up that staircase?"

Like me, Satoshi sat on a table, placed his bag on his knees and shook his head.

"It's certainly not impossible. One could use the emergency staircase or evacuation chute. However, using either would be a serious matter. Using the waxed staircase on the other side isn't out of the question, though. You could still use it if you wanted to."

"But there were no traces of anyone using it. If anyone went up those stairs, they would leave footprints. There's also a staircase to the roof, but it's usually locked. Students can't go to the roof without a teacher's supervision."

That would mean that the staircase with the craftsman would be the only route. Of course, if you went on a helicopter and tried rappelling down, you would probably succeed, but I wouldn't think that Ibara's chocolate contains a secret so huge that it needs to be obtained at all cost, to the extent that one would use spy-like methods to steal it.

... But wait a minute. Ibara was using a Belgian brand of chocolate. It's common knowledge that Belgium is a member of the EU. What if Ibara's chocolate somehow contained a microchip that would harm the stability of Europe? That would explain the rappelling and hovering.

"Oreki-san?"

"No, it's nothing."

There weren't any helicopter sounds earlier.

Where would the chocolate be? I stared at the snow, and hit upon another possibility.

"So, when you were searching for the chocolate, did you look below?"

"Below, you say?"

Moving my fingertip in a half parabola, I asked,

"If the chocolate was thrown out of the window, it would fall to the ground, right?"

Chitanda shook her head.

"If that was the case, I would have seen it."

So she hadn't overlooked that. But what about this?

"Have you checked the girls' toilet?"

I was met with flabbergasted replies.

"What?"

"What did you say?"

"The girls' toilet. In that fifteen minutes, there was nowhere to go on the fourth floor of the Special Block besides this room, Electives Room 5, and the girls' toilet. Furthermore, the chocolate is neither here nor outside. Therefore, don't you think that there is the possibility that someone hid it in the girls' toilet?"

Without waiting for me to finish speaking, Chitanda fluttered her skirt and stepped forward. Noticing that I wasn't moving, she said reprovingly,

"I didn't think of that. Let's go!"

"Let's go," she said. How absurd.

"Sorry, but you can go by yourself."

"Oreki-san, having more hands would be..."

"If this floor's toilet was a boys' toilet, would you be able to rush in?"

It seems that Chitanda wasn't really aware of her surroundings. "Ah," a sound escaped from her lips as she blushed, bowed her head twice and hurriedly left the room. By the way, the first and third floors of the Special Block had boys' toilets, while the girls' toilets were on the second and fourth floors.

Satoshi watched Chitanda leave with a smile. Dangling his legs, he asked,

"Do you really think it's in the toilet?"

I answered without bothering to hide my boredom.

"Nope. Not even a chance in 10,000."

"A chance in 10,000 means 0.01%. Is it that unlikely?"

"Satoshi."

I released a sigh.

"I was just throwing an idea out. Just shut up for a bit."

"... I see."

With that, Satoshi closed his mouth. It seemed that his unextinguishable smile had gone out. It would take about three minutes for Chitanda to return. The Geography Lecture Room was silent.

Chitanda returned, her shoulders dropping weakly.

"It wasn't there..."

I nodded and spoke.

"Then, there's only one possibility."

"Eh?"

Chitanda, who had been hanging her head in shame, looked up. The moment that we had been putting off finally arrived.

The door of the Geography Lecture Room opened, and that person entered. Wearing a beige jumper over her sailor uniform and donning a knit hat was Ibara Mayaka. The band-aid on her left cheek was to hide the pimple she

got from trying out too much chocolate. Ibara looked at all of us and gave a bewildered expression.

"Huh, why is everyone here?"

"Mayaka-san..."

I could hear the slight trembling in Chitanda's murmur. However, Ibara, not noticing Chitanda's expression, took off her hat and spoke in a lighthearted tone.

"Ah, so how was my chocolate?"

So she asked about it right off the bat, huh. Well, it's her biggest concern, so it was obvious that she would do so.

I quickly looked at Satoshi. However, he was looking at Ibara with a vague, expressionless face. It didn't seem like he was going to say anything.

Since it had come to this, I thought that I should at least say something I opened my mouth, but probably noticing that, Chitanda raised her hand, causing me to stop. I think she wanted to say it by herself, so I had no choice but to stay silent.

Chitanda stared seriously at Ibara.

"Mayaka-san, I am very sorry."

This time, I could not feel the quavering in her words. It seems that she had resolved to tell Ibara the truth. On the other hand, Ibara had a quizzical look on her face.

"What for? There isn't anything you should be apologizing about, is there?"

"Yes. Actually..."

She was still hesitant to say it.

"When I left the classroom without locking the door, your chocolate was stolen... I'm sorry."

Chitanda said this with a firm voice and an unreserved attitude, but her eyes had turned red.

Then, having received this confession, Ibara responded with an unexpected attitude.

All she did was mutter a few words.

"Hmm. I see."

After a brief pause, a troubled, bitter smile appeared on her face.

"So it was stolen, huh."

With that expression, and with those words.

I couldn't believe that Ibara was reacting this way. Knowing her, I thought that she would spit out words with unconcealed rage. That's how it should have been. Regardless of how estranged I am from matters of love, I wouldn't let this pass if I were Ibara.

But she remained calm. Inversely proportional to that, Chitanda's feelings were overflowing.

"Mayaka-san, I.....!"

Ibara turned to Chitanda and shook her head.

"Don't look so sad, Chii-chan. Are you worried about not having locked the door? There's no way that you would have known that someone would steal a Valentine chocolate."

"But!"

"Even if someone else's at fault, I wouldn't blame Chii-chan. Not at all. Actually, I don't even remember asking you to look after the chocolate. I

feel like I've done something wrong. You helped me so much, and I wasted your efforts."

As she spoke, Ibara put on the hat she had just taken off. She looked away from Chitanda, sighed, and muttered.

"Yeah, but, it does hurt a little. I'll be going home for today. Chii-chan don't fret over it, okay?"

With that, she turned on her heels and exited the Geography Lecture Room with a composed gait. No one called out at her retreating figure.

Chitanda, Satoshi, and I. There was no doubt that all our thoughts differed as we watched Ibara walk away.

After Ibara left, Chitanda waited for her figure to disappear down the stairs before stepping forward resolutely. Reading her intentions, I got off the desk and went in front of Chitanda. Without hesitating, she proceeded until the tip of her nose was about to touch me. Only then did she finally stop.

".....Please step aside."

"What are you going to do?"

She was way too close. I took a step backward as I spoke. However, Chitanda stepped forward in response to my retreat.

"Even if I have to use forceful measures, I will find Mayaka-san's chocolate. If I do not do this, I will not be able to face her tomorrow."

"As everyone has said, it's not your fault. Even a lawyer would agree. It was beyond the scope of risk prediction.

"I don't know anything about the law. I simply cannot forgive myself. Today was supposed to make Mayaka-san happy, but now it has turned out like this. I cannot just stand here without doing anything!"

She tried to slip past me.

My right hand reflexively shot out and grabbed Chitanda's right wrist.

Her hand was warm.

Since I was holding on to her wrist, I could feel from her chordal movements that she was focusing her strength in her fist. Should I let go, or should I continue holding on? While I was undecided, I spoke out.

"I can't say that I understand your feelings. I don't feel things as strongly as you. But please, leave this to me. I'll definitely pass Ibara's chocolate to Satoshi by the end of the day."

I'd never thought that the day when the energy saver, Oreki Houtarou would say, "Leave this to me" would ever come.

Chitanda's huge eyes widened ever more. However, she did not release the energy in her fist.

"..... I'm happy that you would say this, but if that's the case, I will search for it with you."

I shook my head.

"No. I've thought of something but I can't do it with you around."

A temporary silence descended. Chitanda asked in a small voice,

"You have an idea?"

I let Chitanda's hand go. Perhaps I had been exerting pressure with my hand without knowing it, for Chitanda lightly stroked the wrist that had been gripped.

Since it had come to this, I had no choice. I slowly nodded.

"Who did it?"

"There can only be one person holding on to the chocolate right now. It's her."

I let out a sigh.

"Nakayama from the Astronomy Club."

A table clattered. Satoshi was half-rising to his feet, but I ignored it for the moment.

"Based on the craftsman's testimony, we were the only people who went up the stairs from the third floor. Based on Sawakiguchi's testimony, there are only three Astronomy Club members who could have stolen the chocolate."

"Oda-san, Nakayama-san and Yoshihara-san, right?"

"Let's assume that one of them came in and tried to steal the chocolate. But if you were the thief, how would you do it? Ibara's chocolate is pretty large."

Chitanda nodded, and spread her hands to show a size slightly smaller than her waist.

"It was about this big."

"There's no way you can hide something of that size. Since they didn't hide it in the toilet or throw it outside, they could have only brought it with them into Electives Room 5. However, Sawakiguchi said that no one came in a with a chocolate. The other members said so as well. It would be a different matter if the whole Astronomy Club was in one it, but it would be weird if that weren't the case."

I pointed at myself and Satoshi.

"It's impossible to hide that size of chocolate in a school uniform. They could hide the chocolate in a bag if they had one, and I could probably fit it in the pocket of my coat. However, none of the Astronomy Club members left to go home. They didn't leave the room with their bags or winter wear. Furthermore, the pants pockets are too small, and even if they hid it in their

clothes, the bulky chocolate would cause their movements to be unnatural and make them noticeable."

Next, I pointed at Chitanda.

"However, it's possible with a sailor uniform. If the chocolate was attached to her thigh with tape, it could be hidden by the skirt... I have no idea what that Astronomy Club member, Nakayama, was thinking when she stole Ibara's chocolate. Perhaps both of them have some feud unknown to us. But putting aside the question of why, since Nakayama is the only one who could have hidden the chocolate, I can only think that she has it right now."

After a short pause, I spoke again.

"I'll pass Ibara's chocolate to Satoshi today. Although I have absolute confidence that it is right, you being there would trouble me. So don't worry, and just go home for today."

Chitanda looked into my eyes.

.....I instantly averted my gaze, showing just how much of a pathetic guy I was.

But even so, a small part of Chitanda's smile returned to her face.

"It's rare for you to go so far as to say something like that."

"Is that so?"

Actually, I also thought so. It was pretty much asking the impossible from myself.

"I understand. I do not know what you plan on doing, but since you said that it's better this way, I'll take your word for it."

The tension drained from my body. My expression probably became more relaxed as well.

"Right. I'll call you if it succeeds."

Chitanda said that she would be waiting for my call, and bowed.

Chitanda left, leaving behind me and Satoshi.

Looking at the pitch-black exterior, I frowned at the fact that it was still snowing, and shouldered my bag.

"Well, let's go."

In response to those words, Satoshi got off from the desk he was sitting on.

"Yeah, let's go."

I made sure that I didn't forget to securely lock the door.

# 6

The road home at night. Headlights and tail lights flashed by. Snow fell on the front of my coat.

The wind was cold, so I buried my neck in my trench coat. Satoshi was walking next to me, with a drawstring bag on his arm and a backpack on his back. The only thing protecting from the cold was his vest.

"The Valentine chocolate was stolen by tying it to her leg, huh?"

I muttered the words I had said earlier, and burst into laughter.

"That's impossible, isn't it?"

"And I thought that stood to reason."

Satoshi said as he swung his drawstring bag around. I also laughed at that statement.

"No, it doesn't."

"Really?"

"The female student wouldn't have been able to learn that Ibara had decided to leave the chocolate in the club room. Even if she somehow did, Chitanda was looking after it, and she couldn't have predicted that Chitanda would go out and look for you."

"She could have, I think."

"Alright, let's assume that she knew everything. Even so, the chocolate would melt due to contact with human skin. When chocolate melts, it gives off a unique smell you can never hide. And more importantly..."

The pedestrian signal started to flicker as we got to the middle of the crossing. We jogged across the road, and Satoshi turned around.

"...I can't imagine an honest person stealing a Valentine chocolate."

Satoshi gave a cynical laugh.

"There's no guarantee that Nakayama's an honest person."

"Since an indecent person has been involved from the beginning, of course you would doubt her."

A thin layer of snow had accumulated on the walkway. A sharp squeaking sound could be heard with every step I took. Strong winds blew for a while. I resisted the wind by hugging my shoulders and waited for it to die down.

"I suppose I should fulfill the promise."

Satoshi was silent.

"...Pass me your bag."

I could hear a laugh coming from Satoshi's throat as he followed my request. I received the drawstring bag, and gave it a strong vertical swing. "Crrk". A sound was produced. It sounded like broken pieces rubbing against each other.

I returned the bag to Satoshi with a disagreeable politeness.

"That was amazing, Houtarou."

Satoshi may have smiled, but I could only see it as a mere habit or a bluff.

The person who stole the chocolate was Satoshi.

I had already concluded that Satoshi was the only possible culprit after Chitanda said that the chocolate had been stolen. Even without that prediction, Satoshi would still be the only suspect by the process of

elimination. After striking out the Astronomy Club, the only person who could have stolen the chocolate was someone who went up from the third floor. According to the craftsman, three people used that route: Chitanda, Satoshi, and me. I'm obviously not the thief, and Chitanda is out of the question since she's the victim. Thus, this leaves only Satoshi.

Satoshi probably hid in the boys' toilet on the third floor after we parted and he told me that he was heading to the club room. The toilet is right next to the staircase, and the third floor toilet is for male students. Satoshi waited there for a while, knowing that Chitanda would leave the room to search for him sooner or later.

Confirming that Chitanda had passed the staircase, Satoshi headed for the fourth floor. On the way, Satoshi was seen by the craftsman. It's also possible that he was asked about the straightness of the poster. If my memory isn't mistaken, when the craftsman asked for our help earlier. Satoshi's reply was "It's too low." If he hadn't said something like "Move the right side down." earlier, he wouldn't have used those words.

In the empty club room, Satoshi appropriated Ibara's chocolate. But to his surprise, he found that it was enormous. He had planned to hide it in his drawstring bag, so he was at a loss. Satoshi's bag could barely fit a duodecimo-sized book. No matter how slim Chitanda's waist is, it's definitely bigger than a book.

If he just took the chocolate and ran, he might bump into Chitanda at the staircase, and that would be the end of the chocolate game. So what did Satoshi do?

The street lamps had already lit up. The road was reaching the bridge soon. It was a narrow bridge meant for pedestrian use. If two people were to walk side by side, they wouldn't be able to pass each other. With nothing to block the wind, the sound of the blowing wind grew even stronger.

"Did you hesitate at all when you were breaking it?"

My small voice was caught up in the wind, so Satoshi probably didn't manage to hear it. There was no reply.

Satoshi broke the chocolate. He probably did so by bringing his elbow down on the wrapping paper. If he had been aware that it was the heart-shaped chocolate that Ibara made, he might have folded it neatly. But the result is the same. The heart-shaped chocolate was made into a size that could fit inside the drawstring bag.

And then Satoshi left the club room. He met Chitanda on the landing, and probably gave some excuse like "Hey Chitanda, sorry for being late, I was too engrossed in something." Chitanda then brought Satoshi to the club room, only to discover that the chocolate was gone.

I wonder what Satoshi thought as he saw Chitanda become flustered?

We reached the middle of the bridge, and I stopped. Satoshi followed suit.

So that the wind wouldn't extinguish my voice again, I raised my voice quite a bit.

"Now we're even."

"Even?"

Satoshi answered with a faint laugh.

"For what favor? It's not that incident on New Year's Day, right? If I had to choose, I would say that I don't really care about this sort of thing."

"I'm talking about April last year. You created a story to help me escape from Chitanda<sup>[13]</sup>."

It took some time for Satoshi to remember. "Ah," he muttered.

"Oh yeah, that's right."

"At that time, you played along with my plan."

"Yeah, I suppose. I'm surprised that you actually remembered about that."

"Of course I would."

I clenched my teeth.

"That was a terrible thing to do. I did something stupid."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

I'm sure of it now thanks to today's events. I've been made to clearly realize the meaning of deceiving others with cowardly tricks. Unexpectedly, or perhaps inevitably, the one who was deceived this time as well as last time was Chitanda.

"But that was a graceful story."

Satoshi said.

"When the energy-saver Houtarou realized his intentions, no one got hurt... except for Houtarou himself."

All of a sudden, the wind surged, causing the dancing snow to form eddies in the night sky. I adjusted the collar of my trench coat again. I cast my eyes down and asked,

"You could at least give an explanation, right?"

"An explanation, huh..."

I have no idea why Satoshi acted this way. But I thought that he would have a reason for doing so. You could say that I believed in him. That's why I came up with a fictitious deduction for Chitanda to accept, and acted to close the situation. On a day when I say something like "Because I felt doing it", it wouldn't be impossible for me to get mad. But because I wasn't asked, I kept silent. In the end, in order to convince Chitanda and get her to calm down, I had no choice but to make an absolutely unrelated student the scapegoat. There was probably a better method, but I couldn't find it. From now on, that girl will spend the rest of her school life with Chitanda's misunderstanding.

I did all that because I believed that Satoshi had a good reason for his actions. But what if...

"If you say you did it as a joke..."

"If I did?"

"Then I'll have to hit you. For Chitanda and Ibara as well. With my fist."

Satoshi shrugged in a exaggerated manner.

"I sure don't want to be hit."

"By the way, if you want to keep silent, you'll have to apologize to Chitanda, and while you're at it, tell her that it was your doing."

"That's even worse. I had no intention of getting Chitanda involved in the first place."

Satoshi looked up at the sky. A long breath escaped from his mouth.

After some silence, he slowly spoke.

"I really don't want to say it. It's not something I want to talk about. But I can't keep silent, can I?"

"I don't know what you were thinking. You didn't only think, but acted on it."

"That's right, it's exactly as you said. I don't regret it, I really don't, but..."

Satoshi's gaze fell from the heavens to the ground. As if he had resolved himself, he began speaking, albeit in a faltering tone. His voice wasn't very loud, but I could still hear him over the wind.

"Houtarou, do you think of me as the obsessive type?"

I thought for a while and answered.

"Yeah, I guess. You're also quite the hobbyist."

"That's where you're totally mistaken."

Satoshi leaned on the railing of the snow-filled bridge.

"Hobbyists and obsessive people devote themselves to something. They don't want to lose to anyone in their respective fields, and their daily lives entail study and discovery."

"Aren't you like that?"

"Nope. Have you forgotten the 'Empress' incident? I said that I couldn't be number one at anything, didn't I? But to be precise, I've given up on reaching the top."

"You played a game with me earlier."

He was talking about the match we had at the game center. I won with a set count of 2-1.

"Yeah."

"At that time, didn't you think that something was weird? I wasn't obsessed with winning.

"We used to play that game a lot two years ago, yeah? The me back then looks like a pretty deplorable guy now. I used to win for the sake of winning. If I lost, I would quibble and find fault with the rules. It wasn't limited to games. When there was a guy who was well-informed about Takeda Shingen, I fished around for books so that I would know even more than that expert. At one point I also hopped on the train mania bandwagon. I simply wanted to win.

"I was obsessed with so many things. I can't remember what exactly I was into, but it could be anything, like the arrangement of colors on clothes, or the correct stroke order of kanji. Even when I went to a conveyor belt sushi bar, I would be engrossed in the correct order of assembling the sushi toppings, and I wouldn't notice the delicious food right under my nose."

Satoshi laughed at himself in an extremely strange fashion.

"To put it plainly, it was boring. Since I wanted to win so much, it wasn't interesting even if I did win, and I couldn't bear that end result. At that time, I couldn't understand why I felt that way, so I thought about it a lot. I was such an idiot. Would things be fun if I didn't have a fun way of winning?"

"So, one day, I grew tired of it. I gave up on being obsessed. No, that's not it. I became obsessed with not being obsessed. I've forgotten the exact cause."

"And after that, Houtarou, every day was truly entertaining. Today would be cycling, tomorrow would be handicrafts, and then I would read up on the US-Japan Security Treaty, postal life insurance, and classical music. With enough determination to spice it up but not so much as to be fixated on it, I dabbled in a variety of subjects. There was one time when you used the phrase 'shocking pink' to describe my lifestyle, right? That was a clever description."

Satoshi had already stopped directing his words at me. I caught his gaze, and continued his reminiscing monologue.

"But even in those comfortable days, one problem remained.

"I became obsessed with not being obsessed, and became at ease with this life. I don't have a clue how far your energy-saving belief supports your life, but my lack of obsession is quite a critical point for me. Without it, I would probably go back to being that pathetic guy."

"But then there's Mayaka."

I could sense Satoshi clenching his fists.

"Mayaka's great. You probably don't know how good she is, but she really is. There's no girl like her. If Mayaka said that she wanted to be with me, it would be like a dream."

"But then, would it be alright for me to be obsessed with Mayaka?"

"I had decided to not be fixated on anything, but could Mayaka be an exception?"

"I thought that it was a really simple thing. By doing whatever I wanted, I acquired my current level of comfort. And I really wanted to be with Mayaka, so I thought that I should perhaps just follow my wishes."

"But then, Houtarou, that was impossible. Absolutely impossible. Because I wanted, I didn't become obsessed with anything and because I wanted, I obsessed over Mayaka..... Mayaka was a problem, but ignoring her would be a terrible policy. I should fix the situation, but how should I do it? Perhaps I'm mistaken in thinking that I can come up with the solution myself. With this Zen dialogue, I wonder if I've become a person who cannot hurt Mayaka."

"While I was still searching for the answer, last year's Valentine's Day came. Don't you think that the Valentine chocolate could be taken to be a sort of symbol? If I accepted Mayaka's chocolate, it would be like announcing that I would obsess over her. And I hadn't even found my answer yet."

"So that's why you didn't accept it?"

"Yeah. It's the same for this year."

"You can call me a blockhead. It's been a year, and I still can't give an answer!"

"In that situation, I wondered if there was any way to refuse the chocolate that I couldn't accept, other than making it disappear. If there was..... Yeah, I guess there would be some merit in giving me a punch."

Silence fell.

But that was supposed to have nothing to do with Chitanda.

"But you hurt Chitanda."

I said, and Satoshi responded with a sorrowful smile.

"..... My plan didn't go as smoothly as yours, Houtarou. I had no idea it would turn out this way."

"Then how did you expect it to turn out?"

"We had an agreement. Mayaka would leave the chocolate in the club room. If I was ready to accept it, I would take it. If not, I would leave it there. With that promise, that was what I had planned to do. I'm not saying that Mayaka is at fault, but she didn't factor that into her calculations. That Chitanda, who helped her in making the chocolate, would want to see through the accepting of the chocolate..."

So it was a collaborative plan by Satoshi and Ibara?

"Then, have you told Mayaka all this?"

"Of course I have! Isn't it obvious? If not, I would be manipulating Mayaka under my own terms!"

"..... Hmm, actually, that's exactly how it is.

"Last year, after I rejected Mayaka's chocolate, we had a talk. It was one that lasted a few hours and was even more detailed than the one we're having now. That sure takes me back. It's already been a year since then. I was scolded pretty harshly back then. In the end, Mayaka didn't say that she understood my situation, but said that she would wait. The next Valentine's Day would be a teset.

"Mayaka still stayed calm even after she learned that he chocolate had been stolen, right? That's because she probably understood that it was a sign that the thief still hadn't been able to find his answer. That's what I think, anyway."

Ibara realized that Satoshi was the one who stole the chocolate. That's what I had expected. But then I thought that Ibara would be enraged about it afterwards. Since this year's chocolate was rejected like last year's..... I didn't even know if that would be a reason for her to be angry.

If that's the case, Ibara's Manga Research Club business would probably be a lie as well.

Satoshi spread his hands out wide. His uniform sleeves were stirred up by the wind and fluttered around.

"So, Houtarou, that's all I have to say. My actions weren't just a practical joke, and I didn't keep quiet about it. What are you going to do?"

... The snowfall increased in intensity.

I straightened the collar of my coat. It was too cold to stay on the top of the bridge. As I walked, my feet made crunching noises on the snow.

Satoshi followed behind.

"I can't tell this to Chitanda, can I?"

"Definitely not. I would rather get punched."

That's what I thought. Even if Satoshi did speak frankly to Ibara regarding this topic, this would still be guys' talk. Likewise, Chitanda and Ibara would probably be having some girls' talk too. Since the contents of their discussion has not been leaked to me, and Satoshi hasn't told me everything yet, I, too, shouldn't reveal everything to Satoshi.

No, I wonder about that.

My motto is "If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick." That's all. I don't have anything that needs to be disclosed. I suddenly recalled what I was thinking about at the library while I was looking at the photograph collection. An energy conserver cannot deal with a love affair. The same goes for Satoshi's motive for breaking the home-made chocolate. But the two things are falsely similar. I definitely made a mistake. Satoshi hesitated because of Ibara.

As I crossed the river where the cold winds blew fiercely, I felt troubled. Although he was the one at fault from the beginning, I've made him say something that he probably didn't want to. Should I make it up to him?

Should I say to him, "Sorry, I guess I didn't know much about Fukube Satoshi"?

With my back facing Satoshi, I gave a small, bitter smile.

Well, guess I can't say that.

The bridge wasn't that long. Right before we reached the other side, I asked, "So, is there the prospect that you'll be able to answer?"

I turned back to a serious face that cannot be seen under normal circumstances. Satoshi nodded slightly.

"I'm almost there, just a bit more..... I just can't put it into words yet."

I hit his shoulders.

"Sorry for making you say all this in the cold. I'll buy you a can of coffee."

With that, the usual smile returned to Satoshi's face. He swung his bag around, and I could hear the broken pieces of chocolate making cracking noises inside.

"All right. Since you're treating, I'll have a red tea, then."

Once I got home, I brewed some tea to warm up my cold body. After drinking half of it, I called Chitanda.

I told her that it ended uneventfully, that I handed the chocolate to Satoshi, and that any friction or future conflict had been completely cleared up. I wonder if Chitanda was happy with this. Not knowing how long her words of thanks would last, I forcefully stopped her and hung up.

I told a lie. Perhaps I've become defiant, but no one can blame me for what I've done.

I returned to my room, lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

Besides..... it's not impossible for Chitanda to be lying to me. It's common knowledge today that there is more than one perspective to any topic. Anyhow, I don't totally understand Satoshi, who can be said to be an old friend of mine. Even if no one was lying, it's also possible that someone had a misunderstanding, or that the other person misconstrued their words.

In any case, it's impossible for Ibara to not realize that Chitanda would want to witness the accepting of the chocolate. Does Satoshi understand this? That Ibara might have used Chitanda as a strategy to get Satoshi to accept the chocolate? Or could I be looking to much into it?

I don't know. Not that I tried to find out. If that Astronomy Club member, Nakayama really stole the chocolate with the physical trick I mentioned earlier, I wouldn't be spending my time staring at the ceiling like this.

A bar of chocolate lay on the floor. That was the single piece of Valentine chocolate I received this year.

I picked up the chocolate that seemed like it was made overseas, tore off its cover and peeled off the foil. I bit into the black chocolate that appeared from under the foil.

The taste of chocolate spread in my mouth. It was intensely sweet, then bitter, as I had expected. The taste gradually faded and disappeared, leaving only its impression.

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Refers to spring
2. ↑ Ideal Japanese woman
3. ↑ To hold a meeting is 催す, which is the first kanji of 催淫薬, which means aphrodisiac
4. ↑ An idea during World War 2 which states that battleships should have cannons as large as possible for a more advantageous position
5. ↑ I believe the game described here is Virtual On
6. ↑ Satoshi's screams of disbelief, I presume
7. ↑ Limit hands in Japanese mahjong, giving 48000 points to the dealer or 32000 points to the other players
8. ↑ All tiles with the same shape
9. ↑ 188mm x 130mm
10. ↑ Oreki corrected himself here because the Japanese word for craftsman can be taken to mean spy
11. ↑ Japanese soup stock made from fish and kelp
12. ↑ After a few hours of research, I still can't find a table role playing game of that name which fits the few lines of description here. Those who know something, please don't hesitate to drop me an email!
13. ↑ Refer to [Story 1: If I Have to Do It, Make It Quick](#)

# **Story 7 - The Doll that Took a Detour**

# 1

After passing through the downtown area of Kamiyama City and following the road to the northeast, I reached a long, gentle slope. The feet on the pedals of my bicycle grew heavy, but I didn't feel pain. The slope wasn't so severe that I had to stand up and pedal, but I could feel my body temperature rising.

Sparse forests appeared on both sides of the road, and I could start seeing the lingering snow on the ground. The sings of human presence suddenly died out, as if some kind of catastrophe had just occurred. Actually, looking from a historical perspective, the hilly area on the northeastern side of Kamiyama City used to be an independent village of a different name. That's what I heard from Satoshi, at least. Even now, that area is known by its local name, Jinde. The incline of the slope increased for a short while. Although the indications of spring were getting stronger, it was still freezing in the morning. It was so cold that I could see my ragged, white breath escaping into the atmosphere.

I noticed a shrine at the apex of the hill. I've taken this road a few times already. The first time was with Satoshi showing me the way. The next time was when all four members of the Classics Club celebrated the end of the Cultural Festival. But this is the first time I've noticed the shrine here. It's probably because I've always walked on this road while there was some sort of disturbance, I suppose.

Today, I'm alone. Who would have thought that the Oreki Houtarou, who took up the self-appointed role as energy conserver, would wake up so early in the morning to cycle to a distant village? Thinking that this would have been impossible one year ago, I smiled bitterly. The deity in the shrine was the Kshitigarbha<sup>[1]</sup>. Taking a break, I got off my bicycle, and with one hand, paid my respects to the bodhisattva.

After the Kshitigarbha shrine was a downhill slope.

I could see speckles of snow in the rice paddies. The rays of the morning sun shot through the chilly atmosphere.

Since this hill wasn't so high, the view wasn't so good. However, in the middle of the expansive plains, out of the sporadically distributed houses, I could see an estate surrounded by a white fence of an unusual style. A majestic pine tree was growing in the garden of that estate. That would be Chitanda's house. You can tell that it's a large house from here, but you wouldn't know of the dumbounding size of the reception hall and the infinite detail of the transom<sup>[2]</sup> without going inside.

But I wasn't going to Chitanda's house today. I turned my head around.

After the Chitanda residence was a brook that partitioned the land into two banks. A small temple was built on the other side, as if eating into the mountain that couldn't be merely described as having a fresh verdure. I couldn't see the main building. I only thought it was probably there because of the flag in front.

That's my destination. It's called Mizunashi shrine, I think.

It was two days ago.

As I was languidly lying on the bed in my room and reading a thick paperback book that just wouldn't end, the phone rang.

"Hello. Sorry for calling you during your break."

It was Chitanda. By nature, she has a polite demeanor and docile tone, but when we talk face to face, I get influenced by her large eyes and our past experiences, and I get made to realize that she's not just a trim person. However, I can't see her face over the phone, so I thought that I had received a call from some lady.

"I wasn't really taking a break."

"Eh? Oreki-san, you have supplementary lessons?"

"No, that's not it..."

My grades were certainly not the most outstanding in Kamiyama High School, but they weren't that bad for me to receive a notice to attend extra lessons. On the other end of the line, Chitanda spoke calmly.

"It's the spring holidays."

That's right. I was definitely taking a break from the spring holidays, without a care in the world.

"I apologize for being so sudden, but..."

Chitanda did seem really apologetic about it, so I held my breath, wondering what this was all about.

"Do you have any plans for the day after tomorrow?"

I glanced at the calendar. There were no plans for the day after tomorrow, the day after that, and in fact, the whole spring holidays. If my sister was around, she would drag me along somewhere, but thankfully, she's traveling in Nanki<sup>[3]</sup>, leaving me at home in peace.

"Nope."

"I see. That's great."

I could sense clear relief from the other side. Then, Chitanda continued.

"Erm, Oreki-san. I understand that this is sudden and troubling, but could you please help me hold an umbrella?"

While holding the receiver, I tilted my head without thinking.

If this was April last year, I would have seriously been troubled about whether "holding an umbrella" was some sort of slang. However, I've known Chitanda for about a year. Based on experience, I've learned that Chitanda tends to gloss over the explanation when asking for a favor.

"...Explain from the beginning."

"From the beginning? Right. It all started from the postwar period..."

"Ah, I mean, explain from the middle, and in a way that I can understand."

It seems that even Chitanda had realized her habits. With an embarrassed voice, she said,

"Sorry, I'm bad with explanations..."

I could hear a muttered "Erm" from Chitanda. With that, it seemed that she had organized her thoughts.

"Basically, a shrine near my house is celebrating a Doll Festival. There's the emperor and empress, ministers and three court ladies. There used to be a five man ensemble, but because of the decrease in the number of children, it was removed."

"I see..."

I have absolutely no idea why declining birth rates would cause an ensemble to be omitted, but more importantly, there was a fundamental contradiction. The Doll Festival should be in March, but it's April now.

"Isn't it one month late?"

"Ah, right, that is to match the lunisolar calendar."

This statement made me want to ask something like "Is that so?" or "What about it?" Is a Doll Festival held one month late such a common phenomenon? Without caring about my questioning silence, Chitanda continued.

"The royal dolls have umbrella bearers, but... one person who has filled this role for many years suddenly dislocated his hand in an accident. I wouldn't ask the impossible, but we are do not have enough helpers. I've asked around for suitable people in my area, but none of them could make it.

"The costume has a specific size, so not everyone can wear it. For example, it would be too large for Fukube-san, but I think that it will fit you perfectly."

Chitanda stopped talking for a moment. Then, she continued, as if she had been waiting for my response.

"It will take less than an hour. Could you please help out?"

I realized that my face had turned bitter.

Basically, all I have to do is to hold an umbrella next to the tiered doll stand. But to be honest, it would be troublesome, and no matter how eloquent Chitanda was, there's no doubt that I would feel embarrassed participating in a festival in an area I have no ties to.

"Not really interested."

"Ah, I see..."

An awkward silence followed.

But now that I think about it, no one would care about the person holding the umbrella. Moreover, Chitanda knows about my energy saving principle, and yet she asked for my help. That means that she's really troubled.

If I can quickly help Chitanda when she's in a pinch, well, that's not so bad.

"Ah, but it's fine. I'll go."

"Eh? Is it really alright?"

Based on the sudden change in her speech pattern, it seems that Chitanda was really surprised. After a deep breath, her well-mannered words

returned.

"Thank you very much. You are a great help."

"So, the day after tomorrow, I just have to stand next to the dolls, right?"

"Yes, and you will be walking with them. It may not be much, but there will be a gift for your efforts."

Ah, I'll be getting a gift too. This would be just like a simple part-time job, then.

I was just about satisfied with Chitanda's explanation, when all of a sudden, I realized something. That can't be right.

"Walking with the dolls, you say?"

"...Yes."

"The dolls walk?"

"That's right."

She answered as if that was natural, but for some reason her voice became gradually softer. I was about to ask "Why would the dolls walk?", when Chitanda spoke up, as if unable to bear it any longer.

"They may be dolls, but please stop saying 'doll' over and over. I'm also quite embarrassed."

Something was off. Something was definitely off here. I thought for a while.

My job was just to hold an umbrella for a doll, but Chitanda said that the doll walks. Also, she felt shy upon hearing the word "doll".

There was only one conclusion that could be drawn.

"Don't tell me the doll is..."

"...Ah. Could it be that you do not know anything about it?"

Exactly as I had thought, huh.

After adjusting the receiver, Chitanda continued with a detailed explanation.

"Every year, following the lunisolar calendar, the Mizunashi Shrine celebrates the Doll Festival by having girls dress up as 'Live Dolls'. The dolls form a procession and parade around the village. I thought that Mizunashi Shrine's Live Doll Festival was quite famous, so I thought that you would know about it..."

"Yes, I have played the position of Empress every year since the start of middle school... Fukube-san said that he would come over to take a look."

But Satoshi had supplementary classes, so he just couldn't make it for the procession. He called last night, and he spoke in a voice that seemed like he was stomping on the ground in regret.

"Listen, Houtarou. You're holding an umbrella for Chitanda when she's playing an empress. Come what may, never, ever, make a mistake!"

I was more worried about what costume I would be put in, as the umbrella bearer behind the doll.

There was still some time before the arranged time, but I didn't want to get lost on an unfamiliar road. I adjusted my trench coat, and pedaled all the way down the slope.

## 2

Looking at the scenery from up here, I could see that the village was surrounded by mountains on all four sides. There were a few buildings, and probably because now wasn't the right season to plant anything, the fields contained only unmelted snow and some sparse leaves. I heard from Satoshi that lotus flowers would be grown after the rice crops had been harvested, and I laughed ambiguously, thinking that now would also be the time for Chitanda to grow<sup>[4]</sup>. Right now, I can't tell if the leaves in the rice fields were actually lotus plants.

I pedaled along the side of the brook, which had trees growing on its banks. The trees' leaves had fallen off in autumn last year, and the new buds hadn't appeared yet. Despite having no interest in the beauties of nature, even I would know what kind of trees these were, since they were of a major variety. They were cherry blossoms. The apricot plants had already bloomed in the shopping street in town. I'd thought that these would have bloomed already.

Since plants aren't industrially produced goods, they would occasionally have eccentricities in conduct. As I was moving upstream to cross the river, one cherry blossom tree with vibrant blossoms appeared before my very eyes. Not all the flowers had opened up, but while all the other trees were still in the reticence of winter, this one tree already had half of its blossoms. I guess it has something to do with exposure to sunlight. Seeing a solitary flowering tree sure was fascinating.

I stopped the bicycle. I was surprised by the wild bloom, but I wasn't here to admire the flowers. From my pocket I retrieved a memo, which contained Chitanda's instructions on how to get to Mizunashi Shrine.

"From the slope, go upstream along the brook and you will reach a cherry blossom blooming out of season. Cross Choukyuu Bridge ahead and follow

the path."

So I should cross the first bridge after the cherry blossom. I hurried on.

I could sense the festival atmosphere. From the banners with family crests hanging down in vestibules. From the cheers of the walking children. From the white flags in the distance. And most significantly, from myself being here riding my bicycle across the streets at nine in the morning when there was no school.

After rounding a curve, I finally saw a small bridge. That would be Choukyuu Bridge, I suppose. Matching its name<sup>[5]</sup>, it was an extremely old bridge. Its width was narrow, and it didn't seem that cars could cross it.

But then...

My pedaling grew weaker.

"...Hm?"

Looking closer at the vicinity of the bridge, there was a standing notice board. Well, this is troubling. What was written on the board was "No crossing".

The bridge was undergoing some construction. Reading the contents of the notice board, I found that the deteriorating bridge was being reconstructed. Indeed, the completely blackened wood bridge looked unreliable, and the bare floorboards, which hadn't even been laid with asphalt, had probably remained there for a few generations.

Right now, the "No crossing" sign was standing, but it didn't seem like there was any work being done on the bridge, so I could cross if I really wanted to. However, there was a small truck on the other side, and there were two men in yellow helmets and yellow-grey overalls laying down some equipment that looked like metallic scaffolding. They were probably construction workers from the public works company... It would be really stupid to cross on my own accord and anger the two men. Thankfully, the

bridge was only a few meters long. I called out to the workers on the other side.

"Excuse me!"

The worker that turned to look at me had a swarthy face that reminded me of summer even in this cold weather. He could have gotten the sunburn during his job, or perhaps he has an interest in skiing in winter. Fortunately, he didn't seem to be a difficult person.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Could I cross this bridge?"

"Sure, sure you can pass right now. Come along."

He waved his hand. Following his words, I pushed my bicycle and crossed Choukyuu Bridge. The floorboards creaked and bent under my feet as I passed. It would certainly be better for this bridge to be rebuilt as soon as possible.

After crossing the bridge, the worker placed his hand on his hip and smiled.

"We'll be starting work once another truck arrives, and you won't be able to cross after that."

"Okay, thanks."

That means that I would have to use another bridge downstream when I'm returning home. Well, I probably won't get lost.

With my back to Choukyuu Bridge, I suddenly felt that something was strange... Since Chitanda lives in this Jinde area, she should be aware of the bridge's reconstruction. It's strange that she would tell me to cross this bridge. And it definitely wouldn't be a prank.

Well, since I was able to pass in the end, I have no complaints. The shrine would be along the path, so I cycled further upstream.

Come to think of it, I got to see Chitanda in her kimono on New Year's Day. At that time, it was for a shrine visit, and today would be for a festival. I don't really believe in this sort of thing, but it's a weird link of fate.

Like its impression when viewed from afar, Mizunashi Shrine was built near the side of the mountain range. It was totally different in scale compared to Arekusū Shrine, which I visited on New Year's Day. The archway was small, the stone staircase narrow, and the main building didn't seem to have a significant history; it was simply old. It's impossible to compare it to Arekusū Shrine, which is also a famous sightseeing destination, but the caretakers of Mizunashi Shrine were trying. A reconstruction schedule was pasted in front of the shrine, and there was also a notice board with the large words "Living Doll procession starts at 11:30".

I've never been inside a shrine office in my entire life, but this year, I've already done it twice. For some reason, I was a lot bolder during the second time. Naturally, it has nothing to do with the shrine offices of Arekusū Shrine and Mizunashi Shrine, but I supposed it's like being able to pass through the curtains of a Nagoya Don restaurant confidently after having been to a Osaka Don restaurant. Would this be considered "Taking revenge on your Edo enemies in Nagasaki"? In any case, I certainly wouldn't really feel dwarfed being in the middle of my elders wearing Happi coats<sup>[6]</sup>.

The reception hall was a lot smaller compared to the one at Arekusū Shrine, but it was about twenty tatami mats in size. There, I approached a middle-aged man who behaved like a manager and asked him a question.

"So, what should I do?"

The procession would start at half past eleven, but we were supposed to assemble at half past nine. There was still some time before that, but I had nothing to do. The man, who had a red-tipped nosed, stared at me suspiciously.

"...And you are?"

He asked brusquely.

"My name is Oreki. I was asked to hold an umbrella."

"Haven't heard that name."

"Well, I'm not one of the people here."

"Fnnnn..."

I was stared at intently. Did the words get through? Having rushed here in the cold only to be treated like this, I was naturally sullen.

"Didn't you hear from Chitanda? I was told that the person who usually holds the umbrella had an injury, and I was asked to replace him."

Having confirmed my identity, the man's attitude suddenly changed.

"Ah! So you're Hazawa's replacement. I see. Why did you come so early? The mens' changing will be done soon, so it would have been better if you'd taken your time."

... If I had known, I would have spared no effort to move as slowly as possible. The man brought me to a kerosene stove as I was feeling disheartened and crestfallen at the beginning of my work.

"I'll take care of the arrangements. Until you're needed, please stay warm."

"Okay."

That's great. Having gotten permission, I put on my white trench coat and became a living statue by the stove, one of my most proficient actions. If it would be alright for my changing to be done slowly, then Chitanda would be changing from nine thirty onwards, I suppose.

Besides me, every other person in the room had their own things to do, and they were all running around with urgency. There would usually be four to five people gathered in the room, but when the man in the happy coat

stomped in noisily, a few lines would be exchanged, and people would take turns leaving and entering the room. For example,

"Oi, who's in charge of the sake preparations?"

"That would be Nakatake-san. More importantly, what about later in the afternoon?"

"I left it to the women, but please confirm it."

And,

"Hanai-san! There's a call from a newspaper company!"

"Newspaper? It wouldn't be NHK, would it?"

"All they said was that they were from a newspaper company."

From that exchange, I learned that the man with the red nose was called Hanai-san.

For a moment, I was infected by the frantic energies in the noisy room, and I started looking forward to the job. There were a few people who would occasionally look at me suspiciously, as if saying, "Who's this guy not helping out? What's he doing?", but I wouldn't be afraid as long as I didn't make eye contact with them.

... I don't always choose the path of the energy saver no matter the reason. However, this time, there were clear, proper reasons for me to not move an inch from the stove.

Firstly, I don't know this place. I don't know anything about the interpersonal relationships or the festival arrangements. No one asked me to do anything, and I think I would just be a burden if I tried to butt in.

Second. It's warm in front of the stove.

Perhaps I had erased my existence by crouching, for most people passed by without looking at me. I was worried about going unnoticed until the Living

Doll procession started, when the man from earlier, Hanai, stood up. He quickly asked,

"You're holding the umbrella for Chitanda-san, right?"

"That's what I heard."

"I see. I'm telling you just in case, but there's a mourning at Sono-san's place, so the route will be changed."

"Huh. That's unfortunate."

To that response, Hanai nodded lightly.

"It was a peaceful death. So, do you want to know the new route?"

"No."

"Then you'll be fine if you always follow the person in front of you. The route will be somewhat shorter."

Having said everything that he had to, Hanai stood up and left in a hurry. In any case, if I were to just follow Chitanda, there wouldn't be any point in knowing of the change in route. If Hanai hadn't told me about it, I would have just gone past without knowing of Sono's misfortune. It seems that Sono had reached the end of the natural span of life, and I silently prayed for him or her.

The sound of heavy feet stomping around for preparation of the event wouldn't stop.

"The number of clogs don't add up! What happened to the women's Zori<sup>[7]</sup>?"

"Are you missing one or two?"

"One pair."

"Then it would be Chitanda-san's. She brought her own."

Would I be wearing a Zori too? If that's the case, would I have to wear a Tabi<sup>[8]</sup>? What I'm wearing now is normal socks that's tightly guarding my feet from the cold. That would be fine, right?

... Obviously not. It seems that I had been swallowed by the frenzied atmosphere, for I simply couldn't calm down. It's all right, I just have to check with Chitanda. There's nothing for me to care about.

But then again, I don't think our communication will be flawless. I'm feeling uneasy.

As time passed, the number of people bursting into the room with weird expressions on their faces increased. A withered, old man with a head of white hair walked into the room and shouted in such a loud voice that I wondered where it came from.

"Nakatake! What did you do about the sake?"

A man huddling in the corner stood up sluggishly. He was a thickly-built man who looked a little slow-witted, but had a lot of strength.

"I have ordered it. They will deliver it in the afternoon."

"By afternoon, what time did they mean?"

"By one o'clock."

"You fool!"

A thunderous voice sounded. Even though I was on the other side of the room, my body shook in shock.

"The procession returns at twelve thirty, one o'clock is too late! That's why I told you to always leave a buffer, now hurry up and push it forward!"

The person in charge of the sake didn't seem to accept it, but he quickly answered, "I'll do it now." and left the room. The white-haired man now stared at the room, and I accidentally made eye contact with him. "Oh," he

muttered, and with that same austere face, rapidly moved over to where I was crouching. Bending his vigorous body a little, the old man spoke.

"Are you the person Chitanda-san asked to help?"

How did he manage to release so much intensity? I was thinking of saying "No, you've got the wrong person." and making a run for it, but I can't do that.

"That's right."

I couldn't say anything else. My half-kneel had turned into a Seiza<sup>[9]</sup> without me realizing.

In response, the old man lowered his head.

"Sorry for making you come all the way to this place. We don't have enough manpower, so we've been causing quite a bit of trouble for outsiders such as yourself. I hope you will forgive us."

I reflexively removed my trench coat and stood up.

"Not at all! I'm sorry I can't be of much use as an outsider. I'll try my best not to get in the way. If there is anything you need of me, please don't hesitate to ask."

The elderly man raised his head, and his eyes narrowed.

"You've got your act together."

... That's the first time anyone has said that to me.

"Relax until your time comes," he added, and with one more bow, he left the room. It somehow seems that I was officially allowed to relax.

However, that's just not sold in the wholesale store<sup>[10]</sup>.

I heard this conversation from the men entering and leaving the room.

"Did you take care of Choukyuu Bridge?"

That was the red-nosed Hanai. The person who answered was one of the firmly built men in the Happi coats, a relatively tall and gangly man.

"I asked Murai-sensei to take care of it."

"You left it to Murai-san?"

Hanai's words ended with a slightly bitter tone, which the tall man noticed.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, well, fine, I suppose. Did they delay the construction work?"

"He said it was perfectly fine, and that he would have construction stop on the day of the Doll Festival even if the completion date would be delayed."

Since I was an outsider, it wasn't my problem, and I could have just stayed silent. Why didn't I do that? I have no idea myself. In any case, I moved my lips while in the position of warming my body by the stove.

"Construction has already started on Choukyuu Bridge."

That line led to an unexpectedly enormous effect. Hanai and the man he was talking to, as well as the elderly man and the guy who was scolded regarding the sake, or in fact, everyone in the room turned to look at me in unison.

Even I knew that this was important. Hanai's eyes looked like they would pop out of their sockets.

"What did you say?"

And then he was temporarily lost for words. He then yelled at the tall man.

"Shige! Did you confirm the delay?"

The man called Shige was flustered.

"I emphasized it to Murai-sensei! But he told me he would do it, and we can't contact the engineering firm from here!"

"You."

This time his words were directed at me.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

He drew closer. Being talked to like that makes me uneasy.

"When I was coming over here, there was a 'No crossing' sign at the bridge. Since the workers were there, I asked if I could pass and was allowed to do so."

"So they only placed the sign there?"

"Yes... but they said that they would start work after one more truck arrived."

The room's state of commotion, suddenly descended into a hush. Perhaps it came from the kitchen, but a shrill noise entered my ears.

The white-haired old man spoke.

"Sono-kun, take your truck there and check. Tanimoto, call Murai... no, call the Nakagawa Construction Agency."

It seems that the tall man was called Tanimoto Shige. I'm not sure if it's "Shigeru" or "Shigejirou"<sup>[11]</sup>, though. Accepting the proposal, Hanai nodded.

"Ah, please do that."

And then he glared at me for some reason, as if I would be lynched if it was actually possible to cross Choukyuu Bridge.

... But my worries were all for naught. Ten minutes passed.

The man called Sono was a corpulent man whose Happi coat looked like it was close to bursting. He looked out of breath when returning to the room, but he reported in a loud voice,

"It's true! Construction has started!"

I could guess why that was so significant. The procession's course probably included crossing the bridge.

"Shige! It's all your fault!"

Tanimoto also had something to say. While cowering from Hanai's intensity, he spoke clearly.

"But something's wrong here. Murai-sensei definitely called Nakagawa Construction Agency to stop work on the day of the festival!"

"Then..."

"Apparently someone told them the day before yesterday that they could proceed on schedule."

Sono stood in to help the sweating Tanimoto.

"It's as Shige said. I just spoke with someone from the agency, and that's exactly what they said."

"Why did this happen..." I could hear someone sigh and mutter.

Since the atmosphere in the room had turned solemn, I somehow felt like running away. Should I raise an eyebrow? Unfortunately, my troubled face was unable to do that, even though I had nothing to worry about. All I could do was watch the development blankly.

The one who made the practical judgment was, once again, the white-haired old man.

"We shouldn't care about the agency for now. There might have been some miscommunication along the way. What's most important question now is what to do about the route."

A round clock without any form of civility stood on the lintel, inconsiderately telling us that it would soon be half past ten.

The original route was exceedingly simple.

From the road in front of the shrine, we would go downstream along the river. After that, we were supposed to cross Choukyuu Bridge and change direction, moving upstream. In the vicinity of the shrine, there is another bridge called Kaya Bridge, and we were supposed to cross that and return to the shrine. That's all.

However, Choukyuu Bridge is unusable now.

Receiving word of an emergency situation, the men who had dispersed for preparations earlier returned to the room. The spacious waiting room soon became a cramped meeting room. I could no longer sit by the stove blankly, so I removed my trench coat once again, and sat properly and silently at a corner of the room. Since it seemed that they were about to talk about things that an outsider like me wouldn't have any relation to, I wanted to leave the room, but I sadly missed the timing.

Someone started the ball rolling.

"Is it possible to somehow stop the construction? The procession could cross the bridge in five minutes."

If that was indeed possible, there wouldn't be a need for a discussion. Hanai shook his head.

"Besides the procession, there will also be journalists and cameramen, and if anyone gets hurt while crossing the bridge, the construction agency would take the blame. Since they've started work already, we won't ask

them for the impossible. To prevent this situation, we had actually asked them to make the necessary arrangements, but..."

He looked around slightly as he spoke. Mr Tanimoto must be around here somewhere.

"There's no helping it. How about we go past Choukyuu Bridge, then return?"

As Hanai spoke while rubbing his chin, angry voices flew out from all directions.

"We can't do that!"

"Go back the way we came?"

"That takes care of the east side, but what about the west, no dolls for them?"

I could vaguely grasp the situation. The east and west areas of the brook worked together for the festival, but having the procession move on only one side would definitely make some people furious.

Accepting the rebuttal, Hanai brought out another proposal.

"Then what about going past Choukyuu Bridge, returning, then getting to the west bank using Kaya Bridge, then going past Choukyuu Bridge again, and then going back?"

Going and returning twice, huh? That's a way to do it, but...

This time, only one man openly gave his counter-argument. He wasn't in the room earlier.

"That would make the time taken double. That also doubles the walking distance."

"There's nothing else we can do."

"Is there really nothing else? This would throw our plans into disarray. Furthermore, the TV crew are coming, so we can't do something embarrassing like that."

Another man entered the conversation.

"Also, the dolls already have to exert quite a lot of physical energy. Doubling the distance would be terrible."

What a brilliant opinion! I don't know how heavy an umbrella would weigh, but I don't want to walk double the distance.

Having been made to look like a bad guy, Hanai's whole face became shaded with the color of his nose.

"You may say all that, but what in the world could we do? Anything else?"

"We could go all the way to Tooji Bridge."

A young man said.

"If we cross Tooji Bridge and go back by Kaya Bridge, the distance wouldn't be doubled, right?"

From the flow of the conversation, I presume that there is apparently another bridge further downstream from Choukyuu Bridge. Was there really another bridge when I walked along the river? Well, it was probably there, but I just don't remember because it wasn't of interest to me at that time.

However, when that idea was proposed, Hanai grimaced and did not say a word. It wasn't just Hanai. There was some sort of awkward atmosphere in the room.

There was hardly any time before the start of the procession. Is there anyone who can break this stasis!

I'm not sure about the inactivity, but the silence was soon broken. I was wondering if someone accidentally opened the sliding door, when a plump middle-aged woman entered and spoke with a puzzled voice.

"Excuse me... Sorry for troubling you when you are busy, but is there someone called Oreki-san here?"

"Ah, yes."

I straightened my knees and stood up.

"That would be me."

The woman looked at me with an increasingly baffled expression. I have the feeling that I gave off the impression of an impolite person.

"What is it?"

"Ah... Chitanda-san's daughter is looking for you. She wants you to come over."

Chitanda?

Were they waiting for the intruder to leave? I hurriedly left the room with the heavy atmosphere where everyone shut their mouth. I don't know what business Chitanda has with me, but I sure was glad to be called out.

### 3

But I wasn't allowed to look at Chitanda directly.

I was in a room which was about the size of the waiting room where the men were discussing the plan of action. Since there were more kerosene stoves, it was warmer here. A thick curtain-like cloth was hanging in the room, and I couldn't see if there was anyone, or how many people there were, behind it. I felt that I shouldn't even try to look. The room was suffused with the smell of kerosene, as well as the fragrance of cosmetics.

A quiet voice came from behind the sheet.

"Are you there, Oreki-san?"

That was Chitanda's voice, I think. There's no other voice like that.

But for a moment, I hesitated. Chitanda has often used this calm voice. I've heard it many times, but the voice coming from behind the cloth seemed more prim, and somewhat colder. This voice seemed to portray formal, ordered behavior.

"Sorry we have to talk like this. I'm being dressed right now."

I had been thinking about the meaning of that sheet, and my guess was confirmed... this is the female changing room. I vaguely responded with an "Ah" and a "Oh". The discomfort I felt here made the solemn meeting room earlier seem like a siesta room. I adjusted my trench coat, which had fallen off my shoulders.

"I've called you for only one reason. There has been some trouble, right?"

"... Yeah."

"Is it serious?"

"Seems so."

"I see."

The voice cut off for a short moment. Was Chitanda the only person behind the curtain? That shouldn't be the case, right? The procession does not consist of only Chitanda, after all. I don't know what they're wearing, but for things like these, it's usually impossible for one to wear them alone. I said nothing. After a while, Chitanda spoke up again.

"Then please tell me what happened. There isn't much time left."

That was true. If we were setting off at eleven thirty, I would have to change soon. I get the urgency, and I understand why Chitanda wants to deal with the situation. She called me instead of any other guy probably because I would be easier to talk to, with us being the same age.

But then again.

If we were talking without seeing each others' faces, then it would be like our usual telephone calls, but this time, I somehow felt a little tongue-tied. Perhaps it was because I suddenly moved from a cold place to a warm one.

It's alright. It's not something you can't talk about. I wet my tongue and began to talk.

"At Choukyuu Bridge..."

Construction has started.

That construction was initially arranged to be stopped.

But then the construction agency received word that it was fine to continue.

As a result, it became impossible to use Choukyuu Bridge, and the men started discussing the serious topic of how to change the route. I summarized the above things and said it much too hurriedly.

I didn't even hear a cough from behind the sheet. It would have been good to hear some sounds of comprehension, too. I guess it's possible that Chitanda was making those sounds, just that they couldn't get past the thick cloth. I have no idea how she's listening to my words. She could be sitting properly, listening to me as she has her hair combed, or perhaps she's listening while doing a headstand... more importantly, is she even listening?

I suddenly felt a little unsure, so I stopped my speech and asked.

"Someone suggested going through Tooji Bridge, but... are you listening?"

She responded quickly.

"Yes, I am."

Her reply wasn't just curt, it was with a coldness I hadn't experienced before. It was as if she was holding a fan to her mouth. I could imagine her leaning against an arm while stifling a yawn. I sighed, spoke of the awkward atmosphere among the men, and ended my explanation.

I closed my mouth, and the only thing I could hear in the room was the soft sound of kerosene combustion from the stoves.

... No, that's not all.

I strained my ears and heard it. A suppressed, whispering voice. It sounded like someone was talking to someone else. Was Chitanda speaking? Or was it the other person here who hadn't said a word to me before?

And then, the evaluation came.

"You summarized what was happening very well."

Well, thanks.

But her next words were a little different from before. I felt her take a deep breath, and then she spoke in a louder voice.

"Murai-san is a member of the Kamiyama City Council. Delaying the completion date might be just a figure of speech, but it would be difficult for the Nakagawa Engineering Firm to refuse if negotiations went through Murai-san. That means that we should believe that the phone call telling them to continue work today was real."

Her words were mixed with a feeling that I was used to hearing. It was a burning enthusiasm that always existed underneath that neat appearance. When I hear the name Chitanda, I would be reminded of the beginning. Since we first met in April last year, she's gotten me, Satoshi and Ibara involved in many cases. She's a person overflowing with curiosity.

That means that Chitanda's holding no fan. She just wanted to find out who did this and why. She might even be as close to the hanging sheet as possible. Yawning would be unthinkable. There's no doubt that her enormous eyes are filled with energy. That's just Chitanda.

"Why would they..."

Behind the cloth, Chitanda became curious.

But that was all there was to it.

I had caught a glimpse of her excitement, but then it suddenly faded away, as if it hadn't existed in the first place.

While I was sitting properly on the tatami, what Chitanda said to me was not, "I'm curious." Instead, she said,

"But it's fine. It seems that the problem is not that severe."

There were two things I wanted to say, but I just couldn't reply to that. The first was, "Is that all?", but I naturally couldn't say that. I cleared my throat, and asked,

"Is that so? It seems quite serious in the other room."

"That might be the case, but there isn't a lack of a solution. To put it simply, we are hesitant to go to the area further downstream for religious matters."

She said this as if she was giving a lecture. I wasn't really that interested, but I somehow felt like saying, "Could you give a more detailed explanation?"

She thought for a while.

"Oreki-san, could you please bring the men a message?"

"Mm. Sure."

"Then..."

She started with a voice tinged with fortitude.

"I'll ask the other side's priest myself. I'll ask my father to contact the representatives personally, too. Please tell them that."

I momentarily wondered if Chitanda's bad habit was at work again. The message does seem a little short on words, after all. When Chitanda asks for help, she tends to gloss over the explanation, but if I point it out to her, she would carefully and properly supplement it.

But this time, even when I asked, "Is that all?", all that came from the other side of the hanging sheet were a few cold, dry words.

"They should understand."

And that's all I told them.

I returned to the mens' room, and conveyed the message while thinking that the room was really cold. I hadn't even finished speaking when Hanai showed an openly relieved expression.

"Ah, then let's leave it to her... Okay, people, we'll be using Tooji Bridge."

It seems that the route was decided while I was still trying to understand what was going on.

Now was a Sturm und Drang<sup>[12]</sup> with no room for doubts. There was hardly any time left before the procession would start, after all.

# 4

My changing progressed at a frenetic pitch.

The spring sun spread its rays outside. The sweatshirt I had worn here was taken off, and of course, I couldn't wear the trench coat either. On top of my underwear, I was made to wear a Haori<sup>[13]</sup> and something like a Hakama<sup>[14]</sup>. This outfit had long enough sleeves, but the cuffs were too high. A third of my shin could be seen.

"This doesn't really fit."

I told the person who was helping me change. I was called because I would fit the size of clothes, but that isn't the case. However, my helper, who seemed to have not yet reached twenty years of age, smiled and replied,

"That's how it is."

"Is that so?"

My feet are cold. This reminds me of the incident on New Year's Day. It seems that when you add "Chitanda" and "traditional clothes", the result would automatically become "cold".

"It's the best fit. If the cuffs were a little longer, I would be the one holding the umbrella."

The man said. He was indeed a lot taller than me. His hair was dyed bright brown, and he looked like an unconstrained older brother. But if there was a young person here, Chitanda wouldn't need to call me for help. The thought that we would have to depart soon turned into a nervousness I hadn't felt before, and I grumbled a little.

"If it's just the cuffs, it would have been better if you did it."

The man shrugged while passing me a pair of black Tabi.

"You don't often get to see a procession like this, so I purposely came back home. If I were in it, I wouldn't be able to watch."

Well, it's certainly true that I would mostly be watching Chitanda's back.

I don't really like these clothes, but I have a psychological opposition against wearing a Tabi that someone else has used. However, I couldn't resist this time. I put it on with great reluctance.

With that, I had finished wearing a black top, black trousers, and black socks. As I thought, my exposed shins does seem quite indecent.

"Right, next is this."

He handed me some white overalls.

"Wear this, and I'll tie it around your waist."

Just as he said, he tied the cord around with a butterfly knot.

There was some rubber in the cuff, and it was tightened. The sleeves were quite loose, and I could see the black clothing underneath. There was a slit on the side from the waist to the knees, where I could see the pleats of the Hakama. The front part of the overalls was flat and collarless, but around my neck, a black collar could be seen, forming a black and white layered costume.

I see, so even the packhorse can look good with clothes<sup>[15]</sup>, huh? I'm starting to look like someone related to the festival.

"Next, wear this on your head."

The man passed me a black hat which looked like a cylinder crushed from the side. It's a kind of Eboshi<sup>[16]</sup>, I suppose.

I have a bad feeling about this. Everything before this has been fine. But if I put it on...

I tried it.

My whole body was reflected in the mirror. The man looked fixedly at my image and muttered,

"It doesn't really suit you."

My thoughts exactly.

Whether Oreki Houtarou looks good in traditional clothing or not, the festival was about to begin.

It seems that the problem with the bridge was fixed, but the start time was to be delayed. It was said that the procession would start fifteen minutes later than the original time.

I exited from the back door. It seems that the dolls were going to go out from the front door and gather in front of the shrine. That wouldn't be my turn yet. It's only when the gathered dolls line up when I nonchalantly join them, and go behind Chitanda.

Right. The preparations were perfect.

As I felt uncomfortable from wearing a Tabi I wasn't used to, I walked down the corridor of the shrine office and towards the exit. I wore the provided Zori. I would be walking in these for an hour, or even longer since the route was changed. I loitered by the main entrance, but it wasn't because I hurt myself by scraping on something. My footwear wasn't very comfortable, but I think I can endure it.

As I exited the shrine office, I noticed a man whose Happi coat looked as if it was falling off. The man, whom I think was called Sono, was holding the umbrella and waiting for me. It had purplish red paper stuck on it, and was larger than I had expected. It opened at a larger angle compared to a

western-style umbrella, and looked like a T shape, so it would look really big. As I faltered, Sono spoke to encourage me.

"Hey, the Living Doll Festival isn't one to strain yourself over. Try to make yourself at ease."

"You're saying that there are other festivals?"

"That's right. There are quite a few other spring festivals."

"Is that so? That must be really troublesome," I thought as I accepted the umbrella... It may look big, but it's not particularly heavy. It's just slightly heavier than a cloth umbrella. I'll be supporting this with both hands, so I should be able to easily hold out for an hour.

Fuu, I took a deep breath. Sono asked,

"You nervous?"

...Just a bit.

And then the living dolls gathered.

First was the emperor. He was also wearing an Eboshi, but unlike mine, it had some sort decoration like a long tail behind. He was also completely in black, except of his white footwear, which were peeking out from under his costume. Naturally, his outfit was one suited for royalty, but what was interesting was his clothes. It was black, but it wasn't absolutely black. Instead, a pattern of a subtle shade of black was stitched on it. I couldn't see the exact pattern from far, but in a flash, I realized that it looked like stripes. The emperor was played by an aesthetically beautiful man with an imposing face.

That's what I thought, but it was a huge mistake. I couldn't believe my own eyes. That wasn't a man, all the dolls were played by women. And I recognize that emperor's face. Those sharp eyes, and that shallow chin line.

She can't fool me by just pushing her hair up. That was a second year from Kamiyama High School - Irisu Fuyumi!

My relationship with Irisu goes back to the Cultural Festival, where we helped each other. I don't know much about her, but I at least know that Irisu's family doesn't stay around here. Was she also recruited as an outsider, like me? Irisu looked straight ahead, without even a hint of embarrassment. Since she didn't look around, I wasn't noticed.

Next was the empress.

So many people had gathered in front of the shrine that it made me wonder where they all came from. Perhaps some of them were visitors from outside Kamiyama City. It seems that the Living Doll Festival was an unexpectedly effective method of drawing tourists. No wonder Chitanda mentioned that it was "quite famous".

The human crowd that blanketed the whole shrine grounds stirred, holding up their numerous cameras. If we weren't in the middle of the blinding spring sun, we would have undoubtedly been treated to a never-ending slew of camera flashes. The emperor in a doll collection would be wearing black royal clothes, so that was what Irisu was wearing. What would the empress wear, then?

Chitanda came out wearing a twelve-layered kimono.

The outermost layer was orange. The next layers were peach, pale blue-green, a calm, elegant shade of yellow, and white. There was a ring pattern on the kimono, and a fan made of five colors of string had been gently placed on the doll's hands. Chitanda stepped out into the grounds with her heavy make-up and downcast eyes. From just a few steps, I could tell that Chitanda had mastered the art of walking beautifully in those clothes.

"Ah", I thought.

This isn't good. This isn't a good costume. Crap, I should never have come here.

That means that, in other words, what does it mean?

In other words...

I've always taken pride in my relative proficiency at the Japanese language.

Additionally, while I may not be absolutely logical at times, I've always believed that I was the type to use reason to organize my thoughts.

However, that day, on the grounds of Kamiyama City's Mizunashi Shrine, on a spring day, at approximately 11:45 AM, at the moment when I saw Chitanda walking in her twelve-layered kimono...

I have no good words to explain why I thought the word "crap".

I've considered many reasons, but none of them can explain it well. If I don't have to do it, don't do it. If I have to do it, make it quick. This energy-saving principle was being fatally jeopardized. I have no way of explaining why I had that premonition.

I just kept earnestly thinking, "Crap, this isn't good at all."

Behind Chitanda's kimono was a long filet<sup>[17]</sup>, with two women in traditional clothes holding it up so that it wouldn't touch the ground. Long hair drooped down Chitanda's back, tied into a bundle with golden paper. A person who doesn't know Chitanda would probably think that the girl in the twelve-layered kimono has really long hair, but I know that Chitanda's hair isn't that long. That's just a wig.

After that, the Ministers on the Left and Right appeared, along with the three court ladies. Sadly, I didn't take a look at any of them.

I realized that I had to hold the purplish red umbrella for Chitanda, and I joined the gracefully advancing procession. The order was Irisu, Chitanda, the two women holding Chitanda's filet, and then me.

As we walked along the narrow pathway, I was thinking about the filet being in the way... I couldn't see Chitanda.

It seems that besides the tourists, there were quite a few news companies here too. I noticed a gigantic lens on a tripod being aimed at us. As we proceeded a little further, I saw some other cameras lying in wait. If some cause for applause transpired, it would probably be shown on TV, and I thought that I would get really nervous. However, when I was actually in front of the camera, that never happened. I hardly noticed anything different.

But I guess the reason for that would be that I'm just a part of the background, and not a main character.

The procession was longer than I had thought. A troupe of men wrapped in uniforms followed behind, playing their transverse flutes. I didn't see them directly, but since I heard some "Don, don" sounds mixed in, I presume that there are a few people with Taikos there, too.

We headed downhill on the path parallel to the river that I had cycled up. In the morning, it was freezing even with my trench coat, but now the calm light from the sun was pleasant. Even though it was just a small river, a breeze blew over its surface, and since it was only April, it was actually quite cold, although that definitely wasn't an unpleasant thing.

Tourists were lined up in two rows on the left and right of the narrow path. I've never been seen by so many people like this in my life. But then again, I don't think anyone would really look at the boy holding an umbrella at the back of the dolls. I looked forward for just a while.

We had passed the problematic Choukyuu Bridge and were heading to Tooji Bridge before I even knew it. I only realized it when the procession went over the water.

Suddenly, my vision was filled with pink, and I looked up.

Chitanda was walking under the flowering cherry blossom tree. We walked past half-opened and fully-opened flowers, but under the out of season

flowers, Chitanda advanced silently with her twelve-layered kimono. The warm, gentle sunlight, the tiled room of and old house that happened to be built there by chance, the leftover snow on the rice fields, the transparent surface of the creek that had melted snow in it, and the murmuring of the stream. There was nothing unsightly about any of these things. At least, that's what I felt.

However, all I could see of Chitanda, with her flowing hair and her filet that was being held up, was her back.

I can't say that I hold any affinity to the curiousness that Chitanda repeatedly embraces. But this time, I thought, "Do this is what Chitanda has always felt." Right now, I wanted to see Chitanda's expression. Now, in this place, if I could see her face-to-face with her rouged, downcast eyes, how would that be...

"Houtarou!"

A voice called. Taken aback, I turned around.

I saw that Satoshi was in the audience.

I turned back to look in front, with a nonchalant expression on my face.

## 5

The sake was delivered late, but thanks to the altered route, it arrived just in time. On returning to the shrine, the procession was greeted with a hot meal and warmed sake. There were a few obstacles along the way, but it ended without any problems, and all that was left was the night festival. The afternoon meal was extremely calm and full of smiles.

Chitanda and the rest of the dolls did not take their lunch, and instead went to the prayer hall. They're cleansing their impurities, I think.

Dolls are, by nature, things that accept the sins of man. Something has to be done about the accumulated impurities. I don't know when Mizunashi Shrine started the Living Doll Festival, but it has humans take on the role of dolls, so this is a pretty strange ritual. You could even call it dangerous if you consider the incantations involved. It's definitely not meaningless for the living dolls to undergo cleansing immediately after returning.

The person who said all that was the one who knows all unnecessary pieces of information, Fukube Satoshi..... not. It was actually Ibara who gave that monologue. I had changed to my normal clothes, worn my trench coat, and was now eating Mitarashi Dango in a corner of the shrine grounds together with Ibara and Satoshi. I never knew that Ibara could give us so many details about the mystic practices, though.

Satoshi's words, on the other hand, was of a different matter.

"That was miraculous, Houtarou."

"The fact that you made it for the festival?"

"Ah, yeah, that's also unbelievable. I never thought that the festival would be pushed back."

It seems that he hopped onto his bicycle right after his remedial lessons ended, rushed here at full speed and caught up with the procession at the second half of Tooji Bridge. He thrust his hand into his linen drawstring bag and retrieved a disposable camera.

"My equipment was quite inferior, but it's way better than not taking a picture at all. That was a one in ten thousand opportunity, so it was worthwhile using this thing. I was horrified at letting this chance go to waste, and if I hadn't taken a photo, I would be stomping on the ground in disgust."

"So did you take it?"

"It was a perfect shot, with the cherry blossom in it."

I stayed silent. Satoshi grinned and added,

"Based on your type, you just can't bear to say something like 'Make me a copy for commemoration's sake', right? But don't worry, I'll give you one even if you don't say it."

"You didn't suit your outfit at all."

Ibara just had to say the line that didn't need to be spoken.

In the end, I didn't manage to see Chitanda at Mizunashi Shrine. I don't know when the purification ritual ended, but the tourists evaporated after the festival ended, and Satoshi and Ibara didn't feel like staying any longer. "Say hi to Chitanda for me!" Satoshi called as he retreated from the shrine.

As for me, not knowing how long I should act like an involved person for, I had lunch and proactively helped with the cleaning up. The men who weren't free had left already but there were ten people who stayed until the end, so we swallowed the remaining fish and vegetables while having a lively conversation.

I only met Chitanda when the sun was leaning towards the west. I was passing by her house when I spotted Chitanda on her veranda, and she beckoned for me to come in.

I was waiting patiently at the guest room, but I left to go to the toilet. On the way back, we walked into each other.

"Ah, Oreki-san. I was just coming to greet you."

The Chitanda who was smiling in front of me had removed her make-up. She was the usual Chitanda. I had never stared at her so fixedly before, but now I understood. This was the Chitanda that I was used to seeing. She had taken off her twelve-layered kimono and was now wearing a collared shirt and a skirt with a gentle color, which was very suitable as indoor clothes. She could appear in front of people in this.

While I was looking at her, Chitanda's cheeks swelled.

"Wh-what is it?"

Chitanda sighed, and then shouted excitedly.

"Oreki-san!"

"....."

"Today was terrible! I had to control myself for so long! If I may say so, I think I did quite well just for today."

"Ah, playing the doll?"

But that wasn't it. Chitanda shook her head and took a step forward. The polished veranda floor creaked.

"That was not what I was controlling myself for. It was definitely..."

Chitanda put her hands on her chest, and spoke with her heart.

"About who called the Nakagawa Construction Agency. I've been curious for such a long time!"

...So that was it.

"Oreki-san, you probably understood something in that room, but I just couldn't ask. That was what I thought, but I felt that there was something on the tip of your tongue when you were talking behind the sheet."

"No, that wasn't it."

"Then what were you about to say?"

I never thought that I would be asked about that.

"I thought about it a lot! Who would benefit the most if Choukyuu Bridge could not be passed? But I had a job to do today, so I couldn't spend my time only thinking about it, but there was no one I could turn to..."

Her expression did not change much, but I could sense her regret. There was no hanging barrier on the veranda. As a result, Chitanda's eyes, the representation of her curiosity, drew closer.

"Oreki-san, you were in the office the whole time. Did you notice anything?"

"Not at all," was what I would like to say.

But I actually did notice something. Normally, I wouldn't spare a thought about what happened with the bridge, but today, in view of the special incident, I thought that Chitanda would be interested. Therefore, I listened carefully to what everyone said.

Since she didn't say "I'm curious!" in that room, I thought it was over then. I never knew that I would be brought to Chitanda's house in the evening.

I took half a step back and answered.

"Yeah... there were so many people today, though. Honestly, I don't know all their names."

"I know all of them, I think."

"Do you think any of them as suspicious?"

I asked. Chitanda's eyes, which had been blazing with curiosity up till now, opened wide in surprise.

"Eh? You're asking me?"

She said while pointing at herself. Come to think of it, I've been seeing that action quite a lot lately. She tilted her head and thought for a while.

"...Yes, I do not have evidence, but there is in fact one person I think may have done it."

"I can also only think of one person who knew everything from the beginning."

Chitanda slipped out a chuckle.

"Then how about this? We write it out on something and show each other at the same time."

Write it on something? There's no pen or paper here.

But Chitanda wouldn't suggest the impossible. She reached into a skirt pocket and retrieved a pen.

"I have a pen here."

"Why would you have one?"

"I was writing out a name and address at the post office earlier. It should be able to write."

"What do we write it on?"

Chitanda frowned worriedly for just a while, but she quickly came up with a solution.

"We could write it on our hands."

...Well, I don't mind, but don't you have to attend a banquet later?

Chitanda removed the cap and drove the pen on her white hand without hesitation. Once she was done, she spun the pen around.

"Here, Oreki-san."

Since I had no choice, I wrote. My left hand felt ticklish, so I had to desperately suppress a weird laugh that was coming out. Because of that, I might have caused my face to contort with a weird expression.

We held our fists together. Since the storm shutter of the veranda was open, we could have been peeked at from outside. But it should be fine. The Chitanda family's house was large, and had a high fence.

"On the count of two... One, two!"

On Chitanda's left hand was the words "Konari-san's son".

On mine was "Brown hair".

Chitanda compared the two palms fixedly. She gave a small nod, indicating her satisfaction.

"Konari-san's son has brown hair."

She said.

"At first, I thought that the man called Sono was a little strange. I heard that his family was in mourning, but he still came to help for the festival."

"Ah, Sono-san... his grandmother is almost a hundred."

"But I thought that it wouldn't be necessarily strange. If this area had two families called "Sono", then there wouldn't be a problem."

Chitanda nodded.

"They are related to each other, but there are two Sono families. There are quite a few families with the same surname."

"As I thought. Therefore, I excluded Sono. Next was Nakatake, who made preparations for the sake. He arranged for the sake to arrive at one, and angered the old man with the white hair. Since the procession couldn't cross the bridge and had to take a detour, the sake arrived in time.

"However, going that far just to get the sake to arrive on time is way too foolish. Furthermore, the construction agency was called two days ago. It would be natural to simply think that the arrangements were done poorly."

"Nakatake-san... He's not a bad person."

She wasn't being very articulate here. I pressed on.

"My next suspects were the Nakagawa Construction Agency, city council member Murai, and Tanimoto, who negotiated with Murai. I was thinking that one of them was lying somewhere. Perhaps the engineering firm was trying to complete the project as soon as possible, so not wanting to lose a day, they started construction. I was also wondering if Murai told Tanimoto that it was possible to delay construction, but told the Nakagawa Construction Agency to come up with some sort of story and finish the work anyway. He might have his reasons.

"Only that the construction hadn't started at all. I was able to pass normally this morning. That means that they only just started work. They probably had extra days set aside in case of rain, so they shouldn't be in such a rush. The line of reasoning for the council member is also a little suspect."

Chitanda breathed out slightly. I was thinking that something was off, when she spoke.

"That does seems a little doubtful."

Yeah. I don't even know any of the city council members.

"When everyone was throwing out ideas that wouldn't work, there was one person who was working under the assumption that Choukyuu Bridge couldn't be crossed."

"Was that Konari-san's son?"

"I didn't know his name at that time."

Since it would be strange for us to talk while standing up like this, we sat down by the veranda. The evening sun was dazzling. It would be amazing if there was a calico or some Japanese tea here.

"That guy said that he 'purposely came back home' to see a procession that you wouldn't get to see often. Wasn't that weird? You've been playing as a doll every year since middle school, right? That means that the festival is run every year. You certainly can't call it frequent, but it's strange to say that you don't get to see it often."

"...That does seem strange."

Chitanda nodded solemnly. Looking at it her face from the side, it looked tinged with red. It was the projection of the evening sunlight. Returning my gaze to the sky, I continued.

"But this year, a procession that you don't usually get to see happened."

"Eh?"

Chitanda stared in puzzlement.

I recalled Satoshi saying "It was miraculous."

"There was a cherry blossom blooming out of season. Also, due to the reconstruction work, Choukyuu Bridge can't be crossed. I don't know where

Konari has been, but if his family is still here, he would gain this information.

"And if the procession crossing Tooji Bridge, there would be the miraculous scene of 'A doll procession passing under a cherry blossom'. That would be the procession you don't get to see often. It's a sight worth purposely coming back home for."

"Jus..."

Chitanda covered her mouth with her hand.

"Just for that!"

She exclaimed.

Ishikawa Goemon<sup>[18]</sup> danced at the back of my mind. What an amazing view! The spring view is worth a thousand gold pieces, or so they say, but 'tis too little, too little<sup>[19]</sup>.

The combination of the cherry blossom, the dolls and Chitanda was able to take my breath away, even though I was only looking at it from the back. There was definitely value in carefully looking at that scene. You could even say that it was worth the deceit.

I wouldn't say that out loud, though.

I turned the other way and asked Chitanda,

"Why do you think it was him?"

Chitanda cast her eyes down.

"Erm... I did say that I did not have any evidence from the start."

"Yeah. It's alright, I won't laugh."

Even so, Chitanda hesitated for quite a long time, then finally spoke.

"The only person I could think of who could calmly watch Murai-san lose face was Konari-san's son."

I see.

But then again, that would make Fukube Satoshi a prime suspect too.

To sum it up in a blackish, or rather, grey statement, I never intended to indict that Konari guy from the start. If I wanted to more accurately ascertain the truth of the matter, then it would be better to stay and investigate further.

But was there any meaning to this? There might have been some disturbance, after all. Then again, the festival ended without a hitch. We were happy with simply showing our palms to each other, and thankfully, Chitanda was also fine with this, and actually seemed satisfied.

As the sun became obscured, the atmosphere became even colder. But before I could say "It's cold, let's go back in.", Chitanda spoke out first.

"Oreki-san, in that room, I said that I would contact the other side's priest."

I nodded. Chitanda would contact the chief priest, while Chitanda's father would contact with the representatives. That was what I conveyed to the men, and in an instant, the chaos that came with the unavailability of Choukyuu Bridge was resolved like magic.

"This might seem boring, but please listen."

While this isn't rare for Satoshi, I've never heard Chitanda give a preface like that. With this, I was unable to complain about the cold.

Chitanda's eyes looked beyond her house and the wall surrounding the garden, concentrating on the mountain range around the village draped in evening light.

"Thanks to advancements in land improvement, it might not look like it, but in the past, this wetland was divided into two sectors. The area around Choukyuu Bridge used to be a marshland, and north of that was our village, and to the south was another village. But now, they have combined, and the entire area is known as Jinde in Kamiyama City."

Not saying a word or even swallowing, I simply listened.

"Our village had Minazushi Shrine, while the southern village had Sakou Shrine. Disputes over land and water do not occur now, but entering the other side for religious matters is like intruding into others' territory, and would cause both sides to be uncomfortable."

"There were special circumstances this time, so I think the parishioners at Sakou Shrine would understand. Hanai-san and the men know this, but even so, entering without prior warning could cause conflict between both sides. They wanted to inform the people at Sakou Shrine, but there was no one who could act as a channel for that."

"I said that the problem was not that severe, right? After I said that I would contact the priest of Sakou Shrine, everyone relaxed because they knew that we would probably be able to cross over to the southern side."

"... I see."

I was honestly quite interested.

"Satoshi calls it the prestigious clans."

But Chitanda slightly raised her voice.

"Is that so?"

"....."

"Isn't this a small world? All I did was resolve an issue between two villages in the northern region of Kamiyama City, or to use its colloquial name, Jinde. Oreki-san, I do not think that it is an insignificant act, but I cannot think of it as something major."

The sun had reached the tip of the mountain, and the surrounding areas bathed in evening sun started turning dark.

"Konari-san's son hopes to become a photographer. He's attending a technical school in Osaka just for that. That's why I can agree to your theory about him really wanting to see a rare scene. If so, he didn't just watch, but probably took some photographs too. That matter aside, I think that I will go to university after graduating from high school."

"...While Konari-san's son might be different, I will return here. No matter which route I take, my final destination will always be here. In this place."

And then Chitanda put on a smile.

"Oreki-san. What did you do about the humanity-science selection?"

Being suddenly asked about a "humanity-science selection", I couldn't understand what it was for a while. I realized that it was the choice between the humanities and the sciences for first year students moving up to the second year, and I finally answered.

"Ah, I went with the humanities."

"Why?"

"Out of the four science subjects, my favorite is chemistry, and out of the four humanities subjects, my favorite is Japanese history. I prefer Japanese history to chemistry, so I went with humanities."

With a hand covering her mouth, Chitanda laughed.

"Very logical."

"What about you?"

"... I chose the sciences."

Chitanda's grades were in the top five in our year. She didn't say so herself, and the rankings weren't publicly released, so that's just an estimation on

my part. Anyway, someone like her would have a wide range of career choices.

But Chitanda wasn't thinking about that.

"I'm not reluctant or sad to return here. I would like to fulfill my role as daughter of the Chitanda family, which is in a position of leadership in the northern area of Jinde. I have thought about how to do that in high school.

"The first method would be to find ways to produce crops with greater value, so everyone would have plenty to eat.

"Another way would be to use economic strategies to increase the efficiency of production, so everyone can avoid falling in the red.

"In the end, I have decided to pursue the former. That was why I chose the sciences."

While I was staying silent, Chitanda asked me another question.

"Do you know the biggest reason that made me decide on that?"

"Not really..."

I said, when I thought of something.

"Just that the latter doesn't really seem to suit you."

Chitanda nodded slightly.

"That's right... To put it directly, it was that problem at the Cultural Festival when we were trying to sell our anthologies. I understood that I caused a lot of trouble for Oreki-san. That made me realize that I'm probably not cut out for managing a company."

Yeah, that's what I think too.

While we were sitting on the veranda, Chitanda extended her hands to the heavens. The sky was almost dark already, and I could see a few stars.

"Please take a look, Oreki-san. This is my place. All that's here is water and soil. The people are growing old and tired. The mountains are regularly afforested, but what do you think of its value? I do not think that this place is the most beautiful. Nor is it full of potential. But then..."

She put down her arms and looked down.

"I wanted you to see it, Oreki-san."

At that time, I gained an answer to a doubt I had been holding.

I wanted to say this: "By the way, about the business strategy that you gave up on, how about I take care of that for you?"

But what did I do? I thought that I should say it, but in fact, I didn't feel like I could say it at all.

This was the first time I felt like this. This first experience became an important key to a question I couldn't solve before.

Now I knew.

Why Fukube Satoshi broke Ibara's chocolate.

This had to be the reason.

It was probably the same reason why I did not say what I wanted to, and said a different line instead, right here at the Chitanda family residence, right now as dusk approached.

With feigned nonchalance, I spoke.

"It's getting pretty cold."

Chitanda's eyes widened a little in surprise. Then she gave a gentle smile and slowly shook her head.

"No, it's spring!"

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ The bodhisattva who looks over children, travelers and the underworld
2. ↑ An architectural detail found above doors
3. ↑ A place in the southern region of Honshu
4. ↑ Houtarou compares Chitanda to a lotus flower in [The Ghost, When Examined](#)
5. ↑ Chou(長) means long and (久) means old
6. ↑ Loose informal Japanese coats usually worn during festivals
7. ↑ Flat, thonged Japanese sandals
8. ↑ Socks with a separation between the big toe and other toes
9. ↑ Both knees on the ground, with one's legs underneath the thighs and buttocks resting on the heels. The Seiza is considered the polite way to sit in Japan.
10. ↑ Believe it or not, that's an actual Japanese proverb. A similar idiom would be "Roast geese don't come flying into your mouth", meaning that things don't work so well in the real world
11. ↑ Houtarou is wondering about how to write Shige in Kanji. For those interested, Shige is written as 茂 and 重 respectively
12. ↑ Usually translated as "Storm and stress", refers to a period of agitation in this context
13. ↑ Japanese formal coat
14. ↑ Loose trousers with pleats at the front
15. ↑ A similar idiom would be "Apparel makes the man"
16. ↑ Translated literally, it would be called a Crow-hat. It's a black-lacquered hat that used to be worn by court nobles
17. ↑ A kind of lace with a square mesh
18. ↑ A Japanese Robin Hood who tried and failed to assassinate Totoyomi Hideyoshi

19. ↑ An quote from Kinmon Gosan no Kiri, a play about Ishikawa Goemon

# Afterword

Greetings, this is Yonezawa Honobu.

I present to you volume four of the series. This time, it's a collection of short stories.

Looking back on my school days, I always had the principled belief that just as tomorrow came after today, there would always be the boundless loop where the first trimester would follow the third trimester. I still don't think that student life was good, but being afraid of the impression of a time limit, I may have always looked away while just drifting around. That's basically my intolerance to time.

As for stories, I'm also bad with shifting the once fixed time and changing already constructed relationships. I'd always wanted Tripitaka to be continually assaulted by demons in his Journey to the West, and Yajikita<sup>[1]</sup> to continue their fun and foolish adventures. I never hoped for them to traverse Tenjiku<sup>[2]</sup> or Ise<sup>[3]</sup>.

But the protagonist of this book is fixed in time. Setting aside the awkward period when the characters met each other for the first time, the stories are divided into First Trimester, Summer Break, Second Trimester, Winter Break, Third Trimester and Spring Break. If I write a detailed explanation on why the characters' thoughts and feelings change, then this wouldn't be an afterword, and more of a commentary of my own work. To put it straightforwardly, I would say that the reasons are time and compromise. After spending one whole year together, the distance between the characters wouldn't stay the same. That change is what I was trying to portray here.

But the change in distance between these characters would be gentle and slow, rather than a sudden upheaval. That is why this book is titled "The

Doll That Took a Detour".

Also, since this is a collection of short stories, I was able to make use of various situations. As a result, I was able to test out different mystery plots. If you know a lot about this series as well as the mystery genre, you would have probably noticed that "The Case of the Hand-made Chocolate" can be considered a reverse mystery.

If this book has caused you to be more interested in broadening your mystery reading, then I would be honored if "Those Who Know Something" serves as a gateway to Harry Kemelman's "The Nine Mile Walk", and "Sappy New Year" to Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13".

June 2010

Yonezawa Honobu

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Refers to Yajirobe and Kitahachi in a comic picaresque novel called Toukaidouchuu Hizakurige
2. ↑ The historical East Asian name of India
3. ↑ A city home to the most sacred Shinto shrine in Japan

# Translator's Afterword

Whew! After a year or so of translating, I'm finally done with translating Volume 4 of Hyouka! First off, I would like to apologize to the readers for taking such a long time to complete this translation. You could say that I have the worst qualities of Oreki Houtarou and am guilty of committing the same deadly sin. I also hope that I've translated this book as faithfully as possible to the intentions of the author, Yonezawa Honobu.

Now that I'm done with this, I plan to get a copy of "The Long Holiday" and attempt to translate it. (It won't take that long this time, I promise!) Anyway, I hope that you've enjoyed these stories as much as I have (I found "The Doll That Took a Detour" especially beautiful), and I also hope that you will introduce this amazing series to others. Thank you for your support!

-Ex.wife

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米澤穂信

Honobu Yonezawa

# ふたりの 距離の 概算

It walks by past

角川文庫

米澤穂信

ふたりの距離の概算

It walks by past  
Honobu Yonezawa



米澤穂信

Yonezawa Hirofumi

概距ふたのりの  
算離のりの







# **Prologue - Too Long When Simply Running**

## 1. Present: 0km

In the end, it didn't rain. To think I had prayed as much as I had, too.

My prayer didn't go through last year either. This could only mean that praying for rain was completely useless. Now that I understood this, I suppose I'd be able to peacefully come to terms with the inevitable next year when this happens again. If I don't need to do something, I won't do it. If I absolutely have to, I'll make it quick. Today, I, Hōtarō Oreki, learned that praying for rain was something I didn't need to do.

Of the thousand or so Kamiyama High School students that were initially spread about the school grounds, a third had already disappeared. They had set off on a journey to the far reaches of the distant horizon. I knew that what they were doing was nothing more than profitless toil, but I felt no sympathy. After all, I would soon be following after them in their suffering.

With an ear-grating howl, the megaphone was switched on again, and from it came a command.

“That concludes the third-years. Class 2-A, come forward.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Fellow students filed into their set positions as if they were being dragged along by something. Among them were faces brimming with spirited passion, however, most of the students had such a look of resignation on their faces that the tranquility it radiated was almost saintly. I probably had the same exact expression on mine.

There was a line drawn in chalk on the ground. Alongside it stood a General Committee member, pistol in hand. He didn't radiate any bit of the usual no-nonsense severity normally found in a cold enforcer of cruel judgement like himself. Considering his markedly middle school face, he must be a first-year. He stared intently at his stopwatch, itself looking as if it wouldn't

tolerate disorder for even a second. At the end of the day, he was just following his orders. Most likely, he wasn't even thinking about what kind of special significance his actions towards us held. Even if he were to consider it, at most it would be something along the lines of:

“I didn’t make this decision. My superiors told me to do it, and I have to do what’s assigned to me. It’s not like I want to do this, so I hold no responsibility in the matter.”

It was precisely this thought process that allowed him to be capable of such incalculable cruelty without even so much as a change in his expression. Slowly, he raised the pistol in his hand.

Perhaps even now, at this very moment, we will see a torrential rain so violent and so sudden that it will forever change the field of meteorology as we know it. And yet, the July sky remained so refreshingly clear that it pissed me off. Not even foxes would get married on a day like this.<sup>[2]</sup>

“Ready.”

Ah, that’s right. Didn’t I realize it just a second ago? Heaven didn’t respond to our prayers. I had other choice than to find the solution in a way only I could.

Even until the very end, the committee member didn’t look up from his stopwatch. With a thin finger, he pulled the trigger.

An explosive noise rang out, and white smoke rose from the barrel.

This was Kamiyama High School’s Hoshigaya Cup. At last, Class 2-A was ordered to start running.

Kamiyama High School was well known for the sheer amount of enthusiasm with which it treated club activities on campus, to the extent that even counting just how many clubs there were was a pain in and of itself. If I recall correctly, there were over fifty of them this year. The

autumn culture festival took place over the span of three days, and the passion surrounding it was normally so intense that anyone with a cool head would agree that everyone was overdoing it a little.

On the other hand, this meant that there was an overabundance of sports events as well. Although there were no athletes from our school that looked like they could compete in last year's sports inter-high, I heard that the martial arts clubs had a fairly impressive history with it. While things started to quiet down after the culture festival ended, the sports festival started up right away, and in addition to that, a lot of major sports tournaments also took place right after the start of a new academic year. That said, I didn't find it all that grueling. It's not like I was bursting at the seams with the desire to participate either, but I could at least agree to something like playing as a volleyball receiver or running in a 200 meter relay. If I absolutely had to, I could find it in me to work up a little sweat and show everyone a smile.

I couldn't summon even that smile, however, was when I was told to run further.

...Specifically, when I was told to run 20,000 meters.

The Kamiyama High School long-distance running tournament takes place every year at the end of May. Apparently, its actual name is the "Hoshigaya Cup." Even though the event was supposedly named after a graduate who previously established himself in Japan as a skilled long-distance runner, no one calls it that. In contrast to how the culture festival was called something enigmatic like the "Kanya Festival" even though it had no proper name, the "Hoshigaya Cup" was usually known simply as the "Marathon Event." In my case, however, because my friend Satoshi Fukube only ever called it the Hoshigaya Cup, the name ended up sticking for me as well.

Now, it was possible that I should've been happy considering the Marathon Event was shorter than an actual marathon, but in the end, I really wished it would have rained today. According to Satoshi, the notice concerning the use of public roads indicated that, in the event of rain, the marathon was to be stopped immediately and without resumption for the rest of the day.

However, then he also added, “But it’s strange, isn’t it? As far as I can tell from the records, the Hoshigaya Cup hasn’t been stopped once to date.”

There must be a god out there looking out for the athletes in the Hoshigaya Cup.

That god is undeniably rotten to the core.

I wore a white short-sleeved shirt and shorts that were somewhere in-between red and purple, something like a crimson. The girls wore short tights in the same color. The school’s emblem was embroidered on the shirt’s chest-area, and below that was sewn a paper bib displaying the student’s class and name. The string holding my “Class 2-A / Oreki” bib in place was already beginning to turn ragged. Sewing it on was a pain, and I ended up doing a half-baked job anyways. Not good.

It was currently the end of May, so it didn’t rain as much as it might have in subsequent rainy season.<sup>[3]</sup> Considering they wouldn’t be able to hold it the next day because of the weekend if it had to be cancelled on Friday, it seemed like minimal consideration was given to the whole thing. Due to the 9:00 AM start, it was still unpleasantly cold. As the sun rose, I would almost certainly start to sweat.

On the school grounds, there was another entrance aside from the front gates, and all of Class 2-A exited from it as they started to run. Goodbye, Kamiyama High School. May we meet again in 20 kilometers.

The Hoshigaya Cup course was not very clearly defined in that the only specific instructions were really “Do a lap around the back of the school.” The thing was, however, the mountainous area behind the school continued all the way to the distant, snowy Kamikakiuchi range, so in reality, the “long-distance run” was something more along the lines of long-distance mountain trek.

I knew the exact course.

You run a bit alongside the river that flows in front of the school and then go up hilly road to the right at the first intersection. The slope starts off

gently at first but quickly ramps up in steepness. As you approach the very top, it becomes a slope that mercilessly breaks one's body.

Once you've climbed it, the road immediately drops. Just like the upward slope, the decline is much longer and more violent than one might expect, and your overworked knees will surely cry out in pain.

The end of the decline opens up a bit into a large expanse of countryside. You should be able to see the occasional house here and there. While there's little inclination in the road at this point, it continues in a straight line for what seems like eternity, so this stretch tends to do the most mental damage.

Once you reach the end of the flat section, you have to overcome another hill, but unlike the previous slope, the climb on this one isn't as violent. The thing is, however, the road becomes extremely windy at this point, and the constant hairpin turns coming one after another tend to ruin one's rhythm.

Ahead of that is an area in the north-eastern section of Kamiyama City called Jinde, the place where Chitanda's house is located. At this point, you follow a thin river downhill.

Continue making your way through the valley like this, and you will eventually return to the town area. Though, in saying this, it's not exactly like we can run alongside the dead center of a street used by cars, so, as a result, you use a back road. Once you pass by in front of Arekusa Shrine and look past the stereotypically white Rengō Hospital, you will begin to see Kamiyama High School.

How did I know this? Well, you see, I ran it last year as well. I knew every length of the track from start to finish. But that knowledge wouldn't shorten the distance one bit. While I understood where it was we had to go, I felt it was necessary to omit the process in getting there. Even though it was probably impossible, it was likely the most optimal strategy at the same time. In other words, when needing to cover a 20km distance, one should at least be allowed to choose between using a bus or a bike. Unfortunately however, this extremely rational thought process of mine didn't seem like it would be given much consideration.

Up first was the river in front of the campus, and already issues began to crop up. The majority of the course took place in areas that had little traffic, however this section alone connected to a city bypass, so there were a considerable number of passing cars. Additionally, there wasn't anything like a curb separating the pedestrian and motor roads—only a single white line. The only reason we had to start running this early was so we didn't cause any congestion in the streets.

The students of Class 2-A ran in a single-file line inside the area marked off by the white line. This was the only point in the entire 20km during which both the fast students and the slow students had to run at the exact same pace. If they didn't, they would end up poking out into the roadway. Last year we were more-or-less allowed to expand out from the single-file line, however this year, it was strictly prohibited. It was a measure that the school took to prevent any accidents as a third-year was hit by a car in this area yesterday. Thanks to that, we were allowed the immense pleasure of being packed into a line that was difficult to run in.

So I guess I wouldn't be walking this kilometer stretch. The line was jogging at a light, easy pace. The road ahead of me was long. If I imagined the jogging to be next-level walking instead, I suppose I could tolerate it.

We finished the kilometer section before too long, and the course swung a wide right. We veered away from the main road leading into town and approached the school's rear. Thus began the upward slope.

The single-file line crumbled away. As if they were propelled by the building frustration of not being allowed to run at their own pace, those in the class that were more physically oriented immediately broke away from the group. Several groups of girls, most likely motivated by some promise to happily run alongside each other, also began to move up.

And as for me, I slowed down.

...And slowed down even more.

I was essentially walking at that point, but I continued to make it look like I was running regardless.

Sorry to all the Hoshigaya athletes out there, but I can't afford to be happy-go-lucky like you. In the span of this 20km, there was something I absolutely had to find out, and I only had 19km left to do it. Roughly 100m into the upward slope, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

“Ah, there he is.”

I didn't turn around. The owner of the voice popped out in front of me anyways.

He, Satoshi Fukube, then got off the bicycle he had been riding.

From a distance, I thought he looked like some sort of androgynous gentleman, but up close his face looked so different from what you might have expected had you looked at his old middle school yearbook that it surprised even me. Of course, the trouble was not that his face had actually changed that much, but rather, that over the course of the previous year, he had come to lock up all of his emotions behind that façade. I didn't realize it, however, because I hadn't been face-to-face with him for almost three days.

This year around, Satoshi became the General Committee vice-president. As the General Committee was running the Hoshigaya Cup, its members didn't need to run. After all, they set up before the race started and were expected to be distributed around the course. He wore a yellow helmet and pushed his usual mountain bike. I looked at him with a sideward glance and said, “You sure it's fine to be slacking off like this?”

“It's fine, it's fine. I already made sure the race started without a hitch, and I'm not going to come back until the last runner passes the finish line.”

“Must be tough.”

I understood that the General Committee didn't have to run as thanks for their efforts in supervising every aspect of the Hoshigaya Cup, but now this

guy was going to be flying all over the 20km course on his mountain bike to report if any unforeseen situations should ever occur. Satoshi dropped his shoulders.

“Well, it’s not like I hate cycling, so it’s not all that bad, but I wouldn’t need to do this if I could only use my cellphone.”

“How about you tell them that?”

“None of the students on campus are technically allowed to carry cellphones, but in reality, if someone were to get hurt you would use a cellphone to call for help, right? They seriously need to re-evaluate their rules, I swear.”

With this he lamented over the General Committee’s inflexible organizational structure, but then a serious expression suddenly came over him.

“In any case, do you think you have an idea yet?”

As I sluggishly walked on, I responded carefully.

“Not yet.”

“Mayaka is...”

He started to speak, but faltered. I had an idea of what he wanted to say, so I started talking instead.

“It’s clear that she suspects me.”

“No, I don’t think that’s the case. It actually seems like she thinks it can’t be you. This is something someone told me, but apparently she said, ‘I don’t think Hōtarō did anything. After all, he literally does nothing.’”

A bitter smile crept across my face. Not only did that definitely sound like something Ibara would say, but it had been like that in reality as well. I did absolutely nothing yesterday.

If that's what she really thought however, things became quite problematic.

"If it's not me..."

"Exactly," replied Satoshi with a deep sigh.

If it wasn't me, there was only one other person it could be. I remembered what had happened yesterday.

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ The '2' shows their year in high school, and the 'A' indicates their specific class within that year.
2. ↑ A *fox wedding* is an idiomatic phrase referring to a sunshower.
3. ↑ The Japanese rainy season (tsuyu) typically begins in early June and lasts through mid-July.

## 2. Past: 1 Day Ago

I was reading a paperback in the clubroom after school. It was a period novel chronicling the early days of a man who became a master spy later on in his life, and it was so ridiculously interesting that I had become uncharacteristically engrossed in it.<sup>[1]</sup>

At Kamiyama High School, a place overflowing with various clubs, several of which disband and are then replaced by newer ones each year, it was quite common for clubrooms to be switched around at the start of a new academic term. That said, the Classics Club remained in the same Earth Sciences lecture room. It's not like I was particularly attached to it, but because I'd been in this room so regularly over the course of the previous year, I ended up sitting in my "usual seat." It was the chair positioned, as always, third row from the back and three seats from the window overlooking the school grounds.

As I reached the end of one of the chapters and raised my head to exhale from the excitement, the room's sliding door suddenly opened. Ibara walked in, her eyebrows furrowed and her face betraying a concerned expression.

Mayaka Ibara was a second-year now, and she had changed slightly. She had quit the Manga Research Society she was once a part of alongside the Classics Club. She herself said it was because she "just got tired of it." Judging by Satoshi's conflicted face, it seemed there were other circumstances involved as well, but I didn't ask.

It's not like I thought her appearance had changed or anything. If you tossed Ibara into a group of new students and told a hundred people to pick out the second-year, I doubt a single person would have chosen her. She had recently started wearing clips in her hair, however had Satoshi and the others not brought it up, I would have never even noticed.

There was only me and one other person in the clubroom. Just until a little bit ago, there had been three of us.

Ibara spoke.

“Hey, did something happen?”

“No...”

The one who muttered that was Chitanda.

Eru Chitanda was the recurring Classics Club president. She hadn’t cut her hair in a while, so it had grown a bit.

Ibara looked back towards the hallway and then spoke in a somewhat concealed voice.

“I just passed by Hina-chan over there. She said she wasn’t going to join.”

“What?”

“Her eyes were kind of red. Was she crying?”

Chitanda was at a loss for words. Without responding to the question, she muttered to herself.

“I see.”

I didn’t know what had happened.

A year passed, and as we became second-years, naturally so were there new first-years. We opened up the Classics Club for new students to join, and while there were a lot of complications along the way, finally we managed to recruit one member.

Tomoko Ōhinata had turned in a provisional club enrollment form, and all that was left was for her to submit the actual club entry form. Not only had she become extremely attached to Ibara, but she seemed to also be constantly enjoying her discussions with Chitanda. She could be a bit

annoying at times, but it's not like I was cold towards her because of that. Everyone thought she would join the club without a problem; rather, I wonder if in reality we all forgot you were even required to turn in an actual club enrollment form after the provisional one in the first place.

And now, we were being told that she wouldn't be joining. Had all of this collapsed in the short time I had been reading my book?

Chitanda faced Ibara and spoke once more with quivering lips.

"I see," she repeated as best she could. Even though Ibara didn't know what had happened, she listened carefully and asked, "Are you okay, Chi-chan?"

"I knew it. Because of me..."

"What do you mean 'because of me'? If you're talking about Hina-chan, you're wrong. She even said it wasn't your fault."

"No, I'm sorry. I have to go."

Chitana forcibly ended the conversation and left the Earth Sciences room with her bag as if she were running.

All I could do was stare.

Ibara watched Chitanda as she left and then turned around to face me. With an expressionless, monotone voice, she spoke.

"So, what happened?"

All I could do was shake my head, mouth wide-open.

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Possibly referring to the novel *Rasputin Came* 『ラスプーチンが来た』 by Fūtarō Yamada. The book is about a famous WWI-era Japanese spy, Motojirō Akashi, and his confrontations with Russian "mad priest" Rasputin during his younger days.

### **3. Present: 1.2km**

While there were tons of clubs, there were only so many new students. The race to recruit these incoming students reached peak ferocity every April. Last year, I didn't really have any reason to join the other clubs so I ignored the whole thing, however this time around I ended up in the center of the maelstrom. Doing it, I experienced something for the first time; it was my first true bloodbath.

New students I had never seen before were being snatched away left and right in recruiting attempts, so issues began to crop up to some extent. While it was probably true that the new students who couldn't turn down the incessant soliciting of a club they had no interest in had mostly themselves to blame, there were apparently certain clubs that had gathered massive amounts of members to pressure the first-years into joining. Using high-handed tactics like this was something that simply did not work, however. The reason behind the two-step process requiring students to submit both a provisional club entry form and an actual club entry form was to make sure the students joined of their own volition. If a student didn't turn in the actual club entry form later, they were automatically dropped.

The deadline to turn it in was this weekend, so essentially, the deadline was today.

Before anything, there was something I wanted to confirm.

“Just because you don't turn in the actual club entry form doesn't mean you can't join at a later date, right?”

“Of course. You can join or quit any Kamiyama High School club you want at any time. It's completely up to you.”

After he said that, however, Satoshi continued with a slight grimace.

“The thing is though, a club’s budget is based on its member count at the end of the provisional club entry period, so any member changes after that point are really looked down upon. Anyways, more importantly...”

“I know.”

The problem wasn’t the bureaucracy.

In all reality, the second we learned that there was some kind of trouble yesterday, we should have tried to resolve it, though I suppose there wasn’t anything we could have done in the first place considering both Ōhinata and Chitanda had left by that point. Only one day had passed, and yet it already felt like it was too late. If this were to remain unresolved before everyone was separated over the weekend, Ōhinata’s resignation would almost certainly end up being a done deal, and changing her mind might be impossible.

There were no classes being held today after the Hoshigaya Cup ended. You had to attend homeroom for a small period, but after that, everyone could meet with their clubs.

In other words, though today was the only day we’d be able to pull Ōhinata aside, we had hardly the time nor the chance to get into contact with her.

“That said, I don’t know what specifically happened,” said Satoshi with a hushed voice. “It seems like yesterday after school, something made her extremely angry or depressed, but we have no idea what caused that, right?”

“Yeah, I was reading the entire time.”

“If that’s the case, then Chitanda had to have been the cause. Except now, it contradicts what Mayaka was told.”

The upward slope hadn’t yet become physically strenuous. Houses lined the left and right sides of the road and the hill gently continued forward. Someone nimbly caught up beside me as I continued my slow pace. He was probably a student from 2-B, the class that started after us, who had faith his legs would carry him to the end like this.

I whispered my question.

“What did Ibara say?”

Satoshi seemed to be disappointed in me at a quick glance.

“Come on, you didn’t hear?”

“She didn’t tell me anything.”

“I wonder if she didn’t have any time. I wasn’t there either, so the details are a bit fuzzy.”

Satoshi’s eyes darted about, and then he awkwardly added, “If I remember correctly, Ōhinata said Chitanda was ‘like a Buddha,’ or something like that. I only remember it was something that wasn’t insinuating anything mean.”<sup>[1]</sup>

I hadn’t heard anything at all about this. I didn’t know anything other than the fact that Ōhinata said she wasn’t going to join the club.

“Was this really yesterday?”

“The phrasing might have been off, but it happened yesterday without a doubt.”

Then Ōhinata had said both “I’m not going to join” and “Chitanda’s like Buddha”? If that was the case, then that would honestly have me assume that she was essentially saying, “I’m not going to join, but it’s not Chitanda’s fault.”

That would therefore mean I was the reason that Ōhinata decided to quit. Yet, I truly didn’t do anything yesterday. Of course, I would be lying if I said I didn’t remember nor hear anything. I talked a bit before entering the clubroom, and I did hear the occasional thing as I was reading, but that was all.

“I guess this isn’t going to be simple after all.”

However, then Satoshi murmured under his breath, “I wonder if that’s the case.”

“I think it’s simple,” he continued. “A new recruit joined. She changed her mind. She decided to quit. This was all that happened.”

Even as I continued to more or less run, Satoshi managed to follow alongside me while pushing his mountain bike. As expected from a cycling hobbyist, his walking was top-notch.

Satoshi let out a sigh and finally started to talk.

“Hey, Hōtarō. This might be a bit cruel, but if Ōhinata quits, I think we should just give up on her. I mean she’s certainly an interesting person, and Mayaka really seems to like her, but if she herself decided on this, I don’t think we have any right to dispute that.”

He looked at me and added.

“Although I thought you’d be the one to say that instead of me.”

That wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. In reality, when Mayaka came in yesterday feeling distressed, I didn’t really think what had happened was all too important.

I’m sure Ōhinata had her own circumstances. At Kamiyama High School, you were allowed to be in up to two clubs at the same time, so if there were three you wanted to join, it would be completely understandable if you dropped the Classics Club. In any case, her intentions were unclear.

Possibly she found a sport she wanted to do, or perhaps she decided to start participating in General Committee activities. Maybe she just decided she needed to concentrate on her studies. There were any number of reasons why she might have decided to quit, and the Classics Club didn’t have a single reason to dispute that. It was unfortunate, but maybe it wasn’t meant to be. Those thoughts had certainly crossed my mind at one point.

I had changed my mind on the matter for a couple of reasons however, but I didn’t feel like explaining them to Satoshi one-by-one while I was running.

After this, he gets to ride his bike the rest of the way, but I'm stuck on my legs. I would only tire myself out more if I tried to talk while running, so I wanted to limit my speech as much as possible.

Probably realizing that I wasn't going to reply, Satoshi casually continued to speak.

"But you know how it goes. If you've decided on trying to dissuade her, I have no reason to stop you. So, do you plan on finding her and then begging her to not leave?"

I was immediately caught off guard.

"Begging her?"

"Yeah, lower your head like this and tell her, 'I know you must have experienced much displeasure at our hands, but I implore you, bear with it just this once.'"

Satoshi said this while gesturing with his hands, and then continued with a puzzled face.

"You weren't going to do that?"

I hadn't even thought of that. I suppose it was an option, but in the end...

"Ōhinata up and said she had a reason as to why she was quitting, right? I wonder if we can truly bring this issue to a close without knowing that reason first."

He responded with a groan.

"You're actually going to try and resolve the issue, huh. I suppose begging's not something you'd really do in the first place, although quickly apologizing and begging her by all means necessary is certainly the fastest way to go about this. It might even go over better than expected."

I wondered if that was how it'd really go. I had a hard time believing it. At the very least, I didn't think that prostrating in front of her would

completely settle the issue at hand.

In the first place, it wasn't that I was doing this because I wanted to dissuade her from leaving. I'm not sure putting everything aside so I could beg her to sign the actual club entry form and then going on like I didn't know her after was something I could even do. All that would do would be put off the hassle until later. Now, I like avoiding work, and I love being able to omit it even more, but what I don't like is putting something off until later. If you see something that looks like a hassle but pretend it isn't there, having to deal with it later becomes even more of a hassle.

"I guess I'm probably not going to beg her."

"How about persuade her upfront?"

"That's also a pain. Besides, did you think I was even a smooth-talker in the first place?"

"I don't. Rather than gently convincing someone, you're more the type that settles a conversation with a single piece of sagely wisdom."

He said this and then became quiet.

He stared at my face carefully.

"Earlier you said that resolving this issue wasn't going to be simple. Are you really actually trying to figure out the exact reason why Ōhinata wants to leave?"

Calling it 'figuring out' was an exaggeration.

"I'm just trying to remember everything that happened up until now. As long as I just do that, I can spare myself the effort."

Satoshi started thinking for a bit.

"Remember, huh? I see. In other words, you don't think whatever made Ōhinata angry or sad was necessarily something that only happened

yesterday after school. The cause, or rather the original, underlying problem, was something that happened at a different time.”

He was pretty sharp.

I knew for a fact that I didn’t do anything yesterday, and when it came to Chitanda, even if you didn’t take into consideration Ibara’s ‘Chitanda is like a Buddha’ account, the idea that Ōhinata would be so hurt and angry after talking to Chitanda made me feel like Ibara might have played it up a bit.

I felt bad saying it, but considering it was Ibara, I could understand that being the case. She seemed like the type of person that might shank you if you simply mentioned something that rubbed her the wrong way, no matter how trifling it was. When it came to Chitanda on the other hand, she would have simply tilted her head in confusion.

If I were to think about it like that, the cause might have been related in some part to something that had happened prior to yesterday. Possibly at some point, starting from when Ōhinata joined the club as a provisional member, unbearable thoughts had been slowly accumulating in her head. Perhaps yesterday, she had reached her limit.

“I said I wasn’t planning on stopping you, but… this is quite convoluted, isn’t it?”

“No kidding.”

“No matter how much you try to remember, Hōtarō, there’s no guarantee that you’ll have all the information necessary to crack this one.”

“I guess that’s true.”

It’s not like the Classics Club members were always together; even I didn’t go to the clubroom every day. There were likely tons of things I had neither seen nor heard. Had all of it started and ended while I was unaware it was even happening, just thinking would be useless.

That said, and I couldn't tell any of this to Satoshi yet, I did have some ideas here and there. Ever since Ōhinata joined as a provisional member, there were a couple things that I thought seemed strange. Maybe if I focused my attention on those parts, something would become clear. I might be completely wrong, but at least it was somewhere to start. Besides, I had 20 kilometers. This course took far too long when simply running.

I spoke.

"If there's anything I need to know, I'll try asking you."

Satoshi furrowed his eyebrows in suspicion.

"Asking me? Just to let you know, I'm going to be riding ahead of you now."

"I know, but we're bound to pass each other again at some point, right? See you then."

I smiled at him and continued.

"After all, Ibara and Chitanda will be coming from behind."

For a second, Satoshi stared at me dumbfounded.

"You're terrible! So that's what you were planning. How could you? Think about all the blood and sweat the General Committee poured into setting up the Hoshigaya Cup."

"Isn't it the Marathon Event?"

Without a doubt, I needed to talk with Ibara and Chitanda.

On the other hand, I also had to come into contact with Ōhinata by the end of the day.

There was only one way I could achieve both of these.

In order to prevent congestion in the streets, each of the classes' start times were staggered. I was in class 2-A. If I remembered correctly, Ibara was in 2-C and Chitanda was in the very last one, class 2-H. If I ran slowly, eventually Ibara would catch up, and if I went even more slowly than that, Chitanda would as well.

“Which class was Ōhinata in?”

“Class 1-B. No wonder you were going at such a slow pace. No, I’m relieved. Actually I’m really relieved. That’s right, there’s no way you’d seriously try to run all the way through to the end.”

Satoshi laughed as he said this. How rude. I properly ran the course last year, even if I stopped around halfway and ended up walking for 10km or so.

“Now that I know your evil scheme, I suppose it’s about time for me to get moving. Even lazing around has its limits.”

He straddled his mountain bike. I thought he was going to push the pedal and ride away, but he suddenly hesitated for a second. He turned back towards me.

“I’m only going to tell you this because we’re friends. Make sure you don’t take this all on yourself, Hōtarō. You’re the kind of person that doesn’t normally care about another person’s circumstances, so don’t forget that you aren’t responsible for anything, no matter what ends up happening with Ōhinata.”

It was a mean way to phrase it, but I understood what he was trying to say. He wanted to tell me that no matter what I thought or found out, in the end, it was Ōhinata’s decision. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.<sup>[2]</sup> I guess it would be a good idea to keep that in mind.

“I’m going now. See you again somewhere on the course.”

“Yeah.”

Satoshi finally started to pedal away. Even though the slope was getting steeper and steeper, his mountain bike picked up speed without staggering. He didn't even stand up to pedal. With his rear planted firmly on the saddle and his body arched forward, he pedaled further and further away.

With my small steps and sluggish running, I saw him off.

Though I said I was going to talk with Ibara and Chitanda, it wasn't as simple as it sounded.

Even when each of them did catch up, I wouldn't be able to talk with them for very long. Especially Ibara didn't seem like she'd slow her pace for me. In the time that I had for her to catch up to and then pass me, I could probably only ask her around two questions.

I didn't have enough time to ask everything I wanted to. If I didn't decide on what I wanted to ask before she caught up, I was going to ruin my chance.

In order to ask the correct questions, I needed to correctly understand the situation. Specifically, what I need to understand was just exactly what kind of person the Kamiyama High School first-year Tomoko Ōhinata was.

...So I tried to remember. After Chitanda left yesterday, Ibara asked the only remaining person, me, a question.

*“So, what happened?”*

When I didn't answer, she said something else.

*“You don't know? Should've seen that coming. After all, you're not one to pay attention to other people.”*

A single, nonchalant comment.

It almost felt like she was a bit surprised, however.

It's not like I didn't know because I was reading my book after class yesterday. Rather, I just wasn't very interested in anything Ōhinata had to say. It was probably due to things like this that Satoshi always liked to call me a "people-hater." It wasn't like that was entirely the case, but it wasn't very far off either. Perhaps from an outsider's perspective it looked like I was becoming more and more distant from Ōhinata.

For the most part, I came to not really care at all about her personal life, about what made her happy and what had hurt her in the past. I was essentially ignoring her. I wondered if, even now, I could manage a full U-turn from that apathy. Could I do it during this 20km distance? The course took far too long when simply running, however I wondered if even that was enough time for me to try and understand someone.

I had to try and think about it, no matter what it took.

The slope became increasingly steeper, and at some point, the scenery to the left and right of the road had changed to that of a cedar forest.

Another person continued to pass me by as I dawdled forward.

I first met her in April. It was during the new-student recruitment week.

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ This implies that she's kind and understanding.
2. ↑ The Japanese version of this idiom features a stubborn, already-hydrated donkey as opposed to a horse.

# **Chapter 1 - The Reception Table is Right Over Here**

## 1. Present: 1.4km; 18.6km Remaining

Even though the entire width of the road was covered in brand-new asphalt, there was hardly a passing car in sight. On all sides of me were Kamiyama High School students wearing gym clothes. It was almost like the roads that went through the mountainous area behind the high school were expressly built for the sake of the Hoshigaya Cup. Ibara was probably going to be coming up soon from the back. Before that happened, I wanted to make sure I clearly remembered all of the events that took place during the new-student recruitment week.

The time between when a class started to run and when the next class started after them was usually around three minutes. I was in Class A and Ibara was in Class C, so that meant I had started around six minutes before she did.

For the first kilometer, I had matched my pace with that of those around me. Once I had reached the uphill slope, Satoshi caught up with me and I slowed down a little bit. On average, I should have been running at around the pace of a slow jog.

I had once heard that a person's casual walking speed was roughly 4kmph. Running would normally double that, and so on. In a book that I had once read, if you were to walk at slower than 4mph, you were punished.<sup>[1]</sup> Unfortunately, the exact conversion from kilometers to miles was hazy at best in my head, so I couldn't use that as a reference. Anyways, let's just assume that it was somewhere in-between a stroll and a fast run. 6kmph. Ibara was probably running more earnestly than the average, so I decided on 7kmph. From there, I had to figure out how many kilometers were between me and Ibara, who had started six minutes prior. That meant the answer was...

The answer was...

Multiplications and divisions ran circles inside my head. It wasn't like I had exceptionally bad grades in math, and the calculations weren't all that extreme with this one. It's just that doing all of the math in your head and doing it with paper and a pen required different skills altogether. Add onto that the fact that I was running, and my head just couldn't function like it usually could. Taking time while I was trying to figure out the answer was unavoidable. As I made excuses one after another, I kneaded the all the distances, times, and speeds into the formula in my head.

Let's see. In around one minute, one would probably near about 17 meters or so. She would catch up to me at around 4.1km from the start then. That meant that the approximate distance between us was... Well, she probably wasn't that far back anyways.

Even though I didn't have enough time nor distance in the first place, in order to calculate how much of each I had left, I ended up using more of both in the process. Talk about lacking foresight. I had two possible ways to reclaim the lost time and distance.

The first one was to try running a bit more seriously.

And my second option was to try remembering what happened that day all the more quickly.

That day, if I recall correctly, was just like today. I'm pretty sure it was fairly clear out.

It was certainly colder, however.

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ This is a reference to Stephen King's *The Long Walk*.

## 2. Past: 42 Days Ago

The Friday that fell on the very last day of the new student recruitment week was often called the New Recruit Festival. It was apparently called this not because anyone in particular named it such, but because it was simply more convenient to say.

The new student recruitment itself, however, lasted all throughout the entire week.

From Monday onwards, the new students gathered in the gymnasium after school and sat through several orientations. On Monday was the student council's presentation. After that came the important school committees. From Tuesday on, the various clubs took turns getting on stage to show the various first-years just how fantastic they were. Anyways, there were a considerable number of groups, so the orientations were held over a period of four days.

The same sort of thing happened last year as well, but I wasn't interested in being solicited, so I left early. Now that I'm on the soliciting side this year, however, I thought I should probably do at least a little enemy reconnaissance. On Tuesday, Chitanda grabbed me and we did a little spying in the gym.

Each group was allotted five minutes to present. In that time, the Theater Club put on a skit, the Clothing Research Society put on a fashion show, the Choir and Acapella clubs showcased the musical differences between the two of them, and the Track-and-Field Sports Club brought in a mat to demonstrate running high jumps.

There were also clubs clearly at a disadvantage. Not only did the Divination Research Society only have one member, that one member didn't like showing off at all. With a quiet voice, she gave a brief explanation on the

history of the Kabbalah and then quickly put down the mic and left. The Cooking Research Society similarly had their own disadvantages. It's not like you can instantly start preparing something the second you get on the stage. They could only really tell the first-years to come visit them at their table during the end-of-the-week New Recruit Festival because they would treat everyone to their mountain-herb cooking there. The Go Club played a game for the audience, but it was a failure no matter how you looked at it. They didn't have a large demonstration board, so the audience couldn't even see where they were placing the stones. It would have been fine if they had someone reading the moves out loud, but apparently there were only two people in the club. It was like time had frozen in place, desperately wanting to run away.

But this wasn't the time nor place to be feeling sorry for the Go Club. Five minutes was an unexpectedly long amount of time.

The Classics Club was scheduled to present on Thursday. Because they were still sorting things out after becoming second-years, Satoshi and Ibara were often busy so they didn't show up to the clubroom for the most part. On Wednesday, however, everyone happened to be gathered.

“What are we doing?”

Within my question was not only me wondering how we should fill our five minute timeslot, but me wondering if we were even capable of doing something like that in the first place.

“For now let's just try our hardest,” responded Ibara with a voice clearly suggesting she wasn't going to try her hardest.

“I agree, let's try our hardest,” I retorted in like.

As I said this, however, she replied, “Try our hardest on what?”

How would I know? You were the one that said it first.

“Well as it goes, I'm the club president, so technically speaking I should probably be the one to give a speech that could explain what makes the

Classics Club attractive, but..."

Chitanda was also being evasive. Judging by the way she hesitated while saying that sentence, she was, without a doubt, unable to think of any attractive points. That wasn't all.

"Chitanda, even if you were to go onstage to try to sell up the Classics Club, I don't think anyone would come."

"Are you serious? Try looking in a mirror next time you say something like that."

"No, it's fine," said Chitanda to the hostile Ibara. "I know I'm not good at asking people for favors."

Chitanda had a strong will and limitless amounts of sincerity, but on the other hand, because that will of hers was so one-sided, she didn't have it in her to use cunning tricks. If we had the materials needed to convince them gathered here, Chitanda's way of doing things might've worked, but unfortunately, our hand was empty.

That being said, Ibara was right about me needing to look in the mirror. If I were the one pushed out to face the first-years, I would doubtlessly only be able to say something along the lines of "We don't really do anything, but we do have a clubroom, so if you could stop on by, that'd be wonderful."

However, I still had reservations about getting Ibara to do it.

"Chi-chan, I've never thought you were bad at it. If it were me doing it, I'd only end up saying something unnecessary."

It appears the party in question also understood this.

At this point, there was only one person left.

Satoshi showed a troubled look on his face, but his eyes were clearly smiling.

“I wonder if I’m the right person for the job. If there are no other suggestions and you absolutely need me, however, I suppose I could do it to kill some time.”

With that, it became Satoshi’s time to shine.

“If everyone is happy with our Thursday plans, you guys should start deciding on what you’re going to do on Friday. After all, if you plan on using fire or gas, you’ll need to turn in a request slip by tomorrow.”

Satoshi said this in his official General Committee voice and then stood up. I hadn’t known he had been chosen as the General Committee vice-president and was busy as a result of that until later.

And then came Thursday after school. Satoshi Fukube stood on the gym stage as the sole Classics Club representative and let loose a variety of clever, apt one-liners, like “On the way here, I heard a lot of sawing noises coming from the Construction Club, but no matter how hard I looked, I couldn’t *see* a thing. Classics Club, everyone.”<sup>[1]</sup> His appropriate humor invited a good number of laughs from the first-years, and his flawlessly delivered speech wrapped up perfectly in four minutes and thirty seconds. He received a sparse applause and then exited the stage as the Abacus Calculation Club came on next.<sup>[2]</sup>

Even now, I admired my old friend’s remarkable gift.

After all, Satoshi’s speech had almost nothing to do with the actual Classics Club. Even though there was nothing to talk about, he splendidly filled the desired timeslot. That in itself was a spectacular ability, and one that I could never hope to imitate.

And then Friday rolled around. The sky was very clear.

In front of the Kamiyama High School building, in the garden or roundabout (or whatever you called it), there were several spaces dotted with shrubs. During lunch break, each of the clubs and committees had set

up tables there. Because of the scattered bushes, the tables couldn't be set up in a straight line, and as a result, the tables on both sides curved around in any number of offshoots.

I came to set up for the Classics Club. Satoshi was busy with General Committee work, and as much as I believed in my motto, "if I don't need to do something, I won't," I didn't feel like pushing all of the manual labor onto Ibara and Chitanda. I carried out the table and folding chairs and then lunch break ended. During afternoon classes, I was able to see the venue I set up from the window, but the dozens of tables lined up made the front gardens seem something like mysterious maze.

Before the bell that signaled classes were over chimed, my class, 2-A, started becoming restless. I heard various whispers coming from all directions.

"How are the preparations going?"

"Before anything else, we have to start with this."

...and other things of that nature. A particularly hasty student put on an armband reading "Certain Victory!" while he was still in the class. Another one placed a stuffed bear on his desk. I couldn't even begin to guess what clubs these people were in, but I did understand the rush, though. If you were too late to catch the first-years before they left, all of that preparation would have been for nothing. A running start was crucial.

The bell rang, and classes ended. All of my classmates immediately flew out the door like a cascading avalanche. Most likely, this scene was the same in all of the second and third-year classrooms. Although a little reluctant, I ended up joining the end of the avalanche anyways.

The garden that was at one point solely occupied by a line of empty tables was now overwhelmingly covered with various posters, signboards, and handouts. Even at a quick glance, I saw things reading: "Visit the Chemistry Club! May our future relations combust!" "Willing to bet your youth? Damn straight, the Basketball Club is for you!" "Enjoy creating it, and then have fun wearing it! Clothing Research Society." "The Han Dynasty hath

fallen, and the History Research Club shall be joineth!”<sup>[3]</sup> “One more person and we’ll have eleven! Join the Soccer Club.” The Cheering Squad held a group flag, the Cheerleading Club formed a large circle, the smell of black tea began to drift from the Confectionery Research Society, the Tea Ceremony Club had diligently laid out an outdoor mat, and a bunch of people with headbands had gathered who were, if I remembered correctly, part of the Broadcasting Club. Not even ten minutes had passed since the school bell rang, and already this much pandemonium had broken loose.

All of this had started at 3:30, and it was scheduled to be completely taken down once it had reached 6:00. This roughly two-hour long madness was commonly known as the New Recruit Festival. The fact that the “recruit” in the name didn’t mean “warmly invite” but rather “solicit by any means necessary” was something very typical of this school, indeed.

Most clubs had a single standard table, but depending on member count, popularity, and some invisible political element, there were other clubs that had one of the several large ones. Of course, it was decided beforehand which clubs would get them. The Classics Club had the number 17 table, so as I wandered around, searching for it, Chitanda called out to me, “Oreki-san, over here.”

I wasn’t looking forward to it that much, but as expected, our table was placed in a small corner of the venue. On it sat a small cardboard sign reading “Classics Club.” While the writing was elegant, it also felt unreservedly warm. Without a sign, no one would be able to tell what kind of club we were trying to get them to join, but we hadn’t mentioned doing this kind of preparation. Possibly reading my expression, Chitanda gave a slightly conflicted laugh.

“I put it together during lunch break. I probably should have made it a bit cuter, but I didn’t think of that at the time.”

That meant this was Chitanda’s handwriting. I thought she’d normally write in a more textbook fashion, but her brushwork was surprisingly carefree. Just as she had mentioned, however, it wasn’t cute in the slightest. It might’ve been nice if Ibara had drawn a little figure on it, but hindsight’s 20/20.

Chitanda wore a black coat as she sat on the folding chair. The front wasn't buttoned, so her white sweater and tie peeked through. I was also wearing a white trench coat. The New Recruit Festival around us had plenty of burning passion, but even then, it was still abnormally cold for April. Looking around, almost all of the recruiters and the recruited students wore thick overclothes.

Next to the Classics Club were the Ink Painting and Karuta clubs. Each of them only had one person stationed there. I gave vague greetings, and squeezed through them. I then sat next to Chitanda, directly in the center of the "Classics Club" sign.

Satoshi wouldn't be coming this time. He was busy with General Committee work, so it couldn't be helped. Then Chitanda spoke up.

"I guess Mayaka-san won't be coming after all."

"Manga Society?"

"I think that's the case, but it's not like she's going to be at their booth necessarily."

I remained quiet and nodded. I heard that Ibara's position in the Manga Research Society had become somewhat delicate. It was probably becoming difficult for her to even look the rest of them in the face. At any rate, we'd run into some problems if Ibara ended up coming now. Although I thought it was pretty big when I was carrying it earlier, looking at it now, the table we got wasn't nearly as big as the larger ones.

More precisely, it was really small.

With just the two of us sitting side-by-side, it was already getting a little hard to breathe. Had Chitanda been a little considerate in moving to give me some breathing room I would have been quite comfortable, but unfortunately, she had a peculiar understanding regarding personal space, so the fact that we were close enough for our shoulders to be touching didn't bother her in the slightest.

I took a small breath. Let's just play it cool. I wasn't the only one that thought it was cramped. Just in my field of vision, for example, I could see the Photography Club and Global Act Club squeezed far too closely together, and we all had to start advertising our club whilst buried in this mess.

At any rate, I had to start doing something to catch the attention of the passing first-years.

With interested expressions that were still clearly intimidated by the presence of their seniors and faces that still betrayed their middle-school roots, the first-years came little by little. At that moment, I could've sworn that I heard the sound of people licking their lips, thinking their prey had finally arrived. Fake, luring smiles filled the New Recruit Festival grounds.

The Classics Club couldn't afford to lose either. Now, now, come on up ladies and gentlemen. Come forward, anyone with a little time to spare. If you would like to join the fantastic Classics Club, the reception table is right over here.

After five minutes, I became bored.

No one was even stopping at our table.

"I said I was going to catch us some first-years, but how do I even do that in the first place," I grumbled as I stared at the new students passing by. Chitanda sat upright, her hands resting on her thighs, and without looking at me she responded.

"If only we had some birdlime, this would be simple."<sup>[4]</sup>

I knew roughly what birdlime was, but I had never seen it before. At most, it's something like a bug net, right?

"Wouldn't a bird net be more efficient?"

“Possibly, but it’s illegal.”

“I don’t think anyone will find out.”

“Oreki-san, are you the kind of person that ignores a red signal in the middle of the night?”

“I’m the kind of person that doesn’t go out on walks in the middle of the night, period.”

The conversation was so unproductive that it put even me in a miserable mood.

“You strike me as the type that would stop at that red light.”

“There are no traffic signals where I take my midnight strolls.”

It was so incredible unproductive.

I assumed something like this would happen, so I took out the book hidden in my coat pocket. I started reading the short story collection, and then spoke to Chitanda who continued to face forward exactly as a receptionist might.

“We have nothing to do, so I’m going to be reading.”

As I said this, Chitanda finally turned to face me, and with a soft smile she said, “That won’t do.”

“But no one’s coming.”

“That won’t do. Please just sit here quietly.”

Understood. I returned the book to my pocket. Thinking about it, if I were reading a book on the side like I had no interest in the festival, I guess new students would find it difficult to approach the table. On the other hand, if I were to remain sitting like this until evening, it would just get colder and colder. I crossed my hands behind my head.

Chitanda also looked like she had way too much time on her hands. No matter how strong her sense of responsibility was, she wasn't an inanimate object, so we should probably leave if nothing continued to happen. She turned her head to the side and seemed to be watching an excited student from another club with interest.

People continued to flow by. For some reason, as I watched this progression, I spoke.

"Cursed spots really do exist."

"Yes, they do."

She replied immediately. I didn't know what to say in response.

A little while later, Chitanda turned to me and tilted her head.

"That's not what you were talking about?"

What exactly was 'that' referring to? I decided to not think about it too hard and leaned back into my folding chair.

"You know, one of those. In something like a shopping district or roadside area, even though it doesn't look like it's in a bad location compared to the other shops, you have a store that is constantly being destroyed and replaced by a new one. Before you realize it, there's a new shop there, and no matter what kind of shop it is, it never gets any business. I was just thinking that spots like those really existed."

"Ah, I see. A place that's constantly changing ownership. It's mysterious, but once they change the signboard, I can never seem to remember what kind of shop it was previously."

"That's true, isn't it? When it becomes a vacant lot, you end up even forgetting if there was a shop there in the first place."

Chitanda nodded and her expression begged me to continue. I wanted to avoid her eyes so I slightly averted my face. As if to bring attention away from that, I lightly tapped the table with the back of my hand.

“I’m getting the same vibes here.”

“By ‘here’, do you mean this area?”

“Yeah.”

One section of the row of tables was placed in an area surrounded by ring of hedges. According to the General Committee’s official statement, the Classics Club was to be one of the clubs stationed in that clearing, however, I had been watching the path that the students had been taking since earlier, and things weren’t looking good.

When the first-years entered the ring, their backs were turned to us. If students weren’t interested in what was going on and decided to continue through to the school gates, they wouldn’t even see us once, however, if one was curious, if even for a little bit, and they decided to look around, they would naturally end up directly in front of our table. Judging solely by the flow of traffic, this spot shouldn’t leave a bad impression at all.

And yet, for some reason none of the first-years were even so much as stopping in front of it. They wouldn’t even look at Chitanda’s handwritten Classics Club sign.

“Doesn’t it feel like people are finding it hard to stop walking around here for some reason?”

As Chitanda watched the group passing in front of us, she slowly responded.

“I think the biggest problem is that we aren’t calling out to them.”

Loud voices from every club were intersecting each other in the air all throughout the front gardens. “Hey, you look like a quiz kind of guy. I’m sure you’re searching for a quiz even as we speak. I feel you. Well then, first question!” “We also host English debates. Your English grade will certainly rise; it normally does.” “No no, I’ll start from the rules. It’s easy if you memorize them. If you just pay attention to where “gold” and “silver” are, you’ll be fine!”<sup>[5]</sup> “Are you bad at cooking? It’s fine if you are, because

you'll only get better in the Cooking Society. Come to our clubroom now and we'll make you something right away!" "Astronomy Club, Astronomy club over here! Do you like stars? Love planets? Although technically we can't see them right now." I had just realized it, but even the singularly manned Ink Painting Club and Karuta Club were calling out to the passing students.

Certainly enough, staying quiet and then complaining that 'no one was stopping' seemed pretty irrational.

At the same time, however, Chitanda then said this.

"Although, with 'that' thing right in front of us, it does seem a little unfair."

While saying this, she indicated what she was talking about with her eyes.

'That' was putting on a huge exhibition in front of the students passing along the path. A large banner read "Ready for Tea Time." It was an exquisite banner with cat and panda mascots embroidered on it with beads. A black tea fragrance wafted from it. On the table were a Thermos, two stacks of paper cups, a club entry form, and a pen. On one end of the table were also a tabletop gas stove and a golden kettle, the type that a sports team might drink from during a match. That shining kettle looked as if it could carry an impressive 10 liters. At the moment, the stove wasn't turned on.

And the thing that stood out the most was the pumpkin on the opposite side from the gas stove. This utterly massive thing had eyes and a mouth carved into it to turn it into a Halloween decoration. Did Halloween take place in April?

In the center behind the table were two girls. Both of them wore only aprons over their school uniforms. Even though that was the case, they were so enthusiastic that it seemed like the cold hadn't even reached them. Sandwiched in-between the pumpkin and gas stove, they vigorously waved their arms around.

"Come and have a bite. Cookies you'll be sure to love! Great, here you go!"

“The thing is, we put a mysterious concoction inside these cookies. Now you’ve fallen into our trap. You want to join the club now. See, you really want to join. You want to join so badly that you can’t stand it anymore. The registration sheet is right over here.”

“Yes, this is that kind of cookie. I’d be bad if it got stuck in your throat, so drink some of this here black tea.”

As she said this, she picked up the Thermos and poured the tea into a paper cup.

“Hey you, you over there. You look like the type who loves cookies!”

“Ah, you’re right! He does have a face perfectly suited towards eating cookies. Now eat up. It doesn’t matter why, just eat it!”

Somehow I felt like I’d met those two before. What was it, I wonder. I don’t think I’ve seen their faces before.

It seemed like they had a lot of cookies prepared. They were giving them out one after another. I didn’t know whether or not their plan was actually succeeding in getting people to sign up, but they were certainly getting a lot of students to stop.

“The Confectionery Research Society, huh?”

“Yes, you can’t help but look over there, completely forgetting about the Classics Club.”

Using food to lure the new students in, what a dastardly pair. At any rate, those who would let their hearts be stolen over something like a cookie were probably frivolous people anyways. They wouldn’t make good additions to the Classics Club. As I was playing around in my head with my baseless accusations and “we are the chosen few” rhetoric, I noticed Chitanda seemed a bit strange next to me. She was staring intently at the busy Confectionery Research Society table without so much as twitching.

No way... I called to her with fear in my voice.

“Chitanda?”

“Huh... oh, what is it?”

The startled Chitanda turned towards me, and I asked her a question.

“Is it possible...”

“Yes?”

“...you want a cookie?”

Chitanda thought a bit and then replied with an earnest expression.

“If I said no, I would be lying.”

“It’s fine if you go and get one.”

“Thank you very much, but I can’t. We have other priorities.”

One again, she turned her head to stare at the Confectionery Research Society.

“Isn’t there something strange going on over there?”

Caught in her trap, I ended up looking once more myself. The energetic duo. The Thermos, paper cups, and club entry sheet. The tabletop gas stove, pumpkin, and cookies.

...Well I couldn’t deny that there were certainly strange things going on with their choices in presentation. The strangest thing there was probably how lively the two were.

Other than those, maybe there were one or two more weird aspects.

“I guess you’re right. It is odd.”

I was careless to let that slip out. Chitanda suddenly turned towards me. Because the table was so small, when she did, I could feel her so close to

me that I instantly jumped back without thinking.

“Really? Which parts are odd?”

“What do you mean ‘which parts’? You were the one that said it first, weren’t you? It just is.”

Or perhaps she was playing some sort of high-level mind game with me, saying that “it was strange in a way that only the Confectionery Research Club could be.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Chitanda casted a sidelong glance at the commotion surrounding the cookie distribution and then whispered something in response.

“I know, but the thing is ever since a while back I can’t help but feel like something strange is going on. I have these thoughts, and it’s so frustrating.”

“Oh, that’s probably just...”

“Please wait!”

I stopped speaking and swallowed the words before they came out.

“Please don’t tell me yet. I’m still trying to figure out the answer. Yes, I feel like I understand it somewhat.”

I’ve been asked plenty of times to give an answer, but I have never been told to not give one before. While I was considering how rare this was, I stared at the side of Chitanda’s close face as she stared at the Confectionery Society in turn.

At last, she looked resolute.

“It’s the pumpkin. I have a feeling that the pumpkin is off.”

The orange pumpkin had two triangular eyes and a jagged mouth cut into it. No matter how you looked at it, it was your standard, run-of-the-mill Jack

O'Lantern, but I could understand why it might have attracted one's eyes to such an extent.

Chitanda, however, pursued a different line of thought.

"Goods along those lines aren't authorized in Japan... No, that's wrong. That's just a normal variety of pumpkin seed."

"Is that so?"

"Pumpkins are grown in the fall, but I guess if they were stored properly, it wouldn't be strange that they didn't rot."

"I see."

"They aren't being widely sold as a commercial crop yet. I don't think there are any farming families growing them in Kamiyama City."

"I'm shocked."

"But you can buy them normally at the supermarket. Is it domestically-produced? Or perhaps it's an imported variety."

"Why are you looking at it from an agricultural perspective!?"

That part wasn't the problem. As she continued to miss the point so splendidly every time, I began to feel like remaining silent was an evil deed in itself.

Chitanda whispered a couple more things to herself, but finally let out a small sigh.

"I guess everything up until now was wrong. I have no idea. I give up. Why am I so curious about that pumpkin?"

She became bashful, as if apologizing for her previous obstinacy.

"I'm curious."

Normally I would have thought this kind of thing was a nuisance.

After all, Chitanda's limitless curiosity had brought about a similarly limitless number of nuisances to not only the Classics Club, but to this energy-saving advocate right here as well. Thinking rationally about it, even had I not resolved a large majority of these, it's not like I would be any worse off than I was now, and yet, even I didn't really understand why I ended up sticking around all the way to the end in most of these cases. I think Chitanda's large eyes were to blame.

However today, as Chitanda said she was curious at that moment in this very spot, I didn't find it all that annoying. After all, sitting behind this table, I wasn't allowed to read a book nor get up and leave. If I was only going to be sitting at this table anyways, I figured having a discussion wouldn't be bad.

At the same time, I had already mostly understood the true identity of the thing that had caused Chitanda to have a 'feeling that something was off.' It didn't look like this discussion would last for very long. I started speaking.

"That pumpkin is pretty big, isn't it."

Chitanda tilted her head.

"Well it's a *Cucurbita pepo* variety, so it actually isn't that big in compari..."<sup>[7]</sup>

Her tone suddenly shifted.

"You could probably just barely fit your arms around it, right? At the very least, it's considerably larger than the cardboard you used to make the Classics Club sign."

She looked at the sign, and then finally nodded in assent.

"That's correct. It's much larger."

“That pumpkin was placed on one side of the table, and on the other side is the tabletop gas stove, and yet, between them are two Confectionery Society members jumping around and handing out cookies. At our table are just the two of us sitting side by side, and it’s already this cramped.”

“Really? Is it that cramped?”

Just as I thought, she didn’t think so at all.

Let’s just put that aside for now. Because we were watching the table from a gap in the passing flood of students, and its orientation was somewhat diagonal when compared to ours, it was probably difficult for her to gauge distance. The answer to Chitanda’s question was actually very simple.

“The Confectionery Society’s table is bigger than ours. When I was setting up our table earlier, I noticed there were several clubs using extra-large ones. You didn’t know the tables came in different sizes. Isn’t that why you felt a strange sense of discomfort?”

“Ah...”

Chitanda’s voice leaked out.

However, her face wasn’t glowing.

“Their table is extra-large. You can figure that out from the distance between the pumpkin and gas burner. I see. Just like you mentioned, I hadn’t noticed that. But I have a feeling that it’s something else. ...In that case, why do they have a pumpkin there?”

And now we arrived at the ‘why’. It was a difficult question.

“Does there have to be a reason in using decorations? Handing out cookies while using a Halloween theme makes a certain amount of sense, doesn’t it?”

Even though it was completely out of season.

Chitanda returned to look at the Confectionery Society.

“Let me change my phrasing a bit. If they didn’t have the pumpkin there, what would happen?”

As she asked that, I tried imagining it. What would happen if you took away the pumpkin, and the table only had a tabletop gas stove and kettle.

“The table would look fairly open and spacious.”

“I agree.”

She then turned towards me and started speaking slowly, as if emphasizing the point.

“If that pumpkin wasn’t there, don’t you think the Confectionery Society would be able to do so much more with all the space?”

I felt like I understood what she was getting at.

Considering the pumpkin was solely being used as a decoration, the Confectionery Society was limiting the amount of space they had. And yet, even though they had done that, it didn’t look like they were cramped at all.

This meant that they had an excessive amount of table space. To think they were even assigned an extra-large table in the first place.

“So are you saying that them having the extra-large table is a waste?”

Chitanda shook her head slightly.

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that they seem to be using the same amount of space that we are at our smaller table. In that case, why were they assigned an extra-large table?”

The General Committee was responsible for divvying up all of the spots. Naturally, they also decided which clubs got to use the extra-large tables. For example, if a physically bulky club like the Brass Band Club was given an extra-large table, no one would think twice. Yet, the Confectionery Society didn’t take up a lot of space. Even at the moment, there were only two there advertising.

I could think of several reasons aside from that, however, that might explain it.

“Possibility one: There were a lot of extra-large tables, and all of the clubs that actually needed them got one, so there was a surplus. As a result, even the Confectionery Society was given one.”

“Do you really think so?”

Hearing such an earnest response to my half-assed theory almost made me choke on my words.

“Not really...”

“I don’t think so either. If that were the case, it’d be unfair to the clearly-troubled Photography Club and Flower Arrangement Club over there.”

I could see the Photography Club completely drowning in their photos with not enough room to put all of them, but the Flower Arrangement Club that Chitanda pointed out as well was in an even worse position. Because they lined up a row of showy flower arrangements on their table, the final result resembled something more akin to a densely packed jungle as opposed to a collection of floral pieces, and on top of that, you couldn’t even see the club members’ faces. They had probably brought one arrangement per person without thinking about it and quickly ran out of room. Besides, I had basically known there was no surplus in the first place.

Extra-large tables are distributed among the clubs that have a lot of showpieces to exhibit, while the Confectionery Society puts up with a normal-sized one. This is what normally should have happened. So why didn’t it?

“Possibility two: The Confectionery Society has pull with the General Committee, and they bribed these connections to make off with an extra-large table.”

Recruiting the new students was a matter of survival of the fittest; it was accepted that those who haphazardly approached the event without a plan of

attack were morons. For a little while after, Chitanda had a sad look in her eyes. Was she despairing over the cruelty behind this cold calculation? In the end, however, she finally replied.

“So after doing that and making off with the extra-large table, those two...”

“Put a big pumpkin on it.”

No, that was wrong. There was a fundamental contradiction in that. If they didn’t have a way to effectively use that extra space, there wouldn’t even be a reason to pull so many strings to get one in the first place.

If I assume they went after one deliberately, then it was possible that they were using the extra-large table not because they needed it, but because it put the clubs that would need it at a disadvantage. By this hypothesis, the Confectionery Society secured the extra-large table simply to harass the other clubs. It wasn’t like that couldn’t be the case, but the realm of possibility is often far separated from that of reality. I didn’t believe they would go that far, and I don’t think Chitanda would either.

“Let’s just put that one aside for now. Time for possibility three.”

Deep, down inside, I thought that this one was the correct answer. Listing the other two before it was... well... me just killing time really.

It took a little bit for me to find the words.

“The Confectionery Society filled out a request to use a particular device, and they were given an extra-large table because they needed the space for safety purposes as a result.”

“What device would that be?”

There was something that you needed to get special permission for.

“Fire. The tabletop gas stove.”

Upon hearing this, Chitanda turned her head and once again looked over towards the Confectionery Society.

“The Confectionery Society was given an extra-long table in order to use that. It’s dangerous to use fire in a narrow space, after all. However, the table was much too large with only the gas stove at the end. As a result, they added the pumpkin to the other end of the table in order to achieve a nice, pleasant balance. Doesn’t this sound correct to you?”

With this, I was sure I solved the mystery behind the pumpkin. It took a little more than I thought it would, but Chitanda was sure to be satisfied with this.

How naïve I was. Chitanda continued to stare intently at the Confectionery Society table, as well at its ever-energetic club members handing around cookies and black tea.

After an anxiety-inducing period of silence, Chitanda slowly turned towards me.

“I see. I wish I could call it a fantastic deduction, however...”

I also started looking at the thing Chitanda was staring at in particular. A Thermos. Paper cups. A tabletop gas stove and kettle.

*“The gas stove isn’t being used.”*

Certainly enough, the fire wasn’t lit at the moment. You could figure that out just by looking.

But even that being the case, Chitanda’s point didn’t make any sense.

“What are you saying? Just because they aren’t using it at the moment doesn’t mean they won’t be using it later.”

Currently, they were pouring tea from the Thermos, however, if they continued to distribute it, they would eventually run out. When that happened, they would certainly use the gas stove to heat up more. Even a kindergartner could figure that out.

Chitanda suddenly moved her face close to mine. I looked up and our eyes met. It was like her pupils penetrated all the way through to the bottommost areas of my heart.

“Oreki-san, you were thinking that I was dumb just now, weren’t you.”

“I wouldn’t say...”

“Then, were you thinking I was an idiot?”

I was thinking it was logic that even a kindergartner would understand.

Chitanda leaned back in her chair and started talking in a miffed tone.

“It’s not like I say things without thinking beforehand. I figured it out when I was looking really carefully at the table.”

Chitanda had an impressive sense of vision, hearing, and smell. Her taste was probably similar. Perhaps she had caught on to something that I didn’t notice as a result of those five senses.

“What did you see?”

“Nothing that you can’t.”

She probably wasn’t sulking. She was issuing me a challenge. *Damn you*, I thought and then strained my eyes to look for something.

I guess I couldn’t say that there was nothing suspicious.

“That kettle looks brand-new. It doesn’t look like it’s been used over a fire even once yet.”

In saying that, however, there was no way to tell if it hadn’t actually been used before just from that observation. I snuck a quick glance at Chitanda, and I could see her cracking a small smile without looking like she was going to say anything anytime soon. . . . Which probably meant that wasn’t it.

“The Confectionery Society is giving out black tea. They are pouring it out of the Thermos into the paper cups. Once they run out, they’ll have to boil more, of course.”

Wait a second, that’s incorrect. You don’t boil black tea.

Ah, so that’s what it was. Even if the Confectionery Society was really boiling water over there, was there really anything they could do with just that?

“I understand now. You were talking about the black tea, right?”

“Exactly,” she replied, seemingly puffing out her chest with pride. “The Confectionery Society is handing out cookies and black tea. Even if they decided to boil some water, there’d be no point if they didn’t have the tea leaves, and yet, I haven’t seen these tea leaves anywhere on their table. They must have previously brewed the tea somewhere else and then poured it into the Thermos.”

Although I constantly recognized her incredible senses, there were few times when I thought her insight was similarly extraordinary. I wasn’t feeling down at being bested by her, but I retorted with a stingy counter anyways.

“Maybe the black tea base is already in the Thermos. All they needed to do would be directly add the boiling water and it would turn into black tea. Or maybe the leaves were in the kettle...”

As I finished saying this, Chitanda’s eyes became wide.

“Oreki-san... don’t tell me you’ve never brewed black tea before?”

I remained silent.

That was exactly the case. I preferred coffee much more, but even when I did drink black tea, it would always be some that I got from a vending machine. As a result, I had never once had the need to brew it for myself. It

almost felt like me admitting to my life's pathetic nature however, so I didn't want to say that out loud.

"If you were to do that, the tea would get more and more bitter. That's why it's made in teapots with removable strainers and why the tea leaf packages themselves have recommended amounts for single use. For example, even if you were to use a tea bag, you'd normally take out the bag after a certain amount of time had passed."

"Is that so?"

"Yes it is."

So that's how it all worked. I wasn't very knowledgeable about the whole thing, but I could at least understand that there was something wrong with the fact that they didn't have tea leaves nor a pot used to brew the tea in.

This meant that the black tea that they had already prepared in their Thermos was all they had, and that the gas stove wasn't there to make more.

Things were becoming increasingly bizarre.

"I guess this means that the Confectionery Society wasn't planning on using the gas stove that they prepared from the very start. In that case it's just like the pumpkin; at this point it's just a decoration."

I thought for a bit.

"Even if they aren't using it, I still think my hypothesis about them being assigned an extra-large table after applying for permission to use the gas stove was correct. The strange part is how they don't seem to have a use for it. What does that mean, then?"

"What, indeed."

Unexpectedly, this was starting to become a hassle. I went along with it at first just to kill some time, but to think it would drag on for this long. Incidentally, as I was being pursued by this anxiety, I turned away from Chitanda. She also averted her eyes at the same time.

We then both noticed a person standing in front of us.

Skin tanned under the cloudy skies that persisted even in spring. Hair cut short. A face and countenance that suggested a lively, gallant nature. A thick jacket that would have hidden the sex of its wearer had it not been unfastened, showing the sweater and tie underneath. At essentially the same time, Chitanda and I saw a girl standing before us. It wasn't like I forgot we were in the middle of the New Recruit Festival, but I didn't think anyone would actually come to our table. How long had she been standing there?

As the two of us sat there dumbfounded and unable to speak, the girl stuck her hands into her jacket pockets and slightly bowed her head.

"Hi there."

She then flashed a beaming smile.

Chitanda was the first to come to her senses.

"O... oh, um, are you perhaps interested in joining? My name is Chitanda. I'm the club president."

The girl in the jacket continued to smile as she responded.

"Not necessarily, but I was walking around and looking at the clubs, and I finally saw you guys looking like you were talking about something interesting over here. My name's Ōhinata. I'm a first-year."

It was my first time hearing the name. It wasn't as rare as the name "Chitanda," but it was still very peculiar, so I had I feeling I wouldn't forget it. Even that was already out of character for me. I wasn't normally good at remembering things like names and faces after all.

And yet, it felt like I had seen her face somewhere before. There could only be one reason for me knowing a first-year's face.

"Kaburaya Middle School?"

Ōhinata looked at me and smiled as if she were extremely happy.

“Yes,” she nodded. She was a very straightforward person.

“I see.”

Just like I thought, she was once an underclassman of mine. I figured I should say something about Kaburaya Middle School, but there wasn’t really anything I wanted to ask or talk about, so I stayed silent.

Chitanda started to speak from the side.

“Well, we are recruiting at the moment, so how about it? Over at the Classics Club we do… various things.”

Well put.

“I don’t know, it seems kind of complicated. You guys read stuff like classical Chinese literature, right? I mean I guess I do like Japanese studies and all…”

“No, we don’t do those kinds of things. Of course, if you would like to we could.”

“Is that so? Still though…”

I didn’t know if Ōhinata had heard something up in the sky somewhere, but she suddenly stooped over and brought her face close to Chitanda’s.

“This is just something a friend told me, but people should finish the things they start. So? What’s up with the pumpkin after all?”

“Wha…?”

I see. So she was eavesdropping on us, huh?

“From which part did you start listening?”

“Umm,” she thought as she pursed her lips from side to side, “From the part where you told her she could go and get some cookies if she wanted to.”

“That’s basically from the beginning!”

Chitanda let out something like a yell. Her cheeks were becoming visibly flushed.

“You heard everything? That’s so embarrassing.”

Could you really call a conversation like that embarrassing?

It was such an unexpected reaction that it caused even Ōhinata to falter.

“Um, I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to overhear it all. It’s just that… I just got really curious about the pumpkin when I heard you guys talking about it, so I kind of just stopped walking and it went from there. I couldn’t help but wonder how much you guys were going to think about the pumpkin, is all.”

She quickly lowered her head.

“I’m really sorry.”

“No… It’s fine.”

As Chitanda said this, she brought her hand up to her mouth like she was about to cough. Ōhinata also had an embarrassed expression for a little while after, but she quickly reverted to her original self.

“So? What’s up with the pumpkin?”

Chitanda aside, why was this first-year’s curiosity so fired up about something like that as well. As I thought this, however, I figured I’d just continue anyways and ignore the new element. I recalled the point where we had left off.

“If I remember correctly, we were talking about the gas stove being unused.

“The reason they have the space to use a pumpkin as decoration is because they have an extra-large table.

“The reason they were assigned an extra-large table was because they filed a form asking to use a gas stove.

“However, in reality, they aren’t using the gas stove. Something’s fishy. We left off right around there.”

I looked to Chitanda as I said this, but she only casted her eyes downwards without responding. It looked like she was really embarrassed after all. Ever since Chitanda joined the club, she’s been bringing troublesome things behind her one after another, and yet this was the first time I had ever seen her like this. What was she so conscious about?

“So how about this then?” Ōhinata asked with a voice that sounded like it was competing with the surrounding ruckus. “Those guys had initially planned on using the gas stove for a reason that was unrelated to brewing black tea, but later their plans changed, and they ended up not needing it. More importantly than its use, however, was the fact that they felt they had to put the gas stove on the table even though they weren’t going to use it.”

“Interesting.”

She must have really payed attention to our conversation if she could already make these kinds of deductions. Although, that’s not to say they were correct.

“However it should have been decided long ago that they were going to distribute black tea and confections. At any rate, it’s not like they suddenly decided on it today. It’s a bit inconsistent to assume that they had long decided on handing out tea and confections while also having plans to use a gas stove for a different purpose.”

“We don’t necessarily know that’s the case, do we? If they had the ingredients and tea on hand, wouldn’t they be able to make them in time even had they decided on it today? If they started in the morning, wouldn’t they be able to finish by the afternoon?”

It's true that the Confectionery Society would most likely have the cookie ingredients ready to go if they needed them. That wasn't the problem, though. I raised my arm and pointed towards the item in question.

"That's true about the cookies, however the banner isn't really something you could make in the same amount of time."

The large banner that read "Ready for Tea Time" was embroidered with a ton of beads. It would be extremely difficult to sew that entire thing between classes.

"They had decided a while ago on the 'tea time' theme, and as a result, they were able to spend time making that."

"Whaaat..."

Ōhinata appeared dissatisfied.

"Yeah, I guess if you put it like that I'd have to agree. This is really difficult."

Looking at her, I couldn't help but feel like I'd made a mistake. I didn't really have any obligation to illuminate the truth for Ōhinata, so it probably would have been much easier to just say something like 'you might be right there'. As an energy-saving advocate, I made the wrong choice.

"In that case, let's see..."

She began thinking again. Considering Ōhinata wasn't the one who originally thought the pumpkin was strange, she seemed to be very enthusiastic about the whole matter. She said something about always finishing what you start, but maybe that was actually her own motto.

Apparently unable to think of anything else, Ōhinata started to glare menacingly at the Confectionery Society and began saying things like "Anyways, it's pretty much decided that they're bad people."

"That's pretty cruel of you. Even if you say all that, I've found myself eating quite a number of their cookies already."

“Did they come over here to hand some out?”

“They came to sell them to me during the culture festival. So anyways, why do you say they’re bad people?”

Ōhinata once again threw a quick glare at the Confectionery Society and then spoke with her chest puffed out.

“This is just something a friend told me, but apparently people who don’t use nametags are always pretty shady.”

I wonder about that. I think I’d prefer to not have a tag hanging from my chest reading ‘Hōtarō Oreki’ no matter where I went. Or maybe it was some kind of metaphor.

As I was stuck thinking up a response, Chitanda suddenly raised her head.

“That’s it!”

“Wh... what is?”

“Ōhinata-san said it perfectly. How wonderful, that’s exactly the problem.”

The frightened Ōhinata took a step back. Chitanda, try not to scare the innocent first-year.

“What are you talking about?”

Upon hearing this, Chitanda almost certainly started to drill a hole into my head with her strong gaze.

“It’s strange that the pumpkin was placed there.”

“Isn’t that exactly why we started this conversation in the first place?”

“No, not that. I’m talking about this.”

As she said that, she pointed to the only thing place on our table, the signboard that read “Classics Club”.

“I knew I thought something was strange. It’s the fact that the Confectionery Society is missing something.”

From beside the enthusiastic Chitanda, Ōhinata timidly started to ask a question.

“Um... for a while now you two have been constantly mentioning something called the Confectionery Society, but what exactly does that stand for?”<sup>[8]</sup>

“You see!?”

As she said that, I finally realized it. The Confectionery Society was missing something that it should obviously have.

Unbelievable. I was so used to Kamiyama High School that I had thoughtlessly glossed over such an important fact. Just by seeing those two jump around, I had known they were from the Confectionery Research Society. However...

“So that’s what it was. *They don’t have a sign.* ‘Confectionery Research Society’ isn’t written anywhere, not on the table nor on their banner.”

“Exactly. Even though they’re recruiting new members, they don’t have their name anywhere, which should be the most important thing when doing that, and seeing something like a pumpkin there instead made me curious.”

Ignoring Ōhinata as she nodded with newfound comprehension concerning the Confectionery Research Society’s shorthand, I started to think.

Was it a mistake on their part? No, it couldn’t be. For a club that put as much effort into the New Recruit Festival as they did with their extravagant banner, that kind of oversight should have been impossible.

Then, was it just like Ōhinata had mentioned earlier? Had the Confectionery Society done something so shady that it would prevent them from putting their name up? What could something like that even be? In the first place, who would be on the receiving end of that shady action?

Did it have something to do with the gas stove they got permission to use but ended up not using at all?

A large amount of yelling reached my ears. The Quiz Club, the Debate Club, the Photography Club, the Flower Arrangement Club, the Cooking Society, the Astronomy Club, and now, the Confectionery Research Society.

“Oreki-san?”

I turned to face Chitanda.

I felt like I knew what had happened for the most part.

*“It’s because the place where that pumpkin is sitting right now doesn’t belong to the Confectionery Society.”*

I ended up instantly stating the conclusion without any lead-up.

Naturally there were a lot of steps omitted to get to that point, so Chitanda stared at me blankly.

“What do you mean it’s not theirs?”

“Well... It’s probably best if I go in order.”

I stayed quiet long enough to arrange the explanation in my head.

“Basically, it’s this.

“If there was a club that filed for permission to use a tabletop gas stove, that club would be assigned an extra-large table. However, on the day of the event, the club that arrived at that table, the Confectionery Society, didn’t need the gas stove at all. Why?

*“It’s because the club that applied to use the gas stove wasn’t the Confectionery Club.”*

“Which means...” Chitanda covered her mouth with her hands. “They stole the table?”

That carefree duo from the Confectionery Society did? No, that’s not it.

“What I’m saying is *they switched tables*, the Confectionery Society and whoever put in the request for that gas burner.

“This explains why they would look like they put in a request for the gas burner without actually needing it in the first place. Because they didn’t plan on having an extra-large table, they brought a pumpkin to fill up some space. It’s also why they don’t have a sign. They probably didn’t put their sign out in order to fool the General Committee who would have realized they were ignoring the table assignments.”

“B... but...”

Likely unable to believe it right away, Chitanda shook her head.

“If that were the case, that would mean the club originally assigned that table would be at a disadvantage. Why would they do that?”

Without directly answering her, I gestured to point out the large number of clubs tightly lined up next to each other throughout the gardens around us.

“Somewhere in this courtyard is a club that was originally supposed to use a gas stove but isn’t.”

“You know you don’t really have to beat around the bush,” interrupted Ōhinata from the side. “If you’re talking about a club that uses fire, there shouldn’t be too many of them no matter how you look at it.”

O sweet, naïve first-year. You underestimate the sheer number and variety of clubs in Kamiyama High School. I don’t know what rock you’ve been living under, but one small mistake and Classics Club might have been forced to serve a tempura lunch and pork soup, that’s the kind of school this was.

Though, saying that, I was certainly wrung dry during the occasion.

Chitanda started to whisper.

“Oh, that’s right. How could I have forgotten?”

Chitanda had also watched the orientations in the gym. Her memory was far superior to mine, so it wasn’t strange that she had remembered.

“The Cooking Society, wasn’t it? Didn’t they say they were going to treat everyone to a mountain-herb cuisine demonstration at their table during the New Recruit Festival?”

I nodded.

I wondered if the Cooking Society was handing out their food to the new students. No, they weren’t. Even now they were telling the students to come to the clubroom if they wanted to try some food.

“I wonder if the ingredients didn’t arrive on time.”

“The herbs? If they were so strapped as to warrant giving their extra-large table to the Confectionery Society, they could have just lied and cooked up some fake dish instead.”

“A fake dish... Couldn’t you at least say they could use the ingredients available to them to make something else?”

“They could use the ingredients available to them to make something else.”

Chitanda glared at me. I only said it because she asked me to...

“It wasn’t that. It was a much bigger slip-up. Something happened that rendered them unable to hand out the food to the new students.”

“Maybe they didn’t get rid of the bitter herb taste. No one would want to eat it if that were the case.”

“That’s the same thing. All they would need to do is start over with the remaining ingredients and they’d be fine. Something much more serious would have had to happen for them to be willing to give up the extra-large

table like that. With that table, they'd be able to line up all of their cooking utensils and still have a bunch of space, just like the Confectionery Society is enjoying right now.

"The fact that the Cooking Society switched tables with the Confectionery Society and had to keep it a secret means that they must have made a mistake that they couldn't report. They had such a bad problem that they couldn't even have anyone wondering why they had an extra-large table with a gas stove but they weren't using it to make any food. I'm willing to bet on it; the Cooking Society won't have their name displayed anywhere."

Just like Ōhinata had said, those who didn't have nametags were shady.

At some point, my voice had become soft. Perhaps because it was hard to hear me amidst all the hustle and bustle, Chitanda had brought her face close to mine. Incidentally, Ōhinata had also bent over and brought her tanned face closer. She was the first to whisper her question.

"Does that kind of mistake even exist? No offense, but what's the worst that a club could do with their cooking? No matter how much they mess up, what kind of mistake could force them to keep quiet about it?"

If she thought that was really the case, then she really was truly naïve.

"It's related to food handling. Even a shop would be forced to temporarily shut down if they made this mistake."

"Wait, do you mean..."

I nodded, and softened my voice even more.

*"It's food poisoning."*

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ I had to change up the pun.
2. ↑ This is an actual type of club.
3. ↑ This is a play on words. The original line (蒼天已死 黃天當立) comes from the Chinese *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, and it generally refers to the predicted downfall of the Han Dynasty and success of the Yellow Scarves Rebellion. For more information: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow\\_Turban\\_Rebellion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Turban_Rebellion)
4. ↑ Birdlime is an adhesive that traps birds that land on it.
5. ↑ "Gold" and "silver" here refer to pieces from Shogi, a Japanese version of chess.
6. ↑ In Japanese, the word for strange, *okashii*, sounds almost identical to a word meaning confections, *okashi*.
7. ↑ One of the most common pumpkin varieties.
8. ↑ While not necessarily clear in the translation, the shorthand that they have been using for Confectionery Research Society, *seika-kenkyūkai*, is *seikaken*, so while it might make more sense in English, the Japanese would sound ambiguous to someone who didn't know what word was being abbreviated.

### **3. Present: 4.1km; 15.9km Remaining**

At the end of the day, it turned out that I was mostly correct about the food poisoning, but Chitanda's hypothesis about them not getting their mountain herbs in time had some truth to it as well.

The Cooking Society had failed in their preparation of the herbs. It appeared that they had initially intended on cooking a miso soup made from bracken, but when some of the club members sampled it during lunch, they complained that their stomachs began to hurt.<sup>[1]</sup>

If they were truly intending on hiding their slip-up, there was a strong possibility that the affected members wouldn't even go to the infirmary for help. As I said this, Chitanda immediately started to run off. I suppose she didn't take food poisoning from mountainous herbs lightly.

"They might need help," she said as she did so, but I wasn't so sure about leaving one's table empty during the New Recruit Festival. The flustered Ōhinata responded with, "Oh, then I'll help too," and then started chasing after her. I heard what had happened after that from Ōhinata later.

"Chitanda-senpai barged into the Cooking Practice Room without a second thought. At first the Cooking Society members tried to play dumb, but once they could tell she knew everything that had happened, they pulled out the members with the ruined stomachs. It looked like she knew some of the people in the club, so things went more quickly than expected."

"Chitanda has acquaintances everywhere. So, how were the poisoned members faring?"

"Not very well. It looked like they really wanted to go home and rest, but they knew they couldn't do that. The second she saw them, Chitanda-senpai rushed out of the classroom and brought back some student who looked

something like an aspiring doctor. Apparently her family is in the hospital business, and she looked really cool and all, but it felt like she was really annoyed by the whole situation.”

That was most likely Irisu-senpai. Ōhinata had said she looked annoyed, but she was probably no different than how she normally was.

“She had them throw up using salt water and then told the others to bring the students to her place if their condition got any worse. Taking them to the hospital would only make things complicated, after all.”

“I guess if they got food poisoning, the doctors would have to report it to the school infirmary.”

“I wonder if they’d actually have to. Isn’t there doctor-patient confidentiality or something like that?”

“I have no clue.”

“At any rate, the members fortunately recovered after throwing up.”

That was a relief.

The Cooking Society managed to hide their failure. According to Ōhinata, Chitanda sternly lectured the entire Cooking Society on how to properly handle mountainous herbs as a condition in overlooking their irresponsible actions. At that point, I was convinced that this time for sure no one would be coming to our Classics Club table, so I took out my book and continued to read.

I had only managed finish one paragraph however, when Ōhinata started to speak again, showing her teeth in a bright smile reminiscent of the one she showed me when I first noticed her earlier today.

“I’m going to join this club. What’s it called again?”

Chitanda told her at that point.

“Are you sure? We haven’t explained what we do at all yet.”

“I’m sure.”

She looked at me and then Chitanda and then smiled once more.

“It feels really friendly over here. Seeing people having a good time with their friends is my favorite thing in the world.”

I don’t remember what I said in response.

The upward slope was finally starting to become fierce, and the number of students that were passing me on it while struggling for oxygen was increasing as well. I hadn’t initially intended on it, but at some point without realizing it, I had slowed my pace to a walk. I guess I was too wrapped up in my thoughts to pay attention to my speed.

A boy who was in my class last year suddenly passed me. If I remembered correctly, he was in 2-C this year. Class C was catching up. I hadn’t even noticed it until now, so perhaps they were closer than I thought.

As I turned around to look for Ibara, I could see a long line of students running up the sloped street, trailing like a procession of hardworking ants. If I continued to walk slowly like the grasshopper I was, I might end up dying a dog’s death by the time the end of the line caught up with me.<sup>[2]</sup> As I turned my head to face the path ahead of me, the top of the hill came directly into sight. I guess I had ended up mostly walking the entire thing after all. I couldn’t say I didn’t predict it might turn out like this, but my efforts to measure the distance between Ibara and I had clearly failed.

Intending to compensate for this this slip-up, I sprinted up the small stretch of gentle slope that remained before the peak. My field of vision opened up, and I felt a cool breeze so slight that it could’ve been simply born from my imagination. I had thought that the slope would instantly enter into a decline the second I reached the top, but I guess I remembered it incorrectly. The street continued on for about 100 meters at a fairly level elevation. There was a miniature shrine located on the side of the road. I didn’t know what god was enshrined there, but I figured I might as well form a prayer in my

heart just in case. A bunch of unanswered questions were still laid out in front of me after all. My piety usually came around in these kinds of troubling situations.

Both sides of the road opened up, and I could tell by the color of their walls that there were several old houses scattered about. A single, brand-new vending machine stood among them and I couldn't help but feel that it looked out of place.

I slowly walked along the level street. Because it was the haven right after the grueling hill, there were many others walking as well. A massive guy arrived as if he had sprinted all the way from the bottom of the hill, and he sharply exhaled as he stood still, hunched over while grabbing his knees. I had to wonder if he had decided he was going to use all his strength on this one hill beforehand or if he was planning on keeping this pace up all the way until the end.

I had no proof, but I decided to assume that Ibara was right behind me. If she were to pass me now, doing so on this flat stretch of road would be nice. Trying to talk to someone while they passed you on a downwards slope seemed like it would prove to be somewhat difficult. In order to have that not happen, I began to move at a crawl.

Ibara, huh?

When Ibara first heard that Ōhinata was joining, I wonder how she reacted.

I remember Satoshi's reaction. He had celebrated in a typically exaggerated fashion over the fact that even one new student had joined. "To think that Hōtarō has actually managed to recruit someone... To be frank, I had never even imagined it to be possible. This is truly a miracle." ...among other things of that nature. And then to Ōhinata he started asking various questions about Kaburaya Middle School, like if anything had changed or if anyone had transferred.

On the other hand, I didn't have the impression that Ibara felt the same way. Before I realized it, they had become best friends. When Ibara had first met Chitanda, they had bonded just as quickly. Maybe it was because, even

though she looked like a harsh person to other people, she wasn't very shy at all. Even though Ōhinata was clearly taller, it was strange how easy it was to tell who the senior was when the two of them were talking.

When did that happen, I wonder.

“Hina-chan, you look really athletic. I mean you even have the tan.”

When Ibara said this, Ōhinata began to look a little embarrassed.

“Some of it's left over from when I went skiing, but I have naturally dark skin as well.”

“I see, so you ski, huh? Nearby?”

“Sometimes, but this year I went to Iwate.”<sup>[3]</sup>

“Not snowboarding?”

“No, I only ski. Do you snowboard?”

“I can't do either.”

I had remembered that absurd conversation.

In my memory, I could see the two of them smiling brightly.

I looked behind me countless times as I continued to walk forwards.

My prediction was correct. As I was about halfway across the flat stretch, Ibara's face popped up from behind the rising slope.

Her arms were pressed close to her sides, and she was staring at her feet. Because her head was hanging down, I couldn't see her eyes through her bangs. As she was probably taking the run up the slope seriously, I could see that her breathing was rough. She had a thin stride, but as the road

leveled out, her arms began to swing more freely. She came running at a set rhythm.

I also raised my arms and abruptly began to run over to her. I matched my pace up with Ibara's and moved alongside her with about a single person-sized amount of space between us.

“Ibara.”

When I called out to her, only her eyes moved to look at me.

Surely enough, she remained silent and started to pick up her pace. I had predicted this would happen from the start, so I instantly got to my point without any hesitation.

“I just need to ask one thing, Ibara. Only one thing. It’s about Ōhinata.”

Even then, Ibara didn’t move to face me in the slightest, however I could hear the single word from within her exhale.

“What.”

I had decided on what I wanted to ask.

“Yesterday, you said you passed Ōhinata in the hallway. You heard she was going to quit the Classics Club.”

Ibara returned a small nod.

“At that moment, Ōhinata said something about Chitanda. Satoshi told me about it; he said Ōhinata mentioned Chitanda was ‘like a Buddha.’ Is this exactly what she said?”

For the first time, Ibara turned her face to look at mine. For a second, I thought it looked like there was a hint of confusion in her pained expression.

She quickly returned to look at her feet as she ran. As if to catch her breath on the flat stretch, she deeply inhaled.

Thinking that me being close would only irritate her, I had purposefully stood somewhat far away from her as the two of us ran, and yet, all of a sudden she closed that distance. In the couple of meters that we ran truly side-by-side, she said a single sentence that forbade interruption.

I slowed down. Ibara continued at her pace and then eventually disappeared as she started to descend the slope.

Her words remained echoing in my ears. Ibara had said this.

“That’s wrong. What Hina-chan said was, ‘Chitanda really does look like a bodhisattva, doesn’t she.’”<sup>[4]</sup>

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pteridium\\_aquininum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pteridium_aquininum)
2. ↑ A reference to Aesop's fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper." The story is about a grasshopper that dies because it is too busy having fun instead of preparing for the winter like the ants in the story were.
3. ↑ Prefecture in the northwest section of Japan's main island.
4. ↑ A bodhisattva is a Buddhist term that refers to someone who has achieved enlightenment through his desire to help others. While similar to a Buddha, a bodhisattva is commonly differentiated by his decision (and sacrifice) to cast aside paradise and return to the earthly realm in order to help others achieve enlightenment as well.

# **Chapter 2 - Friends Need to be Celebrated**

## 1. Present: 5.2km; 14.8km Remaining

I couldn't move the gears in my head as I descended down the slope.

Even though I had worked so diligently during the climb, all of my hard-earned altitude was erased in a flash as I began to run down the hill. If this was truly my own doing, and I was going to have to descend at some point anyways, why had I even climbed it in the first place? I gravely reflected on these actions of mine.

Though the beginning of the uphill slope had started off gently, the descent had instantly become a steep drop reminiscent of even that of

Hiyodorigoe's.<sup>[1]</sup> Both sides of the road had once again become densely packed with various cedars, so my range-of-vision was blocked. Had I been half-assed in my descent, I would have ended up being at an angle similar to that of someone falling down a cliff, so from that I ruled out the idea. If I were to start running haphazardly, there would have been the strong noise from my feet slamming the asphalt. Running like this would only destroy the knees. Keeping all this in mind, I decided to adopt an energetic running style mixed with a naturally small stride. Even though my feet would normally start to hurt if I ended up running too fast, it was a given that running downhill made going fast easier. If I didn't run seriously at any point throughout the entire 20km course, I would end up not returning until the sun had set.

As a result, I focused solely on running down the slope.

And yet at the same time, Ibara's words—that simple sentence she had heard from Ōhinata—continued to spin around in my consciousness.

Like a bodhisattva... Like a bodhisattva...

For some reason, I couldn't help but feel a slight chill when hearing that supposedly auspicious word, but I descended down the slope too fast to think about the meaning behind it.

The downward slope had one large curve in it. The male students that had smoothly passed me before were running with too much gusto and ended up veering outside the curve. They looked as if they were stomping on furnace bellows.<sup>[2]</sup> As they realized their situation, I could hear the students up front frantically slamming the asphalt with their feet.

As for myself, I somewhat hugged the inner curve as I turned the corner, and my field of vision finally opened up once more. I could see there was still some snow remaining on the mountains in the distant Kamikakiuchi range. There was no way to say for sure if a winter breeze had been blowing from that direction, but I suddenly began to feel cold regardless.

Satoshi had gone ahead on his bike, and Ibara had also already left. Before Chitanda caught up to me as well, there were some things I wanted to think through first.

As the slope ended and the street became flat once more, I immediately began to relax my legs.

I didn't remember any point at which Ōhinata and I had had a long, proper discussion face-to-face. Probably because Ōhinata had joined the club, however, there actually was a certain something that I had never really given much thought to up until now. Moreover, if there actually was a problem between Chitanda and Ōhinata, this thing might have been extremely crucial in understanding the situation.

I didn't relish the idea of thinking about what had happened that day. How should I put this... It's not like it caused cold sweat to run down my back per se, but I had a feeling that the anxiety I had then still remains to this day.

I could clearly remember both the date and time of week.

It happened on a Sunday.

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ A famous mountain path located on Tekkai Mountain, one of several mountains in a range to the west of Kōbe City. The path is most commonly known because of the “Droppings of Hiyodorigoe,” an event that took place during the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani in 1184 during which an army was surrounded on the mountain path and forced down its steep cliff. For more information:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Ichi-no-Tani](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ichi-no-Tani) (This is specifically an account from the famous Japanese war epic, *Heike Monogatari*, and as a result, there is not much information on this in English, so sorry I couldn't give you a better source.)
2. ↑ A foot-operated blasting tool used in old Japanese furnaces. For more information: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatara\\_\(furnace\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatara_(furnace))

## 2. Past: 27 Days Ago

It was a lazy morning.

I had stayed up fairly late the previous night. It wasn't like I was doing anything in particular, but because I had no school the next day, I ended up aimlessly reading and watching TV for a long time.

I had sluggishly woken up late in the morning and saw that there was no one in the living room. I knew that my dad was away for work, but I had no idea what my sister was up too. She might be somewhere in the house, or she might be somewhere outside of Japan. As I unabashedly let out a big yawn, I plopped down onto the sofa.

The remote control was sitting on the low table in front of me. I figured I'd at least turn it on and see what was showing, but I couldn't find anything very interesting, even after changing the channel a couple times. I was still drowsy so the television actually ended up being a little annoying. I had brought the paperback I was reading from my room, so I sank into the couch and opened the pages.

Before reading even a single line, I looked up from the print and muttered to myself.

“It’s kind of dark.”

The curtains were closed. Naturally I would have preferred them to be open, but because I was so comfortably deep in the couch, getting up would be too troublesome. I put the book aside and reached for the remote once more. On top of the table was an ashtray and a lucky cat figure.<sup>[1]</sup>

This lucky cat was a strange little thing. I couldn't tell if it was poorly made or if it was purposely designed like this, but the cat almost looked like it

was grinning at you. It was holding a large coin like any other lucky cat would, except instead of the usual assortment of bold phrases that might be written on it, like “great happiness,” “fantastic fortune,” or “exceeding wealth,” it only contained a single word, “lucky.”<sup>[2]</sup> Of course, the only person who would have bought something this half-assed was my sister, but even then, I wondered where she could have possibly bought it.

The inside was hollow, and its arm was spring-loaded so you could move it in an up-and-down beckoning motion. My sister had made some alterations to add onto that feature. She tried making it so that it would shoot an infrared beam. Even though you couldn’t see it in the first place, she had still purposely rigged it so that the beam would specifically come from the eyes.

“If a cat’s going to shoot lasers, then it has to be from the eyes.”

When she told me this, I was speechless, but thinking about it more rationally it’s not like it was all that strange. After all, the remote also used infrared beams. She had essentially just put a remote inside the lucky cat.

Its receiver was connected to the fluorescent light on the ceiling. When you moved its arm to invite good fortune, an infrared beam would fly from its eyes and either illuminate or darken the room. As a result, you could take the string off the ceiling lamp and rejoice over the newly spacious surroundings. Except now, as you had to constantly keep the lucky cat there instead of the string, it continued to get in the way regardless. At least have the common decency to use a cat that was actually lovable.

The lucky cat currently sat on the other end of the table, so I reached towards it. That was the reason I even picked up the remote in the first place. In lieu of a stick, I used it to try and move the lucky cat’s arm. It looked like I should have been able to reach it, but I couldn’t no matter how hard I tried. Had I lifted myself a bit I would have probably been able to reach it, but at that point I might as well be standing. As I tried my hardest to use only my arms while avoiding moving the rest of my body like the plague, a voice called out from behind me.

“Are you finally trying to fully master the art of laziness or something?”

The road to fully mastering energy-preservation was endless; I haven't yet even seen the heights of its perfection. I turned around and saw my sister. It looked like she had taken an afternoon bath because of the bath towel tightly wrapped around the top of her head. She walked into the kitchen and asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then pour me some as well while you're at it."

She wasn't going to do it herself? Then why did she even go to the kitchen in the first place?

Because I had gotten so in the mood for coffee, all of the determination and effort that I had previously put into not standing up instantly fizzled away. I slapped my knees to give me the energy I needed to stand up and then went over to the kitchen to start boiling some water. My sister had her back to me as she stared into the refrigerator and eventually found a sandwich to eat. I had no idea why there was a sandwich in the fridge to begin with. Over the years, I had seen all sorts of things being cooled in that fridge, from bee larvae tsukudani to kangaroo burgers.<sup>[3]</sup> Compared to those, at least a sandwich wasn't too far removed from normalcy.

"Either dry your hair or eat your food. Don't do both."

I said this bitterly towards her as she still had the towel wrapped around her head, but she ignored me. She took out a single egg and spun it in the sink like a top. The egg quickly lost its balance and toppled over.

"Oh come on, it's raw?"

As she sighed, I figured she must have mistaken the raw egg for a hard-boiled one. It was true that I had made some the evening before, but I ended up eating them myself later that night. I thought it was strange that she even knew I made some in the first place, but who knows. Maybe she saw something like the leftover dishes after I had finished.

Nothing else in fridge must have stood out. She closed the door by pushing it with her lower back and then asked a question from behind me as I was readying some coffee cups.

“Oh yeah, you’re cold’s gone now, isn’t it.”

“My cold?”

“Wasn’t it pretty bad?”

I thought for a little bit and then responded.

“When was this?”

It was true; I had indeed caught a cold this month.

One day, Chitanda had contacted me, asking me for my help because the spring festival was understaffed. A lot of stuff happened, but long story short, I left to go help them and ended up having a pretty strange day. It was hard for even me to believe that all of that had happened within the span of a single day. I could still vividly recall that pretty scene, surrounded on all sides by the early-blooming cherry blossoms.

It was particularly chilly then, especially after the sun had set. Even though I had been saying it was cold, Chitanda continued to insist that it wasn’t because it was already spring at that point. I’m not saying I caught it because of that, but the very next day, I remained cooped up in my bed. Until my sister had returned later that night, I had been the only one in the house, so all of the chills, fevers, and hunger added up to make me a very miserable sight.

My sister was probably talking about that, but that had happened during spring break. I had all but recovered in around two days, so when I went to the opening ceremony I was completely normal.

“That was a month ago.”

“Really? To think already a month has passed. They grow up so fast.”

As she feigned ignorance, she lightly tapped my head. She started to toss around my hair and then said, “Fix your beadhead.”

I’ll do it later.

Someone had so graciously made coffee for her and yet she didn’t even so much as taste it. She suddenly said, “Oh, it’s time,” and returned to her room. I started to read the book I had left on the sofa, but after thirty minutes had passed, she came out of her room again.

“Hey, you aren’t going out today either, right?”

I didn’t have any plans, but I wasn’t too happy with how she said ‘either.’ I answered without looking away from the book.

“I’m not thinking of doing anything.”

“I wonder how much distance you’ve covered throughout your entire lifetime.”

“Siblings need to balance each other out.”

After I said this, she replied in a condescending tone.

“So you’re saying you’ve been resting up on my behalf. Aren’t you a kind one.”

My not leaving the house only compensated for her extravagant use of gasoline, airplane fuel, and other travel costs. As an energy-saving advocate, this was my apology to human civilization for the actions of my idiot sister.

“What a pitiful child.”

She had said something so cruel.

“Well at any rate, continue doing nothing until 2:30.”

“You want me to watch the house?”

“Yeah. If no one comes, you’re free to do whatever.”

I didn’t have any plans to go out in the first place, but just being told this made me feel uncomfortably restricted. As I continued reading the book, I spoke.

“Get me something.”

It looked like she was already putting her shoes on. Her voice rang from the house entrance.

“Then I’ll buy you some candles. You like those, right?”

Since when?

Because she had mentioned the candles, however, I knew that she hadn’t forgotten what today was. It didn’t look like she was intending on celebrating it, though...

Surely enough, when I was a kid, I loved to blow out the candles on cakes.

Today was my birthday.

What could she have possibly meant by telling me to watch the house until 2:30? I put my book aside part-way, and threw myself face down on the sofa to think. It was my sister. She was probably planning something unnecessary. She had told me to wait because something was probably coming, but what was it?

Having something celebratory arrive while I was here would be wonderfully considerate of her. Because it would be such a decent thing for her to do, I consequently knew that that wasn’t going to be the case. Tomoe Oreki wasn’t the kind of person who did things like that, and even if I was wrong, setting up the delivery time for 2:30 in the afternoon would be far too half-assed for her.

She had told me, “If no one comes, you’re free to do whatever.” That meant that most likely someone would be coming rather than something. Someone who would come on my birthday... Actually, it could be incorrect to assume my birthday played into it at all. It could simply be someone like a bill collector or neighborhood information distributor that was coming. Maybe it was wrong of me to assume that she was setting this all up. Maybe I’d been suspecting her too much.

Even as I said this to myself, however, I couldn’t get rid of the bad premonition lingering in my head. Because I was overly conscious of the time, it was only natural that the second hand seemed to move far too slowly.

I had lost the desire to eat, so I continued to wait without making myself lunch. I finally finished the book I had been reading, but I didn’t have enough time to get into a second one. I switched on the television and turned to a travel program. This was how I passed the time, watching complete strangers enjoying delicious-looking food in a first-class inn.

Thinking back on it, the way she had specifically stated “if they don’t come” meant that it didn’t necessarily mean that they were going to come at 2:30. She wasn’t indicating an arrival time, but rather an arrival period. For example, had I told Satoshi, using the same exact phrasing, “If I don’t come by 2:30, do whatever you want,” I would be saying something along the lines of, “I should actually be arriving earlier, but there’s a possibility that I’ll be late. If I’m not there by 2:30, just assume I won’t be coming.”

That was why, when I heard the doorbell chime at around 5 minutes to 2:00, I assumed that it wasn’t related to the guest that my sister was having me wait for. ‘I wonder if it’s a demon. Perhaps it’s a snake.’<sup>[4]</sup> For some reason, that feeling started to well up inside of me. I put on a pair of slippers and stepped down into the entrance area, taking a peek through the door’s peephole.

It wasn’t a demon, nor was it a snake. Neither was it a bill collector or a neighborhood information distributor.

“Ah, shit. So that’s what it was.”

It slipped from my mouth before I realized it.

Four individuals stood outside: Satoshi, Chitanda, Ibara, and Ōhinata.

As if sensing my presence, Satoshi returned my gaze through the peephole. He showed me a revolting smile and then held up his hand. For all of the various problems she had caused me, there was one thing I was thankful to my sister for.

She had told me to fix my bedhead ahead of time.

There was no helping it. It wasn't like I could send them away.

At any rate, I took them to the living room and had them sit around the low table. Chitanda and Ōhinata sat on the sofa while Satoshi and Ibara sat on floor cushions.

Satoshi wore a polo shirt and cargo pants. Ibara wore a gray parka and shorts. Chitanda had on a knitted peach-colored sweater and a skirt that reached below her knees. Ōhinata wore a graphic tee and jeans. Staring at this unfamiliarly dressed ensemble around me, I started to grumble.

“Gentlemen, what on earth is this goose before me?”<sup>[5]</sup>

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Even as Ibara sat with such well-mannered form, her speech remained unsurprisingly foul. Neglecting Ōhinata as she responded with, “Oh, that’s Sakutarō,” Satoshi started to laugh.

“Are you perhaps wondering what foul wind could have possibly blown us your way?”

I nodded wordlessly.

There was no doubt that they came to celebrate my birthday. After all, Ōhinata was carrying a box tied with a ribbon and featuring the logo of a

cake shop that even I knew on the side, so I couldn't exactly ask them why they had come.

The thing was, however, Satoshi and I had known each other for three years now and not once had we celebrated each other's birthday. Even had he decided to do this as some kind of joke, there's no way he'd think to bring the rest of the Classics Club. We just weren't that kind of group.

Sure we had come together once, purely on a collective whim, to write the anthology. But we weren't so close as to randomly hang out at someone's house to kill time. That's what I had thought, and I was pretty sure the other members felt the same way. As if to suddenly close that distance, something perplexing ended up happening.

"I thought that we'd be a bother if we came so suddenly, but..."

Chitanda's words were full of consideration. I wasn't really bothered, but rather...

"I was surprised."

"I figured you'd be."

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm equally as surprised. Talking about it is one thing, but I never imagined this would actually happen in reality."

There were two things I wanted to ask.

"How did you guys know about today, and whose idea was it to come here?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

Chitanda tilted her head as if trying to decide where to start.

"When Ōhinata asked us if we had ever done something like a party with the entire club, I told her about the culture festival after-party, but then she

asked me if we had done anything aside from that, and I told her that I couldn't think of anything else really, so she..."

It did look like it was shaping up to be a long story. At that moment, however, Ibara cut in and swiftly said, "When I mentioned that your birthday was coming up, Ōhinata said that we should throw you a birthday party."

"You knew when my birthday was?"

"Only that it was in April. That's the kind of thing you'd normally remember about someone in your class."

"I wouldn't."

"That's because you're an inconsiderate human being."

Thinking about it, Ibara has had plenty of chances to learn my birthday up until now. We had been in the same class all throughout elementary and middle school, and especially in elementary school, they often had those "Who has a birthday this month?" posters. If she had remembered my birthday was in April, it'd be easy for her to check the old class anthologies to find my actual birthday.

Without the motive, however, she wouldn't have done it. In other words, the culprit was Ōhinata.

"So you were the one that came up with it, huh?"

I stared holes into Ōhinata. Her eyes were darting around the living room, but when they finally met mine, she smiled without a hint of trepidation.

"Friends need to be celebrated."

That motto's correctness aside, there were ways to celebrate that involved being alone and undisturbed.

"And there's no one that could be in a bad mood after having a party thrown for them."

There wasn't a trace of self-doubt in her. And having said that, she planned on making me one of those happy individuals. Yay.

Unfortunately for her however, not a single person had said "Happy Birthday" to me yet.

"That aside, I'm surprised everyone is actually here."

No matter how hard Ōhinata might've tried to push the idea of having a party, it was almost unbelievable that everyone would have gone along with it. Chitanda might have simply wanted to make the new recruit happy, but I couldn't for the life of me imagine a scenario in which Ibara agreed. As if hearing what I was thinking, the girl in question spoke bluntly.

"I'm going to be watching a movie in the evening, so this is just to kill some time before then. Two hours is all I'll spare for your celebration."

Are you a mind-reader?

"We bought drinks so go get some cups."

You should have bought paper cups too then... I saw Satoshi had brought a paper bag full of snacks. Instead of eating them from the bag, it would probably best if I brought out a tray to stick them on. If I remembered correctly, the wooden tray was in the cupboard. Also, if there was a cake in Ōhinata's box, then I should pull out a knife and some plates for later. I wonder if we had enough plates to go around. Of course we'll need spoons as well. Having forks might also not be a bad idea.

As I stood up from my chair and went to the kitchen to search for this and that, a doubt suddenly crossed my mind.

If this was a birthday celebration, then I had the main role.

And yet, why was I the only one up and moving around?

When I brought the utensils and dishes back to the living room, I noticed that the ashtray, the book I had finished reading, and the television remote had all been cleaned up and placed on top of the sideboard. Only the lucky cat had remained, still enshrined in its corner of the table, continuing to expose its unlovable grin.

The snacks that Satoshi had bought turned out to be some fairly fashionable biscuits.<sup>[6]</sup> Chitanda had mentioned, “They look like they’d be good with jam,” so I also prepared a smaller plate in addition to the larger one for the snacks and brought out some summer mandarin jam from the refrigerator. Upon seeing the jar, Ōhinata exclaimed with joy.

“Oh! That’s ‘MilleFleur’ jam isn’t it!”

Looking at the label, I could see the word “MilleFleur” written on it. Had I not heard the correct way to say it, I probably would have pronounced it something like “Mile Flew.” Making sure I didn’t reveal this thought of mine, I responded, “Yeah,” with my chest puffed out.

“To think you would pull out something like ‘MilleFleur’ so casually, what a classy upperclassman you are, jeez.”

This smiling Ōhinata was a good, honest girl, but there also happened to be a not-so-honest girl in the vicinity. Clearly suspicious, Ibara started to question me.

“Do you even know what that is?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Then why were you acting like it?!”

“I wanted to look cool. My bad.”

I apologized and asked Ōhinata from the start.

“What is it?”

After learning the truth about my childish vanity, Ōhinata looked at me with unbelievably cold eyes, but she recovered quickly enough and picked up the jar of jam.

“It’s a specialty jam shop. It’s really well-known. I once bought one myself a while back, and, as expected, the taste befits its high price.”

“So it’s expensive, huh?”

I muttered without thinking as I looked at the jar.

“Well, not really. Expensive as jams go, at least.”

I couldn’t imagine this tanned, lightly-dressed Ōhinata doing something like going to a specialty shop to buy jam. I knew it was wrong of me to judge a book by its cover, but still...

“I wonder if it’s a bit of a waste to eat good jam like this with simple biscuits.”

As Satoshi voiced his concerns, however, Chitanda responded with a small smile.

“It should be fine, right?”

And with that, it became fine.

Ōhinata mentioned that she had brought a lighter, so I could only assume it was to be used in lighting birthday candles for the cake. The preparations were ready, but cake would probably happen a little later on.

The drink that Ibara had prepared was carbonated white peach juice that not only resembled champagne, but came in a similar bottle as well.

“Now come on Hōtarō, certainly you have something a little more sophisticated than these.”

Spurred into the kitchen once more by Satoshi’s comment, I pulled out several unused glasses intended for guest-use that hadn’t even been taken

out of the box they initially came in. They were short and had no stem. The design etched into it shined as if it were crystal.

“What were these called again?”

Ibara asked this while tilting her head in thought.

“It’s a cup,” I told her, but she wasn’t listening, as per usual.

“It’s not a tumbler glass, nor is it a goblet...”

“Is it a Kiriko glass?”<sup>[7]</sup>

Ōhinata had proposed this, but it appeared like that wasn’t the case.

“That’s just a decorative variety. No, that’s not it, what was this shape of glass called again?”

“It said whiskey glass on the box.”

A slight show of vexation appeared on Ibara’s face.

I had personally thought that glasses with long stems would be more fitting, but it couldn’t be helped that there weren’t any in the house. There actually might’ve been some laying around, but if that was the case, I didn’t know where they were. To make matters worse, I could only find four whisky glasses, which meant...

“Wait, is Oreki-san the only person with a normal cup?”

...something like that ended up happening. No matter how you looked at it, this was a terrible way to treat today’s main character.

As the juice was passed around, Ōhinata spoke.

“Well then, someone should propose a toast.”

Satoshi and Ibara exchanged glances with each other and then looked over towards Chitanda, almost as if they had planned on doing so ahead of time.

Perhaps aware that she would be the one chosen, Chitanda picked up the glass without looking like she intended on refusing.

Wearing an ambiguous smile that suggested she had no idea how to go about this, Chitanda began her speech.

“Umm, today is Oreki-san’s birthday, so let’s celebrate it. I wish I could’ve given you a present, but because this was on such short notice, I have to apologize for not being able to bring one.”

“Your presence is present enough.”

The one who interjected with this statement wasn’t me. It was Satoshi. Hearing him fabricate people’s feelings for them was troubling.

“Hearing that makes me feel better.”

And hearing her feel better after hearing that fabrication was troubling as well.

“Out of all of us, you were the quickest to turn 17. So, umm... congratulations. Cheers.”

We held up the four whiskey glasses and one cup and lightly tapped them together. Although the birthday was supposedly being thrown for my sake, Ōhinata seemed to be the one who was exceptionally happy.

It was at this point that one of my worries had disappeared.

It wasn’t like I had specifically wanted to be told congratulations or anything, but rather, I was anxious that they might have only planned on eating and drinking, returning home immediately after. Now that they had completed the toast, my birthday had been properly after all.

There was one other thing that I couldn’t say didn’t bug me, however.

It was the lucky cat.

*Why was it still on the table?* While I was getting the plates and silverware, they had cleaned up the table for me. They had put everything that was on it onto the nearby sideboard, and yet, only the lucky cat had remained.

I wonder if it was a coincidence. No, out of everything on the table, that was easily the thing most likely to get in the way. Even though they were planning on spreading the food around the table, they had to do so now while specifically avoiding the lucky cat. Perhaps someone had been poking around at it to figure out why it had been sitting there?

I had already made a mistake. To think I had so thoughtlessly brought out this amazing summer mandarin jam without knowing just how truly impressive it actually was. Fortunately the conversation veered away from that at least.

I'd have to be careful from now on.

Satoshi's biscuits were just the slightest bit salty, and as a result, the jam worked really well with it. I'd always thought that I preferred sweet things, but the tartness of the summer mandarin jam proved to be quite refreshing; it was—how should I put this—something like comparing the épée to the foil.<sup>[8]</sup>

“Fukube-senpai, you've come here to hang out before, right?”

As Ōhinata asked this, Satoshi turned to me.

“I don't think so.”

“Nope.”

“I've been nearby before, but it was just us meeting up at some park in the area. I think I was borrowing something from him.”

I twisted my head. Just like he said, I had made Satoshi wait in a nearby park a while back while I went there from my house. However...

“Are you sure? I have a vague recollection that you were actually returning something.”

It had only been two years or so and already I couldn’t remember it very well. Of course this vague memory wasn’t going to prove very trustworthy, but I couldn’t sit still while our views were diverging. Agreeing with that, Ōhinata then said, “Perhaps you came two times, once to borrow something and then once to return it.”

Of course, what a reasonable idea.

“Except you never once went all the way to his house, right?”

“I don’t think going to his house would impact our being able to do what we needed to do.”

Ōhinata muttered a dubious sound and brought the whiskey glass to her lips.

“That’s pretty straightforward of you. If it were me, I’d say something like ‘I’d only be a nuisance,’ but I guess it’s because you’re guys.”

Satoshi tilted his head in response.

“I wonder if that’s the case. I’m the type that keeps light acquaintance and is satisfied by that, so those kinds of general conceptions might not apply to me.”<sup>[9]</sup>

“Which kinds?”

“Every kind.”

I could agree with that.

“I see, I guess people like that exist.”

Ōhinata was deep in thought. Speaking as a guy, I personally didn’t think that Satoshi and I preferred ‘light acquaintance’ to any special degree. It was probably normal. If I had to name it, although Ōhinata was particularly

tomboyish, it's possible that there really weren't any guys that could talk about these kinds of things easily.

Ōhinata tossed a biscuit into her mouth, and then raised her head to ask another question.

"Can I ask a question? What kind of room do you have?"

My room, huh? I started to brace myself.

"It's pretty normal. There's a bed, a desk, and a bookshelf."

"Isn't it decorated with anything?"

I don't think I mentioned anything like that, but I'm sure there was at least something sticking on the wall. As I quietly tried to remember if there was, Ibara suddenly started saying some unnecessary things while petting the lucky cat's head.

"You should just stop there, Hina-chan. Even this guy is entitled to his privacy."

She then turned towards me and flashed a cold smile.

"Besides, it's a guy's room, so I'm sure you can already imagine what kinds of things are laying around."

I wasn't exactly sure what Ibara was imagining, but there was nothing in it that could justify the grin full of contempt directed at me. ...Well, there wasn't much at least.

"I can't really imagine anything."

As Ōhinata muttered this, Satoshi responded with a smile.

"Things like textbooks."

I also contributed.

“Reference books as well.”

“Also dictionaries, right?”

“Of course.”

Ibara had an amazed look on her face.

“Are you guys dumb or what?”

The number of biscuits on the snack dish in front of us became progressively fewer. I hadn’t actually thought that they would all be eaten, but if they were, the cake would naturally come next. As I reached for another one, it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn’t eaten anything for lunch. I then had a thought.

“By the way, did you guys have lunch?”

The responses were varied.

Chitanda responded, “A light one.”

Ōhinata responded, “I did.”

Ibara responded, “I had a late breakfast, so not yet.”

Satoshi responded, “I haven’t.”

As I was at the same time today’s main character and host, it was probably my job to suggest something.

“If that’s the case, we can get some pizza.”

“Eh?! But I’d feel terrible if you treated us.”

Chitanda was trying to be thoughtful, but there was no way in hell I was going to treat them.

“We’d obviously split the tab.”

“O... oh, that makes sense.”

At that moment, Satoshi also interjected.

“I agree, at first I was also thinking it might be nice to get pizza. After all, it’d be a perfect idea if there were a lot of people going to be eating. But I forgot about something.”

“Was the pizza place closed?”

“If the pizza place was closed on Saturday would they ever get any business? No, it was, well...”

He glanced at Ibara. Compared to the hesitating Satoshi, Ibara spoke as bluntly as she always had.

“I can’t do cheese. Sorry.”

“...Oh, I see. I didn’t know.”

“I’d be more surprised if you did know my preferences.”

There was occasionally cheese in the school lunches, so It wouldn’t be too strange if I did know, and yet, even then, I didn’t. She told me this earlier, but I guess I was pretty inconsiderate.

“You’re also bad with cheese?”

As Ōhinata thrusted a magnificent amount of jam onto the biscuit and then tossed it into her mouth in a similarly magnificent fashion, she suddenly jerked her body forward in curiosity.

“Yeah, a little bit. It’s not like I’m allergic to it, but I just can’t seem to eat it.”

“Is it the taste?”

“It’s probably how it smells. If it’s something like chilled, thin-sliced cheese, it doesn’t really smell, so that’s fine, but I can’t bring myself to

even get near it if it's cooked. You also don't like it, Hina-chan?"

Upon hearing this, Ōhinata flashed a huge smile.

"This is just something a friend told me, but people should really throw away rotten mandarin oranges and milk."

I wonder if Ōhinata had a habit of dragging her friends into the mix when she couldn't think of a good way to word something. As expected, Ibara returned a forced smile.

"It's be nice to have that kind of resolution, but it still kind of bugs me that that it's become something like a weak point of mine. I'll have to get used to it by the time I become an adult."

If Ibara were to become a hermit in the Pyrenees Mountains and force herself to eat cheese three times every day, I'm sure she would overcome it somehow.<sup>[10]</sup> She might even have a cheese-related epiphany on the way down. The legends surrounding Ibara Dairy Manufacturers and how they took the world of cheese production by storm would begin then and there. Maybe.

If she simply didn't like the taste, then it would be fine as long as she didn't eat it, but as the problem was her not liking the smell, even ordering the pizza would be problematic. Judging by all the pizza shop fliers that were constantly shoved in our mailbox, it's possible that there were pizzas that didn't use cheese, but I didn't necessarily want pizza so bad that I would beg for that possibility. Besides, the biscuits were surprisingly filling.

"Anyways, Oreki-senpai, you really don't know anything at all about Ibara-senpai, do you. Even though you were in elementary school together?"

"Pretty much."

"Why're you bragging about it?" cut in Ibara.

That's not what I had intended.

Ōhinata, who had been speedily reaching for the snack plate, suddenly stopped. She started to eye up Ibara with a dubious expression.

“Could that mean what I think it means? Have you never been to this house before either, Ibara-senpai?”

“No way in hell. Just because we were in the same school district doesn’t mean that our houses were close.”

“Really? Wait, but...”

Ōhinata looked at Chitanda sitting next to her on the sofa, and then at Satoshi and Ibara. She tilted her head somewhat in confusion.

“We all arrived here without getting even a little lost. I thought one of us had been here before.”

It felt like time had briefly stopped.

So it had come to this.

It had moved from a conversation about my room, and hadn’t even come close to being a discussion about the meaning behind the lucky cat. To think it would end up going in that direction after I had brought up something like getting pizza, it was completely unexpected.

Because I didn’t know something like Ibara’s food preferences, that meant there wasn’t a very strong bond between the two of us, so consequently, she mostly likely had never been to my house before, huh? I see; it did follow logically. This meant, however, that I had already dug my own grave.

Was it still possible for me to change the subject?

No, it was probably too late for that. The conversation had already reached the point of no return. If I desperately tried to interrupt the flow of the conversation, they would only wonder why I was trying to change the topic and become more unnecessarily curious as a result. Ōhinata’s question was

dangerously close to revealing *the secret that the lucky cat was hinting at*. However, things were still only ‘close.’ It wasn’t a direct hit yet.

It was painful, but the only thing I could do was retreat from the conversation while praying for them to quickly start talking about something else on their own.

If only she understood this as well.

Ibara looked at Satoshi.

“That’s, well, you know. Fuku-chan showed us through the streets, right?”

Satoshi showed a look of confusion, and responded, “I was only remembering the map. This neighborhood is a bit confusing, but I’m pretty skilled when it comes to memorizing things. As for where I got the map, though...”

“I prepared it,” interjected Chitanda.

“That’s right. I got it from Chitanda.”

He pulled out the map from his pocket to show everyone. It wasn’t one of those extremely fancy maps that showed a lot of details about all the residents, but rather a simple one of the district used by the city. My house’s location was marked on it with a red pen.

“Oh, that’s right. That’s because Chi-chan’s been here once before.”

Upon hearing that, Chitanda stiffened her body.

“Remember? That thing last year. When Irisu-senpai came to us over summer break to ask us for our opinions on her video, Chitanda came here to come get him, didn’t she?”

“Ah, no, that was...”

She had a good memory. Certainly enough, Chitanda had come to get me after hearing from Satoshi that I was planning on skipping it, however that time...

“I had gotten close thanks to Fukube-san’s directions, but I never actually ended up finding the house.”

I had received a phone call that day: “I came to get you, but I seem to have become lost, so please come and get me.” I had quickly managed to find her, but it’s like she even saw the front of the house that day.

“I knew the address, however, so as long as I had a map, I’d be able to find it.”

“So that’s all it was.”

Ōhinata started to smile brightly again as if she were satisfied by that explanation.

“You’d be able to figure it out if you knew the address, wouldn’t you. For example, let’s see... like something like that.”

As she said that, her face began to darken.

“Something? What would something be, exactly?”

It seemed this first-year was hung up on something strange. There wasn’t a single similarity between the two, but somehow, seeing Ōhinata and Chitanda lined up like that on the couch reminded me of a patch of roots.

“Oh! New Year’s cards!”

As Ōhinata said this, her face instantly lighting up, Satoshi responded with an unnecessary comment.

“Even so, Hōtarō doesn’t do tiring things like that.”

That was incorrect. I had actually tried to send some in the past, but I ran into the same problem. I didn’t know any of their addresses.

“Is that so?”

Temporarily forgetting her attempts at politeness, she looked at me with a distrusting expression.

“It’s obvious people should send New Year’s cards to their friends at least.”

“It’s fine. We all saw each other in person at the end of the year anyways. New Year’s cards are just a substitute for the people you aren’t going to be able to see.”

“That might be the case, but wasn’t the only reason we were able to greet Oreki-san because I had called him on the phone myself?” said Chitanda without realizing it.

Satoshi put the biscuit he was gnawing at back down and started to smile.

“Ah, this New Year’s was really interesting, wasn’t it? After all, Mayaka even...” Satoshi stopped as he felt Ibara’s piercing glare. Even though it probably wasn’t like she had been forced to do it, Ibara’s part-time job as a miko at the shrine had embarrassed her to no end.<sup>[11]</sup> Of course, Ōhinata had no idea what they were talking about.

“What about Ibara-senpai?”

“Never mind that. We were talking about Oreki’s address, right?”

She forcefully returned the conversation to its previous track. I might’ve been able to bury the subject for good had I continued to talk about what had happened over New Year’s, but if I did do that, Ibara would certainly despise me. That didn’t sound like a very appealing outcome either.

As I stressed over this, Ibara suddenly had a blank look on her face that seemed to wonder why she hadn’t realized something so simple up to this point.

“What about the graduate anthology? If I remember correctly, it’s written there.”

“Oh, I see. That makes a lot of sense,” nodded Ōhinata, and then she tilted her head once more.

“But Chitanda-senpai didn’t go to Kaburaya Middle School.”

“No, what she said was correct.”

Chitanda had finally said it.

“Oreki-san had a friend from middle school named Sōda-san. I’ve been to Sōda-san’s house plenty of times now, so I asked him if I could see the graduate anthology.”

With this, Ibara and Satoshi raised their voices at the same time.

“So that’s what it was. You should’ve told us.”

“Is that so? You should’ve told us.”

As she was scolded by these two, Chitanda uncharacteristically shrunk back, looking ashamed.

“I thought about asking you two, but I kept passing you by, and I had forgotten all about it in the clubroom… And then all of a sudden, I had business to take care of at Sōda-san’s house.”

“Now that I think about it, Sōda was in our class, wasn’t he? Although, he doesn’t really strike me as the type of guy that would be connected with Oreki.”

Certainly, it wasn’t anything exactly like that. Even though he was the type to space out a lot, he was really good at soccer. There was a long history of lending and borrowing books between the two of us.

“Aren’t his parents kind of famous?”

“They’re on the city council. They don’t act self-important at all, though.”

Puffing out his cheeks for show, Satoshi shook his head in an exaggerated manner.

“That’s Chitanda-san for you. I knew you were incredible, but to think you’d even know one of Hōtarō’s middle school friends. You truly inspire awe.”

“No, it really was just a coincidence.”

“Perhaps you have already heard the rumors surrounding my dark and mysterious past as well.”

As if to get back at Satoshi for ignoring her, Chitanda gracefully placed the palms of her hands on top of her thighs and showed a smile.

“I see. For example, something like a rumor concerning how you began to sing a song after forgetting to turn the mic switch off in the broadcasting room? Nope, I haven’t heard anything like that.”

After a couple seconds, Ibara let out a laugh.

“Hahaha, that’s right! Something like that happened.”

That had happened in the fall of our third year in middle school. It was both an amusing and a sorrowful tale.

“Chi-chan, I’m surprised you know so much about that kind of stuff. I didn’t even remember that until you mentioned it.”

Satoshi, who had repeatedly prodded at the grove to be greeted by a snake, sat without saying a single word, his face still frozen in its previously teasing smile.<sup>[12]</sup> Satoshi was able to tolerate the vast majority of the jokes aimed at him, but as expected, it seemed that incident remained his sole Achilles heel.

I apologized to Satoshi on the inside. After all, the one who told Chitanda about this particular episode was me.

That said, even I didn't have the callous heart necessary to finish him off by telling Chitanda that what he in fact sang at that moment was some terrible attempt at hip-hop.

However, as Chitanda humbly continued to deny Ibara's praise, I found it strange that Ōhinata, on the other hand, sat there with her eyes wide-open in shock, her mouth gaping.

As the time for cake quickly approached, I started cleaning up the snack tray and smaller plates for the jam. After I completed my round-trip between the living room and kitchen, only the lucky cat remained on the table. It was only natural that some jam would be spilled no matter how carefully everyone ate, so I brought a kitchen cloth. As I was wiping, I casually muttered, "This is in the way, isn't it," and proceeded to move the lucky cat to the side board.

I felt like sighing in relief. As long as I could remove that from the table, I could rest easy. The danger had finally passed by.

I brought out a plate for the cake as well as a knife and forks. The grape juice probably wouldn't go with the cake very well. I was told that something like coffee or café au lait would work nicely, so I went to the kitchen once more and waited there for the water to boil.<sup>[13]</sup>

One cannot see the kinds of faces they naturally make, so as a result, I had no way of knowing whether or not I had a good poker-face. I didn't think that mine was very easy to read. When Satoshi and Ibara, and especially Ōhinata, had been talking about my address, I wondered if they had noticed me feeling like I was walking on dangerously thin ice.

I had already prepared the coffee cups. Instant coffee wasn't exactly the most suitable way with which to treat a respected guest of honor, but as it was their fault for coming so suddenly, I couldn't be bothered. I continued to watch the silent kettle, waiting for it to whistle. In my experience, the human gaze undeniably inhibited the heating of water. As long as I continued to watch the kettle, the water inside would never boil. If I were to

avert my eyes for even a second, that would be the instant, without fail, at which the kettle would start to whistle. Of course, from an energy-conserving standpoint, it would be best to simply look away then, but there wasn't anything else to look at.

"Oreki-san, the wipe cloth."

As I turned around, I saw Chitanda holding the kitchen cloth.

"Oh, can you put it over there on the edge of the sink for me?"

I returned to watch the kettle. I assumed Chitanda was still there, so I started talking.

"You stayed silent about it, huh."

Following a short silence, I heard a response that seemed like it would be drowned out by the noise coming from the ventilation fan.

"Yes. ...I suppose the chance slipped me by."

Previously, Chitanda said that she had learned my address by checking the graduate anthology from my middle school. That she had been told it by a friend of mine, Sōda. It was certainly true that I had had a classmate named Sōda. I had no idea what high school he had gone to after that, but it was definitely not Kamiyama High School. It was most likely true that Chitanda had gotten Sōda to show her the anthology. After all, what she said sounded pretty accurate, and Chitanda wasn't very good at ad-lib, period.

However, it wasn't the entire truth.

Satoshi had never been to my house before. Of course, Ibara was the same.

That last summer break, Chitanda had managed to get near my house but didn't make it all the way was also not a lie.

However, no one said anything about her coming only once. Chitanda had previously come to this house before. Chitanda had handed a map to

Satoshi, but even had she not done that, she would have been easily able to find her way through these streets herself.

I heard a slightly dissatisfied voice.

“But you ended up not saying anything either.”

“I suppose the chance slipped me by.”

It was something that had happened this month.

The festival that Chitanda had participated in was running low on participants, and because the clothing would fit me, I had been roped in to help out. The festival had ended without an hitch, but it was cold that day. I ended up catching a cold.

Of course Chitanda, being the one that enlisted my help, couldn't sit still after hearing I was bedridden. When she had called my house in the morning and heard about my situation from my sister, she immediately came over to visit. Her get-well gift was summer mandarin jam. She told me that mixing a little bit with black tea was good for you when you had a cold. I didn't really drink black tea, however, so afterwards I got a small bowl and simply licked it like that.

It felt awkward to have Chitanda come into my room, so I put up with the cold and met with her in the living room. When you're in a lot of pain, it really isn't easy to receive a guest. Chitanda understood this of course and returned home several minutes after handing me the get-well jam. It was only for a little while, sure, but she had come regardless.

“This is difficult... I feel bad for Mayaka-san and the others, but they won't know if we don't say anything.”

I didn't respond as I continued to watch the kettle.

That wasn't how it worked at all, so I became nervous.

She said that they wouldn't know as long as we didn't tell them, but in reality, *Chitanda was simply going to be using her actions rather than her*

*words to declare that she had come to this living room before.*

The party was beginning to near its climax. It would soon be time for the cake to make its grand entrance. At that moment, some candles would be stuck into it and be thusly lit. Ōhinata had brought the lighter.

Chitanda had probably thought of the arrangements at this point. It'd be more atmospheric if all the lights were to be turned off while the candles were lit. That was her plan, right?

That's why the lucky cat remained on the table.

Even though the ashtray, the paperback, and the television remote had all been moved to the side board, *only the lucky cat remained. That was something that only someone who knew about its ability to turn off the overhead light would do.* In other words, *it would point out the single person among all four of them who had come to this house once before.*

In reality, when Chitanda had come to this living room before, it was dark inside so I had pressed the lucky cat's arm to turn on the light. Chitanda would not have forgotten that.

What would actually happen if Chitanda were to use the lucky cat's arm to turn off the lights? Ibara, or perhaps Ōhinata, would probably say something like this:

“Oh my, so the lucky cat functions as a remote, does it? No wonder it was left on the table. But wait a sec, how did you know this was a remote? Now then, Eru Chitanda, not only did you come to this house, to this very living room, but you additionally saw the lucky cat being used as a light switch, didn't you?!”

Had Chitanda remained silent about it when coming with the rest of them to my house, surely she should have moved the lucky cat to the side board as well.

At the moment, however, I couldn't say any of that. The candles were going to be coming up soon, which meant so was the lucky cat. If I pointed out

her mistake and she started to act suspiciously as a result of that, things could get difficult. ...As I was thinking this, I realized that my keeping quiet about the get-well visit wasn't because "the chance slipped me by." It wasn't like what we did was really all that shady, after all... It was all so absurd.

As I thought this, I couldn't help but let out a small smile. As if noticing this, Chitanda asked me.

"What is it?"

"Well..."

As I considered telling her that it was nothing at all, I mentioned something that had suddenly entered my mind.

"It's possible that Ōhinata didn't buy your earlier story."

"Wha..."

I turned around and tried showing her the meanest smile I could muster, but I couldn't see my face so I didn't know how well it turned out.

"Doesn't saying 'I asked Sōda' sound like you might've *sewed a lie*?"

Chitanda tried to force a smile despite her troubled face.

The kettle's whistle began to scream its high-pitched scream.

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ See *maneki-neko* (招き猫): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki-neko>
2. ↑ 「招福」, 「大大吉」, 「千万両」, and then 「吉」 respectively.
3. ↑ Tsukudani is a cooking technique where you boil something in soy sauce to preserve and eat it.
4. ↑ A Japanese proverb. (鬼が出るか蛇が出るか) It refers to the fear of the unknown.
5. ↑ This is a line from famous Taishō-era poet Sakutarō Hagiwara's mysterious existential poem entitled "Death" 「死」, found in his collection, *Howling at the Moon* 『月に吠える』. Because the poem is short, I'll translate it here so you can interpret it for yourself. (Source for those curious and able to read Japanese:  
[http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000067/files/859\\_21656.html](http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000067/files/859_21656.html))

From the depths of the land I gaze at,  
Strange hands protrude,  
Legs protrude,  
A head intrudes,  
Gentlemen,  
What on earth,  
Is this goose before me?  
From the depths of the land I gaze at,  
I make a foolish face,  
Hands protrude,  
Legs protrude,  
A head intrudes.

6. ↑ From here on, 'biscuits' will refer to confections like these:  
<http://tosaichi.jp/millet/millet-600-7.jpg>
7. ↑ A type of Japanese cut glass. See:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satsuma\\_Kiriko\\_cut\\_glass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satsuma_Kiriko_cut_glass)

8. ↑ Both weapons used in fencing, the épée is heavier and more rigid while the foil is much lighter and easier to use.
9. ↑ This is a reference to a passage in the *Zhuangzi*: “Virtuous men keep acquaintances light as water, and narrow-minded men keep acquaintances sweet as rice wine.” For information on the *Zhuangzi*, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi_(book))
10. ↑ A range of mountains on the border between France and Spain.
11. ↑ Shrine maiden.
12. ↑ A Japanese proverb. (藪をつついて蛇を出す) It means to have something bad happen to you while doing unnecessary things.
13. ↑ French coffee with milk.

### **3. Present: 6.9km; 13.1km Remaining**

The road continued on earnestly in a straight line with hardly a slope in sight. I saw a small mountain off in the far distance, however because I knew the course, I also knew that I'd have to eventually climb it. Because one could see the entire distance while traversing the long, flat road, one became thoroughly fed up with it.

I didn't think about anything while I had descended the slope. I had intended on returning to my thoughts after I completed the hilly segment and started walking again, however an unexpected problem occurred. I could see the entirety of the straight path far too clearly. Even though Kamiyama High students were running in front of and behind me, it was plainly obvious that I was the only one walking nonchalantly. It ended up being somewhat embarrassing, so I started faking a run at a speed that still allowed me to think calmly.

However, I had also realized something else because the road was so open and easy to see. Visible up ahead was a familiar mountain bike. I wondered if there had been some trouble after all. General Committee vice-president Satoshi Fukube was stopped there quite a ways ahead of me.

I brought my arms in. I called out to him as he stood in the distance and then increased my stride.

Satoshi looked like his business had already been taken care of as he stood on the edge of the road, as he seemed to be happily chatting with another student on the General Committee. There were still tens of meters between the two of us when I noticed he started to climb back on his bike. Just as I thought that I wouldn't make it, however, he ended up turning back to look at me. It seemed like he didn't have any urgent business to take care of considering he stood there waiting for me.

“Hey, Hōtarō. You told me ahead of time so I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but man are you slow.”

I stopped walking right beside him, and then took two or three deep breaths. As the two of us started walking side-by-side, Satoshi split up with the other General Committee member and I started to talk.

“I thought you’d be further up by now.”

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders as he pushed his mountain bike along.

“If I were seriously pedaling, I’d be at the finish line by now.”

“You’re that fast, huh?”

“No, my bad. I was just showing off. I’d probably be somewhere in Jinde.”

I felt like even that was still him exaggerating, but I let it slide without saying anything further. Satoshi casted a quick glance behind him, and then let out a small sigh.

“It’s not like I thought today would end without anything happening, but still...”

“Was there an accident?”

“In the broadest sense of the word. Someone hurt their leg and couldn’t move as a result. I called a teacher over and they picked the student up.”

He then brought his head close and continued in a whisper.

“I couldn’t tell just by looking, but I’m not so sure he actually hurt his leg.”

That was to be somewhat expected.

“Oh really? Were you hoping that the entire student base would run the whole course honestly and without deceit?”

As I said this in a mocking tone, Satoshi uncharacteristically raised his eyebrows.

“There’s no way I’d think something like that.”

“You didn’t have to respond so adamantly.”

“If there was a student able to evade the General Committee’s watchful eyes and find a shortcut, I’d actually give them my applause, but those guys... even though they aren’t doing anything skillful, they still end up smiling like they’re all that. If they do something like that, the teachers have to come in a car and pick them up. Some of them might really be hurt, but for those who are just putting on an act, I couldn’t praise something so lacking in class. I wish they’d choose a more tasteful method.”

There were a thousand Kamiyama High School students. The trouble probably wouldn’t end with that one incident. One could only wait with baited breath for the next one.

Satoshi glanced at his watch.

“Honestly speaking, I’m pretty far behind schedule right now. I want to get moving soon, so is there anything you wanted to ask me, Hōtarō?”

I had been busy preparing questions under the assumption that I was going to be seeing Chitanda first, however, meeting Satoshi before then turned out to be very lucky indeed. Satoshi’s knowledge covered a wide breadth of genres far exceeding my own, and even had that not been the case, I was still thankful to have a different perspective than my own on these matters.

There were two things I wanted to say, or rather, ask.

“Let’s see. I want you to listen to a purely hypothetical story.”

“There’s even a preface, huh? Fine by me. Go on.”

I gathered my thoughts as I continued to walk. That sounds good, something like that.

“Let’s say I were to say something like, ‘This is just something a friend told me, but no matter how you think about it, it’s pretty unfair that the General Committee doesn’t have to run,’ what would you think?”

Satoshi stared at me long and hard, and finally responded in an unusually serious tone.

“So that’s what you really think, huh? I’d think something like that would make me pretty upset.”

“Just do your damn job. I couldn’t think of any other hypotheticals.”

“Naturally, that’s exactly what I was doing, telling you what I thought. Purely hypothetically, of course.”

Because I remained silent, Satoshi assumed that I had no more questions and climbed on top of his mountain bike. He matched his pedaling with my walking speed and then started talking again.

“I’m saying this just to make sure you know, Hōtarō, but I really do like girls like Ōhinata. Of course, not in that way if Mayaka ends up hearing I said that.”

“I know.”

As if I had said these words entirely to his satisfaction, he started to gain speed.

I called out from behind him.

“Satoshi”

“Yeah?”

Satoshi pressed the breaks and turned around.

“Is there anything else?”

“No...”

I hesitated to say anything.

There was one thing I wanted to confirm with Satoshi, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

In saying that however, it wasn't like I could keep on stopping Satoshi while he was busy like this. I let out an uneasy breath and then asked.

"This is a question regarding the Japanese language. If someone were to resemble a bodhisattva on the outside, what would they be like on the inside?"

As he heard that, he mumbled something under his breath. I wouldn't hear it very well, but it was probably something like, "Mayaka didn't tell me anything like that, though." He wasn't necessarily criticizing Ibara. Most likely, she simply didn't see any reason to tell him what Ōhinata had said perfectly word-for-word.

Just like I had thought, Satoshi knew the word. He knew it much more precisely than someone with a vague recollection of it like me.

"There's a certain saying that suggests if someone resembles a bodhisattva on the outside, then who they are on the inside is set. They would have a heart like a yakṣa's."<sup>[1]</sup>

And then to lighten the mood with a joke, he added this.

"As far as I'm aware however, Chitanda doesn't have a thing for pomegranates."<sup>[2]</sup>

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ Spirits found in Hinduism and Buddhism. While there are a large variety of differing kinds, the usage here refers to something like an evil devil.
2. ↑ A reference to the myth of Hariti, a tale in which a woman kidnaps other women's children to order to feed her hundreds of kids. After being approached and tricked by the Buddha, she vows to only eat pomegranates instead of children flesh. Full story here:  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hariti>

# **Chapter 3 - A Very Wonderful Shop**

## 1. Present: 8.0km; 12.0km Remaining

That which you think is right and that which you think is wrong are both things you learn throughout your life from your education and experiences. You are praised for your good deeds and scolded for your bad ones. It's through this that you start drawing the distinctions between right and wrong. On the other hand, what you end up liking and not liking isn't simply something that someone teaches you. If you were to go as far as call it innate, you would be implying that something like a baby disliking cheese in the future would have been decided from the very start, something like a small treatise on destiny. Rather, might something like someone's preferences be akin to the various impulses that boil up from inside one's self as they grow older? In the end, it's inexorably linked with the ultimate question of what one treasures the most.

On that rainy day, Satoshi had told me this on the way home. He then started to smile in a seemingly condescending manner as he continued.

“Inside of you Hōtarō—you who has a wholly insufficient number of things you either like or dislike—is an impulse that you refuse to talk about. That's what Makaya would say. I wouldn't go that far, though.”

“If it were Ibara, she would probably say something like, ‘That's what Fuku-chan would say. I wouldn't go that far, though.’”

“Nope, Mayaka doesn't talk like that at all. She says everything bluntly. Her choice of words would be much meaner.”

That was exactly the case. I was wrong.

When Satoshi and I would go home together, we would usually end up having ridiculous conversations like this while we walked. Sometimes, we would talk about even more ridiculous things like “the ultimate fate of the

world,” and in even rarer moments, we might even bring up something mildly practical for a change, like “is B5 or A4 sized paper easier to use for notes.” What made that day unusual, however, was the audience listening in on our conversation, namely Ōhinata.

The rain was neither violent nor light as it continued to drip down endlessly. We had walked inside a shopping arcade, so our umbrellas were closed. Holding hers with both hands joined behind her back, Ōhinata peered into my face with a lovely gesture that didn’t suit her tomboyish appearance and smiled.

“Is Ibara-senpai really that sharp-tongued?”

It wasn’t like we had waited for her specifically, but rather, when Satoshi and I had left from the school’s front gate, we just happened to see her leaving as well. She had on a bitter smile, saying, “I haven’t really made any friends yet,” so the three of us ended up walking together. As one might expect from the fact that we all went to the same middle school, our routes home were basically the same.

To Ōhinata’s question I replied, “She is.” However Satoshi tilted his head in thought.

“It’s not like she’ll lash out at anyone. As a matter of fact, I haven’t seen her act harshly towards Chitanda-san even once.”

Thinking about it, that much was certainly true, but I felt like the comparison was a little unfair.

Ōhinata then spoke in a soft voice that sounded as if she had just figured out some terrible secret.

“Maybe that has something to do with the fact that Chitanda-senpai knows a whole lot of people.”

“Um, so are you basically saying that Chitanda-san knows all of Mayaka’s weaknesses and is able to keep her on a leash as a result?”

Satoshi couldn't help but smile in disbelief. It was such a ridiculous idea that I lost all willpower to even respond. Ōhinata was quick to change the subject, as usual. She quickly smiled and said, "Well, I suppose now I understand that Oreki-senpai is someone that doesn't treasure anything."

"Now hold on..."

"What about you, Fukube-senpai? What do you treasure?"

I had voiced an exceedingly dissatisfied statement, but my plea for reassessment went unheard. Satoshi shrugged and readily responded.

"That which makes me unique, I guess."

Ōhinata let out a disappointed "Is that so," and this time Satoshi posed the question.

"Well, because you keep asking others, what about you?"

"Me?"

She had an impish look about her as she started to speak more loosely.

"Well as a girl, I'd have to say I treasure love above all else."

As this underclassman went on about love in front of me, I started feeling like I had just witnessed a koala in the flesh, in that it was an extremely well-known animal, one that I could easily identify by its appearance, but I had never actually seen one in real life.

"Is that so..."

Satoshi responded in the exact same way that Ōhinata had done so to his previous answer. Almost as if motivated entirely by obligation, he then asked, "Oh, so there's someone like that in your life?"

As she heard this, Ōhinata suddenly broke out into a huge grin.

"Nope, not at the moment. I guess because that's the case, what's really important to me would be..."

She suddenly dropped her gaze to stare at her feet and continued, only her voice still containing the enthusiasm she just had.

"...friends."

I clearly understood why Satoshi had previously let out his disappointed "Is that so..." Although it wasn't a very pleasant subject, I was still expecting her to respond with a more elaborate answer. "Love" wasn't exactly a terrible one, but it was so clichéd.

On the other hand, I could also understand why Ōhinata had responded similarly as well. Although she had just entered high school, had a student heard something like, "That which I treasure most is my own unique nature," they would most likely not be very moved.

I understood the vague meaning behind his words, however. Even though his face constantly looked as if he had never faced a single hardship in the world, he had many problems in his own way, and he tried to correct these to produce a better version of himself. There were many times when I could only think about how incredibly carefree I was compared to him. Even though his statement might have made an entirely ordinary impression, there was a determination in that answer that really defined who Satoshi was.

I started thinking from there.

First came love, but because there were no prospects there, her answer became her friends. This was what Ōhinata had said. That kind of answer was certainly uninteresting by itself, however, just as Satoshi had a unique determination that only he could have, the same had to be the case for Ōhinata. Had she simply said those words out of longing? Probably not.

After all, when Ōhinata had offered up “love” as her answer, she had been smiling, and yet, when she switched her answer to “friends,” her eyes were cast down.

I knew the answer rested in that behavior, but I couldn’t figure out the exact meaning behind it.

The reason I felt like I could understand at least a small portion of Satoshi’s inner workings was because of a certain incident. Last winter, after a series of complicated happenings, Satoshi opened up to a minuscule degree that which rested behind his façade and shared it with me.

Compared to that, I hadn’t experienced anything similar with this underclassman girl, Ōhinata. After all, it hadn’t even been two months since I had met her. Could I even hope to understand her given the circumstances?

It might’ve been possible. The fact remained, however, that I hadn’t even tried.

While I ran, I tried to think of a way to reclaim that which I had lost by not looking at those in front of me head-on. It was idiotic of me. For example, if I didn’t listen to a lecture during class, I would have to buy a reference book before the test came around. It was like making the rope only after seeing the thief.<sup>[1]</sup> At any rate, it was difficult for the energy-saver in me to say it, but I had only one option open to me. If a person resembled a bodhisattva on the outside, then they were like a yakṣa on the inside. A yakṣa. In other words, a demon.

There were three ways to interpret this.

The first way was to assume that Ibara’s memory was incorrect and that Ōhinata had actually said something entirely different. In the end, though, that was more along the lines of wishful thinking. Exactly what kind of misunderstanding would have had to take place for her to incorrectly hear the sentence, “She really does look like a bodhisattva, doesn’t she.”

The second way was to assume that Ōhinata had indeed said that exact line, but had meant it purely as a simple feeling or observation, without any hint of an ulterior meaning. This was also difficult to justify. Up until this point, I had never heard anyone use the phrase “That person is like a bodhisattva” to compliment someone else. Of course, you couldn’t say that there wasn’t anyone in this world that used strange phrases like that to praise others. Still overall, I had exchanged words with Ōhinata numerous times by this point, so I thought that it was safe for me to say that she didn’t fit that description.

This meant that I had to concede to the third possibility after all: Ōhinata had referred to Chitanda in a roundabout manner as being like a demon. It was a peculiar use of the language, but I could understand why she would do it. She wanted to criticize Chitanda, but naturally she couldn’t say anything like that out loud in front of Ibara, who was such good friends with her. She probably didn’t expect Ibara to catch onto that meaning alone.

If it did become a problem, Ōhinata could simply pretend that she didn’t know anything about lesser-known idioms, like “A person who resembles a bodhisattva on the outside is a yakṣa on the inside.” However, not only had Satoshi known the meaning behind the word, but I also clearly remembered some incriminating points as well. On the day of the New Recruit Festival, she had mentioned, “classical Chinese literature seems difficult, but I love Japanese studies,” and she was also able to quickly discern that the joke I told on my birthday was a line from one of Sakutarō Hagiwara’s poems. As I saw it, Ōhinata was quite skilled in this discipline.

And yet, in the end, I still wasn’t satisfied.

I couldn’t think of anything that might have gone poorly between Chitanda and Ōhinata.

I didn’t doubt that whatever had happened yesterday after school ended up being the deciding moment. I simply thought it was impossible for there to be absolutely nothing leading up to that moment. I suppose there was something I thought was strange. It happened on a Saturday if I remember correctly.

I ended up running a bit too much. I didn't raise my head. So far, I hadn't been sweating all too much.

I approached another hill in the road up ahead. The line of students around me was beginning to slow down, and all of a sudden, I felt like running alone.

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ A Japanese proverb. (盜人を見て縄を締う) It refers to someone desperately starting preparations after it is already too late.

## 2. Past: 13 Days Ago

Ōhinata's request had come very abruptly, but she had likely been thinking about it for a while, biding her time and waiting for a chance to ask it.

That Friday, I hadn't intended on going to the clubroom. Because the inside of my wallet was barren and I had to consequently make do with a single butter roll and small milk carton for lunch, by the time after-school activities rolled around, I had become extremely hungry. Although I wasn't normally one to snack in-between meals, I wanted to go home as fast as I could to grab a bite.

As I headed for the entrance however, something like a huge group of girls suddenly began to crowd the entire width of the hallway and prevented anything aside from a snail-paced departure. Trying to push my way through them would only prove to be a pain, so I turned back. Before I realized it, I was in the connecting corridor leading to the Classics Club's classroom, so I headed over there, figuring I mind as well show my face.

Speaking out of consideration for my ravaged stomach, that was the correct decision. When I entered the clubroom, I saw three girls standing around a table looking in on something. These girls, Chitanda, Ibara, and Ōhinata, all turned to look at me. Ibara started to speak.

“It’s almost like you came here targeting this.”

“Targeting what?”

To that, Ōhinata played around and answered.

“We’re about to open a box full of snacks.”

What an incredible emotion it was that raced through my head at that very moment. I spoke, blindly driven by my lust for food.

“I feel like I’m about to collapse I’m so hungry. Please share some with me.”

I ignored Ibara as she muttered, “it’s almost like he’s up to something, that was so straightforward,” and added myself to the circle around the table.

The snacks inside the box were potato chips. “Chips Satsuma” was written on the side, so I figured they must have been made from sweet potatoes rather than regular ones.<sup>[1]</sup> It wasn’t the first time that snacks had been laid out like this in the Earth Sciences lecture room. Chitanda had often brought snacks left over from gifts given to her family over the course of the year. The potato chips this time, however, were clearly something unrelated.

“Who brought these?”

“I did,” said Ōhinata as she sheepishly raised her hand. “What? You can’t eat them if I was the one that brought them?”

Why on earth had she said something like that I wonder.

“It doesn’t matter whether a cat is white or black, if it brings you snacks it is a good cat.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Ōhinata stared back with a puzzled face.

“Um, was that Zhou Enlai?”

“It was Lee Teng-hui, right?”

Ibara piped in from the side.

“Wasn’t it Chiang Kai-shek?”

As she listened to our back-and-forth, Chitanda showed an uneasy smile on her conflicted face.

“Umm, well, maybe it was Ho Chi Minh.”<sup>[3]</sup>

It felt like she was playing dumb on purpose. I had started something terrible. On the other hand, while it was true that I had actually forgotten the person behind the quote, I ended up remembering it during a discussion I had later on. It was Deng Xiaoping.

“Anyways, let’s just sit down.”

It was a sound suggestion. I went to grab a chair. Ōhinata took a cellphone out from her pocket and placed it on the table in front of her. I suppose if you were to leave it in your pocket while you sat down, it might get in the way.

The cover was removed from the box. And now, we feast.

Even though the chips were thick and had a consistency vaguely resembling polyethylene foam, it almost felt like eating a capsule fruit.<sup>[4]</sup> There was a faint sweetness to it as well.

“It really permeates throughout the body, doesn’t it?”

As I said this, Ōhinata couldn’t help but comment.

“You look like an old man drinking alcohol after getting out of the bath when you say that.”

I really wanted to ask her whether or not she had actually seen a middle-aged man say something like that while drinking alcohol after a bath.

“Wow, this is good.”

Ibara had muttered this almost as if without thinking. After hearing that, Ōhinata let out a huge smile.

“That’s great. My family loves these, so we picked up some.”

“Really? From where?”

Chitanda was focused on the box's cover as she asked this.

"It says 'Kagoshima Artisan Sweets' on the box. JA Kagoshima... Even though it's not in season, it certainly is very delicious. I guess you can sell it like this too, huh?"

Chitanda looked at the package with appraising eyes. I didn't know whether or not Chitanda's family was growing sweet potatoes as well, but she might've been sizing up JA Kagoshima as a business rival.

"You said you got it from Kagoshima? Do you have a relative living over there?"

I also thought it was strange that Ōhinata had known about a regional confection from Kagoshima, but if she did have a relative there, it would've made sense if she had gone there once before. As I jumped to this hasty conclusion however, Ōhinata immediately began to shake her head.

"No, no. I went to a concert over there."

"A concert? In Kagoshima?"

Looking embarrassed, she responded, "It was in Fukuoka. These snacks were at a shop in Fukuoka."

For a Kagoshima regional specialty to be sold in Fukuoka, just how far were they reaching out? I had a feeling that for Chitanda, a market of that size would be an enviable thing indeed. As Ibara continued to stack several chips on top of each other and bring them to her mouth, she started to talk.

"What concert did you go to in Fukuoka?"

Ōhinata winked and held up her index finger to her mouth.

"That's a secret."

"Oh really now?"

No matter who she had gone to see, even if it was someone zealously singing about devil worship or something like that, I doubt any of us would have viewed her any differently. But if she wanted to keep it a secret, then there was no reason to pursue it.

“But Fukuoka’s pretty far. Was that the only option?”

“No, it was a nationwide tour. I followed the band, although as expected, going to every event was impossible.”

“It was nationwide?”

Chitanda was the one who asked this.

“From Hokkaido to Okinawa?”

Ōhinata responded in a confused manner, “Umm, from Sendai to Fukuoka.” She then added in a frustrated tone, “The only one I couldn’t go to was their important Tokyo performance because the tickets were sold out.”

It wasn’t like I didn’t listen to music, but there was no way I could do something like follow a band on their nationwide tour. I was honestly moved by her determination.

“You really did a good job following them, didn’t you?”

For some reason, as I said this, Ōhinata seemed to become a little docile.

“This is just something a friend told me, but love gives generously.”

“It never runs out?”

As she heard this, she tilted her head in thought and showed me a bitter smile.

“After I listened to their newest album this time around, I feel like the stockpiles might be starting to run low.”

Even while we were talking, the four of us continued to reach out for more sweet potato chips. Perhaps it was because of the light yet pervasive sweetness and the exquisite feel in your mouth when you ate it, but it was impossible to stop after one. Meanwhile, I completely forgot about my empty stomach.

When I came to my senses, I noticed there was only one chip left. Ibara and I moved at exactly the same time. Our fingers suddenly stopped above the chip. It was a situation that could've been seen as being romantic by some, but there wasn't an ounce of warmth in the gazes that we exchanged at that moment, only cold hostility.

"I'm glad you guys liked it so much."

Neither of us paying any attention to Ōhinata, Ibara and I slowly started to retract our hands at the same time. Thinking that the other person was conceding the fight, both of us, once again at the same time, shot our arms forward and met in the middle. It wasn't like I wanted the last chip so much that I was planning on holding my ground as a result, but...

The silence around us was awkward. I hesitated to do anything with my outstretched arm, nor could find the resolve in me to look at what kind of face Ibara was making. Chitanda, who had been watching the situation unfold, was about to mutter a nervous "umm" when we all heard a sound come to her rescue. Someone opened the door to the Earth Sciences lecture room.

All four of us turned to look at him at once. Satoshi stood there with a relaxed smile that looked as if it might've been humming. Ibara then spoke.

"It's almost like you came here targeting this."

Of course, Satoshi should have had absolutely no idea what was going on. Confused, he asked, "Targeting what?"

Ōhinata responded.

"We're about to finish off a box full of snacks."

And with that, the entire Classics Club had unexpectedly gathered in one spot. As Satoshi finished off the final chip, Ōhinata gazed around at everyone and finally got around to the heart of the matter.

“Now then, because you ate the snacks, there’s something that I’d like my beloved upperclassmen to do for me.”

By the time I realized that this was all planned from the start to bribe us, it was already too late. In doing this, all of us had traded our Saturday plans for Ōhinata’s sweet potato chips.

The weather reports weren’t looking very good, so I constantly worried about the impending rain. Fortunately, when I left the house the clouds were still while, and it looked like they would stay that way for a while. I didn’t know what time I’d be returning, however, so I put a compact umbrella in my tote bag just in case, although normally, I didn’t even have a bag with me; I would only carry a wallet in my pocket.

We were told to wait in front of Kaburaya Middle School’s front gate. Certainly enough, it was a location that all of us knew. On the school grounds were the soccer and track clubs, and additionally what was probably the tennis club, as they practiced. I took a cursory glance around, but I didn’t see anyone I recognized.

I had predicted that if anyone was going to show up late to our 3:00 appointment, it would be Satoshi, however my guess was off. Five minutes before that time, everyone, both Satoshi and I and well as Ibara and Ōhinata, had gathered. Although it was denim, just the fact that Ibara wore a skirt was alone entirely unexpected. Because it was rapidly becoming summer, Ōhinata wore a short-sleeved shirt.

“Sorry about this, for asking something so strange.”

Considering she was apologizing, she looked unexpectedly happy. Ibara and Satoshi also looked as if they were having fun while they said things like:

“This kind of thing is really rare. I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m a bit excited. Don’t expect too much out of this, okay?”

…and so on and so on as they smiled back and forth. I didn’t say anything, but even my interest was somewhat aroused.

“It’s close by. I’ll show you the way.”

Ōhinata walked in front.

Our destination was a coffee shop, and it hadn’t yet opened. It wasn’t that the store hadn’t opened for the day, but rather that the store hadn’t even had its opening day yet.

“So your uncle works over there?”

As Satoshi said this, Ōhinata shook her head with a bitter smile.

“Didn’t I explain it to you? He’s my cousin. Even though our ages are pretty far apart.”

I had also thought he was her uncle. I guess he’s an old cousin. I’ll have to remember that.

At any rate, according to yesterday’s story, one of Ōhinata’s relatives was opening up a new coffee shop, so we were asked if we could go in before they officially opened as test-guests. Just like Satoshi had mentioned, being able to enter a shop before it opened was a rare opportunity indeed. As we were essentially the first customers, it felt like some sort of honor.

Had Chitanda been here, it would have probably exposed her curiosity even more, however she wasn’t. She had some inescapable business to attend to, and because she didn’t know how long it would take, she couldn’t make any promises. Yesterday, she had said, “I really want to go too, but… it’d probably be too late if we did it in the evening,” clearly displaying her lingering attachment.

Personally, I was really looking forward to the opening of a new coffee shop. The shop that I had frequented somewhat, Pineapple Sand, had ended up relocating, so as a result, there weren't any shops nearby that a first-year in high school could really enter. Seeing that this shop looked like one that would be easy to walk in whenever really made me thankful.

“So what kind of shop is it?”

I said this while we were walking, but Ōhinata looked like she was deep in conversation with Ibara, so most likely she didn't hear me. Oh well, I'll be able to see it for myself in due time.

I ended up walking next to Satoshi.

He suddenly mentioned what had just been on my mind.

“This is pretty nostalgic, isn't it?”

“Yeah.”

This was the route we had always taken to go to and from school. Because I had been essentially forced onto the Health Committee, there were times that I ended up leaving school late, and it was at times like those that we occasionally walked home together. It felt strangely unsettling to walk this path as a high school student in normal, weekend clothes.

“It almost feels like I'm doing something bad.”

As I said this, Satoshi quietly nodded.

“You're right. I almost feel guilty.”

We had walked this route for three years, and in reality, this was the entire extent of our reach. Good things and bad things, our relationships with others and almost everything else has ended right here on this path.

Kaburaya Middle School was a place that should've been filled with such warm familiarity, and yet, it felt strangely cold and distant. I felt out of place nearing the school I graduated from; I couldn't help but feel like I was doing something taboo.

“Thinking back on it, I also remember not being able to get close to my elementary school after entering middle school.”

“Wasn’t it because of the uniforms?”

I wasn’t being serious of course. Satoshi also showed a bitter smile.

“Should we go pull out our middle school uniforms?”

I couldn’t even try to imagine doing that in an attempt to become reacquainted with the area. In the end, we no longer had a place in Kaburaya Middle School. If I absolutely wanted to be able to return, there was probably no other way than to get a job there.

As we seemingly became further and further separated from the school, and the voices from the school grounds could no longer reach us, Ōhinata finally stopped.

“Here we are.”

It was located in-between a soba shop and a private residence, and it faced a busy street.<sup>[5]</sup> The building wasn’t a new one; rather, I could tell it was actually quite old when looking up at all of the rust and discoloration on the sheet-iron roof. In saying that, however, the glass door didn’t have a single blemish, and the doorknob was polished to a shine.

“Wow, it looks pretty nice,” said Ibara as she faced the cream-colored walls. I, on the other hand, was paying more attention to the windows. When judging whether or not a shop is easy for someone to casually enter for the first time, windows are of key importance. If the windows were too small or don’t even exist in the first place, the shop might seem something like a relaxing secret base, but it would be much too imposing for a random passerby to enter. On the other hand, if the windows were too big, you would feel exposed while in the shop to the people outside, and it might be unnerving. This one, however, appeared to deftly avoid both of those possible problems. The windows were perfectly sized and had some small flower pots in them, containing blossoming red flowers. They were the kind

you see often, but I couldn't remember the name. I saw Satoshi facing them as well, so I asked him.

"Satoshi, what are those?"

"They're flowers."

I only received this condescending answer. I lightly glared at him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know much about plants. Though Chitanda-san would probably know."

"Oh, that's right!"

Ibara was the one who raised her voice. She pulled a cellphone from her pocket.

"I suddenly remembered when you mentioned Chi-chan's name. She might already be done with her business today."

"Is that so? I really do want her to come," muttered Ōhinata as she turned the doorknob. "At any rate, let's just go in for now."

There was no sound when the glass door was pushed open. I guess they hadn't put something like a customer bell on it yet.

I took a step inside, and before I realized it, I couldn't speak. It wasn't that the interior decoration was bad or anything. It was the smell of new wood, the smell of some disinfectant, and to add onto that, the smell of freshly-ground coffee beans. I was instantly assaulted by all of these at once, and it felt like my breathing might suddenly cease. Wouldn't something like this be generally considered a terrible smell? I wondered if it was really okay for the place to smell like this, but considering it was just renovated, I suppose it couldn't be helped. As I rationalized it to myself like this, I resumed my shallow breathing.

"So you guys came. Welcome."

I finally noticed the man standing behind the counter as he said this.

Although he was supposedly a relative, he didn't look like Ōhinata in the slightest. I guess stuff like that happens though. When I compare my sister to myself, there certainly are aspects that are similar, but there're also aspects that are entirely different. Anyways, that aside, he was surprisingly mellow. In addition to his voice being quiet, whenever our eyes met, he would end up looking away somewhat unnaturally. I wondered if that was any way to run a shop, but I suppose the owner of Pineapple Sand was also fairly emotionally distant. Thinking about it more, it was also possibly due to the fact that we were high school students and, as a result, not part of his intended targeted customer base that he skipped the warm reception.

"It has a bright atmosphere. I like it."

As Ibara said this looking around at the also cream-colored shop interior, Satoshi spotted a painting on the wall and muttered to himself, "Oh hey, it's Lautrec."

I also turned to look at it.

There were seven seats at the counter and four tables. It was nice that there was a lot of room at them, but I couldn't help but be disappointed at the fact that they were circular. When a table is round, I always end up feeling like everything will fall off from the very get-go.

The wall behind the shop owner at the counter was decorated with a relief. It looked like a heart lying flat on its side, but judging by the vine patterns surrounding it, it might have actually been a turnip instead. Inside that design were two rabbits facing each other. Although the owner seemed to be fairly emotionless, the relief was almost excessively sweet.

"Sorry there's no music playing, it must make it feel kind of lonely around here. At any rate, please just relax for now and have a nice time."

As he said this in a somewhat muffled voice, I couldn't help but wonder if that was really necessary. I suppose that when this shop eventually opens, he plans on playing some kind of radio station or something. I prefer the

quiet, although I feel like my opinion rests in the minority. I should've probably just been happy that a shop like this opened up near me in the first place.

“It’s almost ready, isn’t it? Just a little longer to go!”

Ōhinata spoke in a much more familial manner than I had heard her talk at school. Even if two people were relatives, that doesn’t say anything about how close they actually were. Not only were there siblings who were raised apart like strangers, but I’m sure there were also cases of cousins growing up together as well. Even though two of them looked quite far apart in terms of age, she seemed extremely attached to the shop owner. Ōhinata stood on her tiptoes and tried to look inside the kitchen.

“Ayumi-san isn’t here today? I was thinking it’d be good practice for you.”

When the show owner responded to Ōhinata, his expression didn’t change one bit. Rather than being particularly cold to us, I suppose that’s just what he was always like.

“We had business to take care of at the public office, so Ayumi is headed there at the moment. You can mention that next time you come.”

“The practice is important! It’d be bad if you called Ayumi-san something like Po-chan in front of the customers.”

Considering what Ōhinata said about us coming making for good practice, I could only assume that this “Ayumi-san” was to be the floor manager after the place opened. Was she the owner’s wife? Maybe a girlfriend at least. If she was just a waitress that he hired, I doubt he would have sent her to fill out paperwork at the public office.

Ōhinata turned around and then asked us a question that sounded like she was the waitress herself.

“What would you guys like? A table, or perhaps...”

Satoshi looked around the shop’s interior once more and then responded.

“It looks like all the tables are meant to fit four people. That might seem perfect right now, but we still don’t know if Chitanda is going to be coming later.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Ōhinata nodded and then pulled out a stool from next to the counter before everyone else. We all followed in procession: Ōhinata, Ibara, Satoshi, then me, in that order. The stools were tall and weren’t fastened to the floor. They didn’t swivel however, so it didn’t feel unstable at all, and to add to that, there was something about the stool that just made it feel comfortable to sit on. Ibara began to stoke the brand-new counter with what resembled deep affection and then started to say rather uncharacteristically:

“I think this might be the first time I’ve ever sat at a counter like this. It’s almost like I’ve taken another step into adulthood.”

That adult must have had quite the low standards if something like that was a step to reach it. The owner lined up cups with water in them on the counter and started speaking to Ōhinata.

“I still can’t get rid of the paint thinner smell. I’m sure it will disappear in due time, though.”

“You better hope it does. The second I entered I knew there was a problem.”

Just like I had thought, I wasn’t the only one who was taken aback by the terrible stench. Strangely enough, however, I ended up already getting used to the smell. I didn’t really mind it at all.

“Apparently it’s because of the wallpaper adhesive... I give up. Oh, that’s right. I haven’t finished taking care of printing the menus yet.”

“That’s terrible though!”

As Ōhinata laughed while saying this, the shop owner finally broke out into a grin.

“It’s fine, I’ll just go over each thing one-by-one. I’d like for you guys to test the house blend though.”

“Is everyone okay with that?”

All of us lightly nodded in response to Ōhinata’s question, so she continued.

“Then we’ll have that and...”

Ōhinata leaned across the counter.

“Is there anything to eat?”

“Four house blends. If you’re looking for something light, I think I’d be able put out a couple different types of sandwiches.”

“Then I’ll sample them for you.”

That’s probably impossible, Ōhinata. Without thinking, I ended up muttering something in response.

“He probably doesn’t have any of the ingredients.”

“...Oh, maybe. Is that the case?”

The owner replied with a small “Pretty much” and then looked over towards me and did something like a compact nod. It might’ve been out of appreciation.

“I do have scones though. If you guys would like, I could get you some of those.”

Because he went out of his way, we took him up on that offer.

Perhaps he already had experience with this line of work or perhaps he was simply being deliberate with his actions this time around, but there wasn’t a single ounce of tension in his movements. Not only did he not appear restless in the slightest, but his every single action was performed carefully and without the slightest bit of unwarranted excess.

However, Ōhinata seemed to have a different impression.

“Come on, isn’t Ayumi-san’s belly going to get big before long? When that happens, will you really be able to do all of this by yourself?”

With this, I became certain that “Ayumi-san” was female. Thinking about it, I just realized the name could have potentially been a guy’s name as well.

As he lined up the saucers, the owner responded.

“It should be fine if we don’t have many customers, not that I’m hoping that that’ll be the case though...”

“Obviously. You shouldn’t stop until there are hordes of customers clawing at each other’s throats to get in.”

“I’ve never seen a café like that.”

That was to be expected.

“I guess you’re right. It’d be nice if you could work part-time here, Tomoko-chan.”

“Part-time, huh?”

Ōhinata sighed.

“I’m not even sure I’d be able to. I’ve never worked a part-time job before.”

“Everyone starts somewhere.”

“That’s not what I mean. You know what my dad’s like. He doesn’t allow it, even though he slashed my allowance.”

“Loans are rough. You should try to be more understanding.”

“He stupidly bought an expensive car and even affected me with his decision. And yet, he refuses to let me earn money on my own. It doesn’t make any sense at all.”

As she complained by herself, she suddenly looked like she realized that not only her cousin but her school seniors were present as well. She began to smile with embarrassment.

“You know how it is. There’s a lot going on.”

As the conversation came to a lull, I could hear the sound of a passing car outside. As she stared at a corner of the shop, Ibara slowly started to speak.

“The wooden shelving is nice. It doesn’t look cheap at all.”

I didn’t even notice it was there until Ibara had mentioned that.

The low-rising shelf wasn’t anything like a cheap, unpolished self-project. It was fashionable, for sure, but it didn’t look like it could carry much. All of the books on it were fairly small.<sup>[6]</sup> There were several volumes, domestic works and international works being mixed together.

“I wonder if he reads a lot,” said Satoshi to Ōhinata instead of asking the owner himself. Ōhinata seemed to struggle with the answer, but the owner raised his hand to stop her and answered.

“Not that much. The books over there are just ones I chose because I thought they looked cool.”

“You mean you didn’t put them over there because you wanted your customers to rea...”

“That didn’t really cross my mind at all.”

Although it was simply decoration according to him, I felt like he was just being humble. There was a magazine rack on the edge of the counter, but it only had a single stack of normal-looking magazines and newspapers. Satoshi followed my line of sight and started to stare at the rack as well.

“Oh hey, they have *Shinsou[7]*

He pointed out the weekly publication sitting in front. Even I had heard of *Shinsou*, but it wasn't like it had particularly amazing journalism, nor was it even one of those tabloids that only covered sex and scandals. I imagined it as some half-assed attempt at a magazine. I thought it was strange that Satoshi would be so interested in the kind of magazine that you could find anywhere.

“Ōhinata-san, could you do me a favor and grab that for me?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Ōhinata was the closest to the rack at the end of the counter. She tried to yank it out, eventually needing to hold the rack down with one hand because everything was so tightly packed in it, and eventually pulled out the copy of *Shinsou*. As she handed it over to Satoshi and he flipped through the pages, Ibara asked him a question.

“What is it? Was there an article that caught your eye?”

“Yeah, something like that. It's rare for this kind of magazine to cover something from this city.”

“Oh yeah? What's it about?”

“The Suitou Co. incident, of course.”

Ibara responded with an “I see,” and Ōhinata didn't act like anything particularly strange had happened. Everyone seemed to accept what Satoshi had said with some sort of mutual understanding and comprehension.

Essentially, I was the only one out of the loop.

“What's that?”

As I said this, Satoshi stared at me blankly, almost as if on purpose.

“What are you talking about, Hōtarō. You're joking, right?”

“I think I’ve heard the name before. If I remember correct, Suitou has something to do with picnics, right?”

Without even listening, Satoshi opened up the magazine to a certain page and showed it to me.

“It’s this.”

It was a small article. At around half a page, it resembled something like a small corner section devoted to random tidbits of domestic news. The headline, however, stood out quite a bit. This is what it said. “Big-name Corporate Extortionist Runs Out of Luck Earning Easy Pocket Money” I would have been fine reading it, but we were still waiting for the coffee, so Satoshi just summed it up for me.

“There’s a company in this city called Suitou Co., and they recently started recruiting a lot of new employees. Anyways, a lot of these recruits were sent notifications of appointment and given training, and then after they were told to show up at the office in four months for their new job. When the four months had passed and they showed up at the office, however, no one at the company knew who the new employees were and why they were there. Essentially, no one had actually employed them.”

It all seemed pretty straightforward.

“Wait, let me try to guess the ending. I bet all the new recruits had to pay something like a uniform fee and materials fee when they were first employed, right?”

“Exactly. Although I guess that’s really the only possible explanation for it.”

Ibara looked at me in amazement.

“It was a pretty big deal in the news, and yet you still didn’t know about it? Are you sure you’re properly paying attention to what happens in the world?”

Just because I didn't know about a single incident didn't mean there was a need to say that. As I was about to say that, however, I figured there was no reason to escalate things like that, so I stayed silent.

"That's a pretty simple case of fraud. Did they catch the perpetrator?"

"It wasn't really something you could pull off without a list of the test-takers. It appears they caught the culprit surprisingly easily. Interestingly enough, the perpetrator's father was apparently an infamous corporate extortionist as well. Maybe them finding out about it led to the father's arrest. It might be written in the article."

That was probably false.

"Has a parent ever been arrested because the child was?"

However, it seemed like Satoshi knew all about that as well. He shrugged.

"Maybe that's why it only has a small corner section in *Shinsou*.

I see.

Satoshi pulled the copy of *Shinsou* away from my reach and started to stare at the open page.

"When I think of fraud, I can only imagine it being something that only affects old people in companies. Let's think of something similar. Let's say last year, we got a notice saying, "You passed the Kamiyama High School entrance exam. Please pay the new student entrance fee." You probably wouldn't assume you were being duped."

"I could understand that," said Ibara. "If you got a message saying your bid won at some on-site sale, you wouldn't really doubt it."

"On-site sale? You mean like a flea market?"

As I interjected with this, Ibara suddenly became quiet.

The owner then brought out the house blend coffees at the perfect time. Satoshi handed the copy of *Shinsou* back to Ōhinata and all of us turned to our coffee.

I suddenly felt like I somewhat understood the reason behind the rabbits on the decorative relief. On both the coffee cup's handle and the spoon's grip were little decorations of rabbits with pressed ears. Perhaps this meant that the shop owner or "Ayumi-san" liked them a lot. Maybe they were just born in the year of the rabbit.

Unfortunately, no matter how much I liked coffee, my sense of taste and smell were nowhere near capable of appreciating the exquisite intricacies of the house blend from a single cup. Saying "This is really good" was the most I could do; when I tried to think of a way to elaborate on that with some sort of comparison or detail, the words couldn't come out. Almost as if he wasn't even seeking those details in the first place, he changed the subject to something with seemingly more priority after hearing our praises.

"You add jam and cream to scones, but I have a couple kinds. There's strawberry jam and marmalade, and as for cream, you can have either the straight kind or mascarpone. What would you like?"

All of us gave our honest preferences, and yet it turned out to be something quite bothersome.

I chose strawberry jam and plain cream.

Satoshi chose marmalade and mascarpone.

Ibara chose marmalade and plain cream.

Ōhinata chose strawberry jam and mascarpone.

We were perfectly divided. For a split-second, I noticed shop owner's previously collected expression turn conflicted.

The jam and cream arrived before us, as well as two scones per person. Satoshi looked at all of us with a serious expression.

“Hōtarō, I have quite a lot of pride in my intimate knowledge of boring, random things.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I’ll say it for you. You have intimate knowledge of many a boring, random thing.”

“It feels weird to hear someone else say it like that. Wait, that’s not the point. What I’m saying is that I know the correct method by which one eats scones in England. Jam first...”

“So you cover the scone with jam before the cream?”

“Wait, cream first...”

“Well? Which is it?”

Satoshi stared at the scone plate and didn’t respond. I guess he knew one of them was supposed to be used first, but he forgot which one that was.

Without waiting for the troubled Satoshi’s answer, the shop owner casually told us instead.

“You put the jam on first. If you put the cream first on a warm scone, it’ll easily melt. But in the end, it’s completely up to how you like it.”

I see. It certainly did make a lot of sense. Even though he told us we could do whatever we wanted, none of us started with the cream after hearing that. As all of us started to eat, I suddenly heard a low noise ringing from somewhere. A cellphone was vibrating.

“Oh, it’s Chi-chan.”

Ibara stood up with the phone in her hand and immediately left the shop. I didn’t know this because I didn’t have a cellphone, but apparently talking on one in a face-to-face environment like this was really considered bad manners. It seemed like quite a hassle to use one.

Ibara quickly returned.

“She said she’s coming right now.”

“Does Chitanda-san know how to get here?”

“I told her to follow the path from Kaburaya Middle School until she hits the soba shop next door. I didn’t tell her the name of the shop but it should be fine.”

The banner outside the shop really stood out, so there was probably no need for concern.

After that, we started talking about the weather to kill some time.

“They said it was going to start raining in the evening.”

Although I said this without thinking much of it, Satoshi and Ibara were quick to counter me.

“That’s tomorrow isn’t it?”

“They said that the date changed.”

Ōhinata grinned broadly from the sidelines without taking a side.

“I wonder which report is older.”

I wasn’t confident in my report being the most recent one, however I stuck by it because it was the report I had seen.

“That’s what it said in the morning news...”

“I also watched the morning news.”

“Me too.”

Two versus one. The arbiter, Ōhinata, then handed down her ruling.

“By majority rule, Oreki-senpai’s memory has been deemed to be incorrect.”

To think I would be forced to accept the opposition. I thought it might be nice to see them drenched in the rain, tears streaming down their faces as they thought with self-reflection, “Ah, Hōtarō Oreki was truly right that time.”

While unintended, all of us took turns going to the restroom, and as I returned as the last one to do so, I saw Chitanda standing near the counter. Not even ten minutes had passed since she had talked with Ibara on the phone. She arrived pretty quickly. As I dried my hands with my handkerchief, I called over to her.

“You’re already here?”

She responded with a happy grin.

“I was closeby.”

Because Ōhinata sat at the furthest end of the counter, the only place Chitanda could sit was in the seat next to mine. We had decided to sit at the counter because the tables only had four seats, but having five people sit in a line was probably too long, and it was a somewhat uncomfortable situation to be in. I had just realized it, but because there were no other customers, we could have easily just taken a seat from a nearby table and sat with all five of us around the circle.

“So what were you doing today?” asked Ibara.

“It was one of my relative’s *kiju* celebration.<sup>[8]</sup> I say relative, but I don’t really know them too well. Anyways, I just had to give them my congratulations. After we greeted each other, they brought out the alcohol and I went to the kitchen to not cause any problems, but it ended up happening anyways.”

“Something happened?”

“Kind of. It wasn’t really much, but something did.”

Chitanda showed a slightly troubled smile on her face.

“When I went to go borrow their phone, it suddenly started to ring. Because there was no one around, I decided to take their message, but it ended up being terrible. It was an old lady with a strong accent and quiet voice so couldn’t understand anything she was telling me. I didn’t know if I should try to take the message or see if I could transfer it somehow… Just getting her to tell me her name was a challenge in itself. Had I not had to deal with that, I would have been able to come much more quickly.”

“What?”

The one who raised her voice was Ōhinata. Even though there were three people in-between her and Chitanda, she leaned over the counter to get as close as she could to ask a question anyways.

“You said you were borrowing their phone? You mean at the house you were celebrating the birthday at, right? Is there really a place around here that doesn’t get any signals?”

“Signals? Um…”

Chitanda looked confused. She likely had no idea what Ōhinata had meant by that. I decided to butt in before things became more complicated.

“Chitanda doesn’t have a cellphone.”

“…What?”

As she was at a loss for words, I suddenly felt like I had awakened some terrible beast. Ōhinata leaned even further forwards.

“Wait, but then… How can you get by? Like when you need to contact your friends. Isn’t it bad when you can’t contact them?”

“I suppose…”

Chitanda had a soft grin on her face.

“I deal with it somehow.”

I also didn’t have a cellphone, but for some reason I could feel the societal pressure start to creep around us this time. Between me and Chitanda, I wonder which of us would end up getting one first.

“That aside, a *kiju* celebration, huh? I suppose Chitanda-san really does have it tough.”

As if to tease her, Satoshi began to talk.

“Really? This kind of thing happens to me once a year.”

“I have never been to a distant relative’s place to celebrate their birthday once in my entire life,” muttered Ōhinata to herself as she sat at the edge of the counter.

Anyways, how old was someone when they had their *kiju* again? I felt like it had something to do with the number seven, but I wasn’t sure. As I gave up on remembering, Chitanda began to speak with the shop owner.

“Would you also like the blend? If you’d like, I can heat up a scone for you as well.”

“I’m actually not very good with caffeine; I’m sorry you went out of your way to call me over like this. It’s a very wonderful shop, however.”

Now that I think about it, I suppose that was the case, wasn’t it. Whenever Chitanda drank anything with a lot of caffeine in it, she’d always become something else. For now, she was probably just referring to it messing up her ability to sleep. Certainly.

“Thank you very much, but I see.”

After he mulled it over in his head for a little bit, he continued.

“Maybe it’d be best to have a non-caffeinated menu as well.”

No matter how you look at it, Chitanda was a rare case so there probably wasn't any need to delve into that any further.

"At any rate, if that's the case, I'm afraid to say there's nothing I have that you could eat."

"Don't mind me. I'm sorry I arrived late in the first place anyways."

And with that, Chitanda made do with a cup of water. As she started to drink it, however, she abruptly raised her head.

"This is... This isn't tap water."

She took another sip.

"Nor is it from a well or anything around that. It tastes like something from further upstream, most likely medium-hard water drawn from a spring higher up in the mountains. Am I right?"

The owner broke out into a smile and gave the tiniest of nods.

"It really is a shame I couldn't have a customer like you try the blend."

I also took some water and brought the cup to my lips.

"I see, it really is mellow."

"Oh, I added lemon to that one, but it's just tap water."

What a world we live in.

As Chitanda held the cup with both hands, she peered around the shop.

"I'd be nice if I could drink the coffee as well. I'm glad that everything is going well at least."

"Thank you very much."

"What's this café called?"

It was an obvious question.

And yet it opened the floodgates. Thinking about it now, it hadn't been brought up even once in all of our discussions. I looked at Satoshi, he looked at Ōhinata, and she finally asked the owner in turn.

“What’s the name?”

However, even the shop owner clammed up with a “That’s, well...” Ōhinata pressed the question even further.

“No way. You can’t be telling me that you haven’t decided on it yet.”

“That’s not it. It’s just, well...”

The owner looked at Ōhinata with a pained expression.

“You’re going to laugh if I say it, Tomoko-chan, so I’m still keeping it secret.”

“It’s something that would make me laugh?”

He thought about it for a bit and then said, “I personally think it’s a good name. The second you see it, you’d know it belonged to a coffee shop.”

You’d think that in the time leading up to the shop’s opening, he would want to have the shop name already out there to publicize it. It felt a little strange to me that he was hiding it.

And, of course, Chitanda wouldn’t let that “strange feeling” pass her by.

“Um... Then is the reason this shop doesn’t have a signboard yet because you didn’t want Ōhinata-san to see it?”

Now that she had mentioned it, I suppose there really wasn’t a signboard in front of the shop, was there. If there was, we would have almost certainly noticed it. That said, it seemed highly unlikely that he put off the construction simply because he didn’t want his cousin to laugh at him. As expected, he shook his head.

“The font is pretty elaborate so it’s taking a long time to finish.”

“When you say font, do you mean you’re using the alphabet?”

“No, only kanji.”<sup>[9]</sup>

As she heard this, Ōhinata let out a howl of delight.

“Kanji, huh! You’re right, I might actually laugh. After all, you have a laughable sense for kanji!”

She then turned to face us with an expression full of happiness.

“This is the same guy that took the *ai* (love) from *aizen-myōou* (Rāgarāja) and *ra* (silk) from *akki-rasetsu* (Rakshasa), among others, to make *ai ra-bu yuu* (I love you).”<sup>[10]</sup>

*Rāgarāja*, huh? At any rate, the words she chose to demonstrate her point were beyond terrible. Ibara looked like she was torn between laughing and staying silent.

“What the heck’s up with those examples? Were you born to a Buddhist temple or something, Hina-chan?”

Was there really a first-year in high school that knew about things like Rāgarāja and Rakshasa? As I thought this, Ōhinata’s tanned cheeks started to turn red.

“No, I was just born to a lowly salaryman. I couldn’t think of any other words, so it doesn’t matter, does it?! I mean, what would you say if it were you, senpai?”

Ibara immediately responded.

“The *ai* from *aichi-ken* (Aichi Prefecture) and the *ra* from *koura* (shell).”

Wow. That was a pretty impression selection. All of us spoke up in admiration.

On the other hand, I could have sworn I heard the shop owner stealthily mutter something like, “You’re close.”

“So the shop’s name is still a secret? Hehehe, I’m curious!”

As least she was having fun.

“Kanji, huh?”

As he said this, Satoshi folded his arms.

“If we’re talking about kanji used in coffee shops you often see ‘to wait’ (*tai*) and ‘dream’ (*mu*) used in conjunction to make ‘Coffee Time’ (*tai + mu*).”

“I know what you mean.”

Ōhinata nodded, and the owner also said, “It’s along those lines.”

By saying his shop name was along the lines of that “*tai+mu*” wordplay, was he saying he used the same characters? I assumed that was the case, but Ibara had a different idea.

“When you say ‘used a lot’, do you mean like the jewel radical in ‘coffee shop’?”

“Jewel radical? Isn’t it the king radical?”

“Although it looks like king, it’s called a jewel radical,” replied Ōhinata to my question.<sup>[11]</sup> Where did she even learn something like that. Without thinking, I turned to Satoshi, but he shook his head in the same confused manner, as if he were saying, “I had no idea either.”

Ibara’s knowledge might have been correct in that one instance, but the rest of her answer was off.

“That’s not it.”

Then, as if in amusement, the owner also added, “You’re correct about it being three characters though.”

“Then...”

As Satoshi said this however, Ōhinata quickly stopped him with her outstretched hand.

“That won’t do, senpai. Let me try to figure it out.”

“Well then, let’s make a competition out of it.”

However, Ōhinata was unexpectedly serious.

“This is just something a friend told ma, but you only get three tries to guess a name as has been the case since ancient times.”

Was that so. If it was decided in ancient times, I guess there was nothing we could do about that. Satoshi started to tilt his head and wonder, “I would be able to understand if it was three days, but...” however he quickly gave up seeing Ōhinata’s resolve.

“So give us a hint! A hint!”

For the briefest of moments, I saw the owner look at the noisy Ōhinata with an incredibly kind expression on his face. It might’ve been a hasty deduction on my part, but I started to wonder if he had always played with Ōhinata in this pure, childlike manner ever since she was a small girl. Then, almost as if he wasn’t serious about wanting to keep the shop’s name a secret in the first place, he gave a hint.

“The name on the signboard is just like it is.”

“Signboard... What? Isn’t that obvious though?”

“Since you only get three tries, you should think carefully about it. If you end up getting it right, I’ll give you something nice.”

Ōhinata’s expression immediately exploded into brilliance.

“I’ll definitely get it right. Just you wait.”

She then ferociously pointed her index finger towards all of us.

“You heard me. I’ll definitely get it right, so none of you need to say anything from here on.”

For the first time since meeting her, I thought that this lively first-year in front of me was pretty childlike. I didn’t mean that like I suddenly saw some annoyingly juvenile side of her. If I had to choose, I would probably say that it was endearing. I might’ve even been smiling.

A clock was mounted on the wall, and even that had a rabbit on it. At some point, the hour hand had already reached five o’clock. We had been here for a surprisingly lengthy amount of time.

Perhaps because she was thinking, Ōhinata rarely opened her mouth as we talked. I had already finished off the coffee and didn’t even have the cup in front of me anymore. I assumed it was going to rain in the evening, so I wanted to leave before that happened. As everyone was slowly running out of things to say, I decided to take the opportunity to say it then.

“Well then, I think it’s about time.”

As I said that single line however, Ōhinata seemed to suddenly look nervous. She looked up at the clock and had an expression that seemed to ask where all the time had gone. She quickly reverted to her usual smile.

“Oh, by the way!” she exclaimed. “Do you guys have a sec? There was something I wanted to ask.”

Most likely this was just a ploy to give her more time to try and figure out the shop’s name. It appeared that I was the only one who noticed her earlier moment of panic. The other three didn’t seem to think that she had just pulled something quickly out of thin air to distract them.

“What is it?”

Ōhinata didn’t look at Ibara, the one who asked this, but rather at Chitanda.

“Chitanda-senpai, your face is big, isn’t it.”[\[12\]](#)

“My face is...”

As Chitanda muttered this to herself, Ibara quickly interjected.

“It’s okay, that’s not what it means. You have a thin face, Chi-chan.”

“No, I understood what it meant. I was just really surprised.”

She rested her hand on her chest.

“Umm, I wouldn’t say I know that many people, but I do meet a lot of people through my family’s official business.”

“Then,” Ōhinata gulped and then nervously continued in a manner very unlike her, “would you know someone, like say, Agawa?”

“Agawa-san?”

Chitanda lowered her head slightly.

“Are you talking about the first-year, Sachi Agawa-san?”

“Ah, yes.”

Ōhinata’s body sank back like it was sapped of all its strength. Satoshi and Ibara sat between us so I couldn’t see what kind of expression she was making.

“Did something happen to Agawa-san?”

“No... I just wanted to know if you knew her.”

Chitanda, who sat on the other side of me, had a blatantly puzzled expression as well. But I thought that there might have been something off about her appearance; she didn’t say “Did something happen to Agawa-san? I’m curious.” Ōhinata remained silent, so the atmosphere became strained around us.

“Umm, well then,” I said once more as I saw what was happening to everyone around me at the counter, “shall we get going?”

Everything was on the house, apparently. I felt bad leaving it at that because business was just starting for him, but the owner told me that the register wasn’t working yet anyways, so the first customers would be able to enjoy tax free food because it was a pain to calculate it manually. I’m fairly certain it was all a façade, however. Satoshi and Ibara, as well as Ōhinata, were all close to the door. I was next to the cash register with the owner, and Chitanda stood next to me.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t drink the coffee even though you went through all this trouble to let us come in early.”

The owner only smiled as Chitanda lowered her head. I had thought he was an emotionless man, but I guess I was completely wrong about that. Maybe he was somewhat nervous because we were his first customers.

“Don’t worry. Coffee isn’t something you absolutely need to drink.”

“This...”

As she started to speak, Chitanda suddenly tripped over her words. It appeared she was about to say the name of the shop. However, the name wasn’t known to us, of course. She ended up saying, “Th... this shop... I hope it does well,” as well as other things of that nature.

Chitanda then suddenly turned to face me.

“Um, Oreki-san. I know we’ll be able to see it when the shop eventually opens, but I... well, you see... just a little, well... um... I’m curious.”

Ōhinata didn’t want us to solve the mystery behind the name for her, but that didn’t necessarily mean that I had to wait. I didn’t understand anything about the unnatural things she had said and done prior, but at least I had a chance of solving this different issue at hand.

Fortunately, there were a notepad and ballpoint pen near the register.

“Can I borrow those?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Thanks. If I do it alone, it won’t count against her three tries I’m sure.”

I then started to scribble on the notepad. Chitanda peeked over my hand.”

“...What?”

There were three kanji lined up next to each other.

The first one meant “to walk.”

The next one meant “alongside.”

And the final one meant “rabbit.”

This shop’s name had several conditions.

“If Ōhinata heard it, she would laugh.”

“Anyone would be able to see it was a coffee shop just by looking at the name.”

“It was along the same line as ‘Coffee Time.’”

“It wasn’t ‘Coffee Shop.’”

“The shop name only consisted of three kanji.”

And finally was the hint given by the shop owner: “The name on the signboard is just like it is.”

What exactly was the signboard, then? So far, there was no physical representation of the signboard. So what was it? There were two possibilities.

The first was “the poster girl,” or in other words, “Ayumi-san.” It was possible to write her name using three kanji, but no matter which ones you used, no one would be able to tell it was a coffee shop.

The other option was for it to be a “menu sign.” If that were the case, it’d go without saying that the item he’d choose for it would be coffee. He didn’t seem very interested in the light meals, and it’s not like coffee shops tended to be famous for their scones or sandwiches in the first place. On top of that, it seems like he didn’t use the original kanji for coffee, either. In that case...

“You said the name of the shop was the name of the sign itself, didn’t you. And the poster item in this shop is the house *blend*, am I correct?”

“Oh, I see.”

Chitanda spoke up.

“I also noticed he said ‘it’s a shame you couldn’t try our blend’ instead of saying ‘our coffee.’”

I nodded. It seemed like he placed an unnatural emphasis on calling the coffee the house blend.

If that was the name of the shop, then how would you write it in kanji? The answer was similar to the earlier “Coffee Time” example. Just like I had thought when I heard it originally, there were specific characters used. When splitting up the word *blend* (*burendo*) into three parts, you can only really do so like this: *bu-ren-do*. It wouldn’t really work any other way.

My first thought was the kanji for rabbit, which can be read as *do*. There were pictures of rabbits everywhere in this shop, on the cups, on the spoons, and on the clock. Most importantly, there was even the large relief with the two rabbits on the wall behind the counter. I was almost certain there was a correlation between the amount of rabbits and the shop’s name having something to do with them.

My next guess was the kanji meaning “walking.” There weren’t many kanji that would be pronounced *bu* that also might have something to do with the coffee shop. He mostly likely wouldn’t have used the ones meaning “incorrect” or “to despise,” and the ones meaning “to stroke” and “absoluteness” were much too difficult to be in a name. I thought it might be the one meaning “to dance,” but even that seemed too splendid for a simple coffee shop. Thinking about it once more, I remembered “Ayumi-san.”

I was simply guessing at the characters in the apparently pregnant Ayumi-san’s name. Earlier, when talking to the owner, Ōhinata had mentioned, “It’d be bad if you called Ayumi-san something like Po-chan in front of the customers.” If her name was “Ayumi-san” but her nickname was “Po-chan” then her name most likely contained the kanji for “walking.” Whether or not it was the only character in her name, I had no idea. At any rate, the character was commonly read as *bu*, so there was no problem putting it on the sign.

That left the *ren*. This was the most difficult one.

The shop owner said that Ōhinata would laugh once she learned the name of the place. Would Ōhinata really laugh about putting Ayumi-san’s character in the title, when she herself wasn’t in a relationship? She might, I suppose, but I personally didn’t think it was that embarrassing. This meant he was probably talking about the *ren* as being the embarrassing point.

On the relief on the wall, there were *two* rabbits inside the heart.

“Ayumi-san” (*bu*) “alongside” (*ren*) the “rabbit” (*do*). *Burendo*, or “Blend.” The shop owner thought silently about it.

He looked down at the notepad and up at me, and then cracked a smile.

“That’s nice.”

“What do I get?”

However the shop owner simply laughed as he shook his head.

“You were close.”

I was off, huh?

It wasn’t a shock. I didn’t have a lot of confidence in it in the first place. I thought that the *bu* and the *do* were good choices, but I still felt unsure about the *ren* until the very end. Just as I expected, the owner took the ballpoint pen and underlined the *ren*.

I then looked at what he wrote next to it and suddenly realized what made it so embarrassing for him. The middle kanji in the new, upcoming coffee shop’s name was “to adore.” The rabbits adored by Ayumi. I had previously thought the owner was somewhat callous, but to think he was such a romantic. Had Ōhinata heard this, she would have most certainly smiled. It would have been a smile so bright it could have pierced through any depth.

However, Chitanda alone remained confused.

“Um, why is it the kanji for ‘walking?’”

That’s right, she wasn’t here when we were talking about “Ayumi-san.” I didn’t want to keep the others waiting too long, so I kept it brief.

“I’ll explain it to you on the way back.”

Chitanda replied quietly, “Please do.”

I went to make sure we didn’t leave any belongings on the counter, and I saw that only the cups, plates, and spoons remained. Before I left the shop, I suddenly realized something. The newspaper sitting in the front of the magazine rack was the evening edition. I quickly rushed over to it and picked it out with my index and middle finger. I looked at the weather report and saw that it said it would start raining in the evening. I handed it over to Satoshi and flashed a triumphant look.

“See? Look at that. It says it’s going to rain in the evening.”

“Are you still hung up on that? I didn’t know you held grudges like this, Hōtarō.”

That wasn’t what I had intended. Ibara, who had already been standing in front of the door, turned around.

“Even without that, you could tell just by looking outside. See?”

Looking outside the glass door, I could see rain drops beginning to fall.

Even though I had known the report ahead of time, I ended up not even being able to leave before I had to deal with it. At least the compact umbrella wasn’t going to be useless after all.

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Sweet potato in Japanese is *satsuma-imo*.
2. ↑ Referencing a famous line by Chinese statesman Deng Xiaoping in 1961, “It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, if it catches mice it is a good cat.”
3. ↑ She mentioned a Vietnamese statesman instead of a Chinese one.  
Never change, Chitanda.
4. ↑ A type of dry fruit that splits open to release seeds.
5. ↑ Soba is a type of Japanese noodle.
6. ↑ Specifically 127mm x 188mm.
7. ↑ Literally translates to something like “the heart of the matter.”
8. ↑ This is a special birthday in Japan that happens when one is 77 years old.
9. ↑ WARNING: From here on, there will be a lot of discussions involving kanji and its potential wordplay, so I'll try to condense a quick crash course here for those who don't know much about it. Kanji are characters in Japanese deriving from Chinese, and as a result, you can read them several ways, those ways usually stemming from traditional Japanese or Chinese readings. While each kanji usually has a distinct meaning associated with it, you can combine the Chinese readings to produce something that sounds like something else, while still maintaining the meaning associated with each individual kanji. The combination of kanji and unique readings associated with them form an important aspect of Japanese wordplay.
10. ↑ Rāgarāja: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C4%81gar%C4%81ja>, Rakshasa: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakshasa>
11. ↑ Radicals refer to the various components that make up a kanji.  
‘Coffee shop’ is written in kanji as such: 珈琲館 Notice the left parts of the first two characters. Ibara and Hōtarō were debating if that radical was either jewel (玉) or king (王), when Ōhinata mentioned

that the king radical is actually confusingly called the jewel radical.  
See? Even Japanese people have trouble with kanji.

12. ↑ An expression meaning to know a lot of people from different walks of life.

### **3. Present: 11.5km; 8.5km Remaining**

As I reflected back on this, I cemented my belief that there was at least one strange thing with what had happened that day. Something that wasn't the case when I walked into the shop for the first time but was the case after I left it. I couldn't imagine that it was simply a coincidence. Someone did it on purpose. It was connected with the question about what to do with the lucky cat on my birthday, so to speak.

As I traced further back into my memories, a thought started to amass in my head. At this point, however, it still remained nothing more than an ambiguous idea. In the end, I needed to ask her for her side of the story.

The mountain-pass stopped rising. A small collection of houses started to fan out from below my vision. It was Jinde, the place where Chitanda's house was located.

By this point, my approximation of the distance between me and Chitanda was already beyond salvation. As I ran and walked, my pace continued to change all over the place.

And yet, for some reason, I felt like I'd be able to talk with her once I reached the end of the decline and finally entered the area called Jinde.

# **Chapter 4 - Easier to Just Let Go**

## **1. Present: 14.3km; 5.7km Remaining**

Around what I think was ten years ago, I had walked a fairly long distance with my sister. Apparently they were going to be tearing down an old community center and my older sister decided to take me along with her to go see it, excitingly wondering if they were going to destroy it with explosives. Actually, I'm fairly certain I was equally as excited. If I could go back in time, I would have wanted to grab my shoulders from behind and tell myself with a smile, "There's no way that'd happen." At any rate, the two of us fervently walked and walked. Even when I was on the verge of tears, she'd tell me, "It'll definitely be amazing!" and I would continue pressing forward. I was a tenacious child, wasn't I?

Of course, they used heavy machinery to assist with the demolition without a single explosive in sight, but I don't really remember feeling disappointed as a result. I think the sight of a giant building being destroyed with various crunchings and gnawings was definitely enough to satisfy me.

What I vividly remembered, however, was the brutal road home. The excitement of the trip going there had already become a thing of the past, so I blindly followed on an unknown road without even remotely knowing where we were, my stomach growling and the sun setting. As I dawdled behind, my sister said this to me.

"If you keep stopping while you walk, your legs will really start to hurt. Make sure you keep up with me."

Was I able to make it all the way back home on my own that day? I didn't remember.

Of course, the reason I even recalled this in the first place was because my legs started to hurt as I constantly switched between walking and running. Specifically, it was the joint in my right leg that started to flare up with

pain. Had it been my feet or calves, hell even my spleen, that had hurt instead, I would have been able to accept it as being something inevitable, but why did it have to hurt there?

The downward slope had all but ended.

I intentionally raised my head and saw a vast scene in front of me containing sprawling, green rice paddies that were sparsely dotted with several estates. Perhaps they hadn't cleaned it up yet, or perhaps they simply combined the Boys' and Peach festivals in this area, but I could see flying carp banners on the houses in the distance.<sup>[1]</sup> I saw the form of the wind as it flew through the banners, creating wave-like ripples, and finally felt it as it refreshingly blew over my body. The sun had already risen, but I didn't feel any discomforting heat from it. For the first time since I had begun the race on the school grounds, I felt like running a little bit. The point at which I actually wanted to run was, of course, also the point at which I could no longer bear the pain in my leg.

It probably wasn't too big of a deal, but just to be sure, I slowed down and came to a stop. A white flower had bloomed on the side of the road. Even someone thoughtless and insensitive like me could understand the beauty of nature. It was a lily bell. As I stared fixedly at the small flower without really paying attention, I touched the leg joint with my palm. I tried pressing down on it and then tried hitting it.

"Well, if this is all..."

The pain hadn't subsided, but putting pressure on the area didn't really seem to make it any worse. It didn't feel stiff either. As I finished making sure that it would probably be fine and went to start running again, a harsh voice called out from behind me.

"How about you start running seriously, you piece of shit?"

I raised my head wondering what happened and saw Nanigashi, a boy who was in my class last year, as he ran past me.

I didn't know much about him. Even though we were in the same class, we didn't really talk at all. Thinking about it, actually, I remembered hearing that same tone of voice from a while back. It was before winter break, when all of the students were cleaning up the school facilities. The trashcan had filled up, but when I went to empty it, he yelled at me with an extremely loathing voice, "You're not going." Perhaps thinking that he was just looking forward to doing it himself, I simply left without saying anything in return.

If he had known I was in Class A, he probably would have been confused to see me all the way back here. What confused me, however, was the harsh severity in his tone. I suppose somewhat unsurprisingly, it appeared that he held some deep-seated hostility with regards to me. I had no memory of me doing anything to him, but whatever it was, it probably got on his nerves regardless. Maybe he was just irritable from all the running.

If I started running now, I would end up following right behind him, and I didn't like the sound of that no matter how I sliced it. My legs were probably fine, but I decided to walk for a while regardless.

As several students passed me, I started thinking about the act of disliking something.

I don't consider myself to be the type of person that stands out and makes enemies, but I'm also not really the type of person that's loved by others either. If I were to involve myself with a hundred or so people, there'd probably be some that would absolutely not be able to stand me. After all, no matter how favorably you might try to frame me, I wasn't the kind of person that took an active role in a group setting. There were many times when I expressed flagrant disinterest in class activities. And, of course, even though I was then a recipient of all the cold, silent stares that judged me due to my nonparticipation, how should I put this, even then I was the kind of person that didn't care. Maybe it could even be called indifference.

That said, I really didn't want to approach the people that did genuinely hate me. The fact that I was walking was even a testament to that. I was different from Satoshi in that regard.

That guy never shied away from things like dealing with others, so he constantly showed his face everywhere. As well as lent a hand. And also ran his mouth. Though, in saying that, it wasn't like he was intrusive or anything. Rather than being the type that said, "Leave it all to me," he never pushed any further than, "Let me help out just a little bit." He never did anything irresponsible like that. Occasionally, there were times when his intentions were misunderstood due to his incessant flippancy. However in the end, even if he was fully aware that he was hated, he would still go out there regardless. Essentially, he was even less concerned about what others thought of him than I was. Perhaps this was also indifference.

But there were also those extremely far removed from that indifference. Thanks to Nanigashi's violent swearing, I suddenly recalled something. I felt like I had heard a similar story yesterday.

Except, the only ones who could talk about its contents were probably the two directly involved.

There was a bus stop on the side of the road.

Thankfully, there was also a small waiting area with a roof over it. The sheet iron walls were spotted with rust; the nailed-in sign had an old-looking font and glossy enamel finish. The bench was made out of plastic, and although the structure looked like it was supposed to be able to stave off a typhoon, the constant weathering made it appear somewhat fragile. In actuality, there was a large fissure stretching across it. A portion of it had faded and none of the pieces had fallen. It didn't look like it had split recently.

It was the perfect place to watch the Kamiyama High School students as they passed by. I nonchalantly stepped inside the structure and pressed myself against the shady portion as if to hide myself. As long as I waited, I'd be able to catch Chitanda when she came.

Even though Nanigashi had hissed at me to run, I ended up not even walking. There was more or less a reason for doing this.

This morning, before I had even left the starting line, I came up with an idea. Yesterday, there were three of us in the Earth Sciences lecture room: Chitanda, Ōhinata, and I. Afterwards came Ibara, who told us that Ōhinata said she was going to leave the club. As a basic summary, none of that was incorrect.

My recollections ended there, however, and the rest of the stories I heard from Ibara and Satoshi later on only served to illustrate just how important those dozens of minutes after school truly were. Saying “I was reading a book at the time so I don’t remember anything” wouldn’t cut it. As I realized this, a memory that I once deemed meaningless and threw out as a result resurfaced once more.

Setting aside if it’s even true or not, Chitanda believed that Ōhinata quitting was her fault and took the responsibility for it on herself. Even had I shamelessly got up and chased after her, saying, “I might be able to help, so please tell me the entire story,” she would have likely just shook her head silently. She was the kind of person that wouldn’t bend after something like that.

I had to stop Chitanda.

To that end, I absolutely had to remember what exactly happened yesterday after school and present her with a single inference. In other words, an inference explaining why Chitanda thought she herself was responsible for Ōhinata quitting.

I felt like I might know why.

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ Boys' Festival, taking place on May 5<sup>th</sup>, is often celebrated by hanging carp-like tube banners that flow in the wind.

## **2. Past: Approximately 19 Hours and 30 Minutes Ago**

I hadn't realized it ahead of time, but it was still too early for it to be evening outside. I left the 2-A classroom on the third floor and casually strolled over to the Classics Club room, to the Earth Sciences lecture room. I only had a little left to go before I finished the paperback I was carrying with me, so I thought I'd go over there to read it.

Students getting ready to leave were coming and going all throughout the hallway. There was a student pinning up posters on the bulletin board, but I couldn't tell which club he was from. A student carrying a massive cardboard box in both hands, her head constantly peeking out from the left and right to see where she was going, passed by me. It was the same scene I had always been witness to after school; I could hear the high-pitched laughter and low-pitched bustle all around me. I stuck both of my hands inside my pockets. I still had the change in there from when I bought lunch, so I started playing around with the coins.

You had to pass through the connecting corridor to go the special wing of the school that housed our clubroom. It was constructed on the second floor, but if it was sunny out, you could also pass through on its roof, accessible on the third floor. I walked out onto that breezy roof and could hear the high-pitched sounds of the Baseball Club's metal bats striking multiple balls.

Generally in Kamiyama High School, you could always hear the echoing sounds of the Brass Band and Acapella Clubs as they practiced after school, but it was quiet that day. I saw a girl I had never seen before leaning over the rusted handrail, wearing a melancholic expression that seemed to be saying there was not a single happy thing that existed on this planet. Had the sun been a bit lower, it might've made for an excellent painting.

I climbed the stairs up to the fourth floor. There was another bulletin board hanging in the level area between the alternating stairs, but new-student recruit had already ended so the brown of the cork stood out. The sole poster still on it featured a beautiful, grinning actress with the caption “Wait up! There’s a way for you to live a bright life as well!” written at the bottom. I had no idea what it was trying to say.

This year, the only two clubs on the fourth floor of the special wing were the Classics Club and the Astronomy Club. The Astronomy Club could occasion get noise, but yesterday they were so quiet you could hear a pin drop. As I headed towards the Earth Sciences lecture room through the vacant hallway I suddenly stopped, almost falling forwards.

The door to an empty classroom stood slid open. A person remained dangling from the doorframe above it.

As disturbing as it was, I had actually thought for a split-second that someone had hanged themselves there. How could you be so hasty, even though there was a way for you to live a bright life as well?!

I quickly realized that that wasn’t the case however. The person was hanging onto the frame with both hands.

The dangling person was a girl wearing a sailor uniform, but I could only see her profile because she faced the closed section of the door. In reality, however, that should have been plenty for me to figure out who it was. I looked at her feet and saw that her navy-colored socks were completely separated from the floor. I thought about calling out to her but hesitated. Perhaps this wasn’t something that she wanted someone else to see, and I should be sympathetic and simply continue walking along like nothing even happened in the first place.

However, the consideration ended up being in vain. I thought I hadn’t made any noise, but she seemed to notice me anyways. As she did, she let loose a little yelp and released her grip, colliding into the door with an excess of energy and falling back onto her butt. She quickly stood up in an embarrassed manner and then started to act like nothing had happened.

“Good afternoon.”

What a polite greeting.

“Yeah, good afternoon.”

“Nice weather out, isn’t it?”

“No kidding.”

Why had Tomoko Ōhinata been hanging from a doorframe on the fourth floor in the special wing after school? Had Chitanda been here, this would have turned into a profound mystery of the upmost priority. Smiling brightly, Ōhinata brought her hands behind her to nonchalantly brush off the back of her skirt.

Most likely because she already knew I saw, her acting was half-assed. I tried to ask what she was doing in the most harmless manner I could muster, but I couldn’t think of what to say.

“Umm...”

I waved my index finger around for no real reason, and then it suddenly dawned on me.

“You were trying that out, right? You were trying to extend your back?”

To this absolutely terrible attempt at consolation, she smiled bitterly.

“I’m pretty sure my back wouldn’t extend with that. If anything, my arms would.”

“Then you were trying to extend your arms?”

“Well yeah, something like that.”

With this lie, she began to look outside, beyond the window. She then looked at me out of the corner of her eyes and asked me a question this time.

“Are you planning on going to the clubroom right now?”

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

She muttered this in a casual manner, but I could tell that it went contrary to what she wanted. She had probably assumed I wasn’t going to show up.

Well, it was never really known for sure who was going to show up on any given day. People came if they felt like it; that much hadn’t changed, even after a year had passed.

At the end of the hallway, I could see that door to the Earth Sciences lecture room was currently being kept open, possibly for ventilation purposes.

“It looks like somebody is already in there.”

As she stared at the opened door, she responded.

“It’s the president.”

“Chitanda, huh?”

“Fukube-senpai is apparently at a General Committee meeting. He came for a little bit and then left right after.”

Satoshi had tomorrow’s Hoshigaya Cup to prepare for. I was more uncertain as to why he even came to the clubroom in the first place.

“Busy like always, I guess.”

Ōhinata nodded with a slight smile.

“That seems to be the case. Even this weekend, he...”

She then stopped speaking midway. Suddenly, she asked a question with a serious expression that looked as if it were skirting around some deep secret.

“You’re Fukube-senpai’s friend, Oreki-senpai, so you know, right?”

While not as bad as Chitanda, I noticed that Ōhinata also had a habit of omitting important details when she talked. With Chitanda, she would often move a conversation far too quickly and then suddenly drop it on a dime. Ōhinata, on the other hand, seemed to constantly think that she could omit certain details because the other party would know what she was talking about due to the subject being so intimate to them.

I mentioned that Satoshi was a busy person. Ōhinata agreed and then started to mention something about the weekend. I couldn’t say I knew Satoshi’s weekend plans, but I could guess that it was something that kept him busy. If pressed, I guess there was one thing I knew about, but it wasn’t really that easy to talk about.

“For the most part. You?”

“I heard about it from someone I know in my class.”

“Someone you know?”

No matter which way you looked at it, a single first-year classroom wasn’t big enough for these kinds of rumors to get around.

“Are you friends with Satoshi’s little sister?”

“Kind of. Only to the extent that we eat lunch with each other.”

“I haven’t talked with her much, but she’s a pretty strange one, isn’t she?”

Ōhinata tilted her head in thought.

“She’s certainly unusual, but not enough to where I’d call her strange. I’d say Fukube-senpai is stranger.”

With that, she became quiet.

Well then, I wonder what exactly it was that Ōhinata had heard from Satoshi’s slightly unusual little sister.

The both of us seemed to be watching each other's expressions. I tried to gauge how much she knew and how much I could tell her before things might become problematic, and it created a silence between us that made it difficult to breathe.

I grew tired of the pussyfooting. Why did I have to talk about Satoshi like I was about to touch a burning pot again? I ended up speaking loosely.

“It’s about Satoshi and Ibara, right?”

Ōhinata drew a deep breath of relief and softened her expression.

“Yeah, that’s right. I guess you knew after all.”

Ibara had liked Satoshi for a long time now. At the latest, I learned about in the winter of our third year in middle school. Satoshi had continued to evade the matter, but I, intending to neither cheer on Ibara nor support Satoshi, didn’t observe what became of it in the slightest.

That said, I heard that over Spring break Satoshi had finally stopped his running and hiding. Ever since then, it seems that his weekends have been consistently busy.

“This is just something that she told me, but...”

Up until this moment, I had never been blessed with the opportunity to gossip with a female student over some rumor. I’m sure anyone in this position right now would have undoubtedly had a happy expression looking as if it were submerged in some guilty pleasure. I remained silent as she continued.

“Since the two of them started dating, for three days now, Fukube-senpai’s become some pitiful creature that can only repeat ‘I’m sorry’ over and over, like he’s supposed to be apologizing to Ibara-senpai for some reason. Did something happen?”

Oh come on. To think Satoshi’s situation would be found out by his sister and even passed along to his junior, talk about a pitiful story. At least the

saving grace was the fact that Ōhinata apparently didn't know any of the specifics. Certainly enough, in order to remedy the fact that he had put off his answer for over a year, Satoshi probably had a lot of things he needed to tell her.

That said, I really wasn't all that interested. I prepared a brief answer to appease Ōhinata as she looked at me expectantly.

"He was probably just apologizing for making her wait so long when he didn't deserve her patience in the first place."

As I said something bewildering like this, Ōhinata sat there dumbfounded for a second.

I had assumed she was going to question me further, but instead, she smiled unexpectedly and simply said this:

"How nice. I like how friendly it all sounds when you say it like that."

I didn't know how to respond. Ōhinata continued to stare at me, and then quietly stopped smiling. As I tried to force some idle chitchat between us, she stopped me and said, "Um, senpai."

"Yeah?"

I stopped and turned around. Calling out to me, Ōhinata started to mumble in a garbled manner, "Umm, well," and then finally resumed like she had given up on what she was trying to say.

"Please wait up for a second."

She then headed back over towards the doorframe she was previously hanging from and jumped up to it once more.

I was understandably surprised. As a result, I didn't really have it in me to ask what she was doing and simply waited like I was told.

I stared at Ōhinata's back as she dangled there. Her skirt still had some white dust on it from when she had fallen earlier. It was regrettable that the

school-wide cleaning had been so glossed over.

“At any rate, it gets really tiring hanging like this.”

I thought that it looked tiring as well, but I mentioned, “But you’re hanging there of your own volition.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I just felt like doing it,” she said as if she were hiding something.

I asked a question.

“Or maybe someone is hanging you from there.”

“I feel like that also might be that case.”

I thought for a little bit. If she was hanging there because of someone else, I truly felt sorry for her. I had often been in the same situation with my sister, so I understood what it felt like.

“If that’s the case, you should just pull yourself up, yeah?”

Ōhinata turned her head to look at me.

“I don’t have enough strength in my arms to do that. Wait a sec.”

I’m pretty sure it had only been for some tens of seconds. Ōhinata let go and stuck a perfect landing this time. She then turned around with a bright smile.

“It’s probably easier to just let go. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

At that moment, it hit me that something was a little bit strange. On the day of the New Recruit Festival, when Ōhinata came to our table and signed up, I had thought that she was awfully tall for a first-year. Perhaps I had even thought that her constantly smiling, snow-tanned face and ever-excited disposition were somewhat of a hassle.

Yet, at this moment, yesterday after school in the special wing's fourth floor hallway, Ōhinata began to resemble a normal first-year, perhaps even a middle school third-year, she appeared so small.

“Well then, should we get going?”

I felt a false bravado emanate from her happy-go-lucky voice and knew I wasn't far from the truth.

I wondered what Chitanda was doing by her lonesome, but it turned out she was diligently reviewing her textbooks and dictionary in a manner befitting an exceptionally serious student. When she realized we entered, she looked up with a wide grin and closed her books.

“What were you two talking about?”

I wasn't surprised in the least. Not only was the Earth Sciences lecture room door open, but Chitanda had incredible hearing. Even though she wasn't able to suss out the exact details, she was probably at least aware of the fact that we were talking in the first place. I didn't feel like lying to her, so I spoke truthfully.

“We were talking about how Satoshi seemed really busy.”

It wasn't the whole truth, but it wasn't a lie either. Chitanda nodded without a trace of doubt.

“Yeah, tomorrow's the Hoshigaya Cup after all.”

It might've been my first time hearing someone other than Satoshi call the Marathon Competition the Hoshigaya Cup.

“It's been three days since I've seen you Ōhinata, hasn't it?”

“Oh... is that so?”

Ōhinata responded halfheartedly as her eyes wandered around the room. She then slowly began to approach Chitanda.

“Um, would it be alright if I sat next to you?”

Chitanda appeared to be started, but responded with a kind expression regardless.

“Yeah, feel free.”

I suppose the reason the door was open was to allow for ventilation after all. Several of the windows overlooking the school grounds were pulled open as well, and the bundled up curtains were swaying to a minuscule degree. Because it was already the end of May, the wind that blew inside wasn’t cold.

I set up a chair in the third row from the back and three seats from the window overlooking the school grounds. I sat down and pulled out a paperback from my school-issued shoulder bag.

I heard the sound of a chair being pulled back. Looking up, I saw that Ōhinata had situated herself at the desk directly in front of Chitanda’s. As I found the page that I left off on and started to follow the characters on the page, I became aware of the fact that Chitanda and Ōhinata were talking.

How long had it been, I wonder.

“Yes.”

My concentration broke after hearing that one word.

The book was very interesting, but there were a few boring scenes as well. As I was losing interest during one of these portions, an unexpected voice suddenly brought me back to reality. I looked up and saw Chitanda facing away from me. It didn’t look like she had turned around in my direction at all.

I thought I might’ve just imagined it. No, I was fairly certain that I heard someone say the word “yes.” It had to have been Chitanda. I suddenly

realized something else. Ōhinata must've disappeared at some point. Well it wasn't like it was that strange. She probably just left to go home.

At any rate, I tried calling out to Chitanda from behind.

“What’s wrong?”

My voice wasn’t very loud, but it wasn’t so quiet as to not reach her either. However, she didn’t budge an inch. At first I thought she might’ve fallen asleep, but there was no way anyone could’ve slept with their spine as straight as hers was sitting there. I tried calling out to her again, this time making sure I did so in a louder voice.

“What’s wrong?”

Chitanda’s body jerked in surprise.

She slowly looked back over her shoulder. She wore an expression I had never seen up until this very moment. There was not a hint of light present in her stiffened eyes. She briefly shook her head like she was frightened of something and then quickly returned to her front-facing position. I thought something might have happened, but thinking that nothing grave could’ve happened in a classroom with only the two of us and thinking that even had there been a problem, Chitanda would have certainly told me, “I’m curious,” I assumed nothing was wrong.

I suddenly realized that the wind outside had become somewhat fierce. It blew all throughout the Earth Sciences lecture room. The sun hadn’t set yet, but the temperature was already beginning to drop. I stood up to go close the windows. Chitanda remained sitting upright as she stared into the space in front of her.

I returned to my seat and started reading once more.

I began to fly through the passages, and by the time I raised my head once more, I had finished one more chapter. I doubt much time had passed in that period.

I had intended on finishing it, but it was gradually becoming dark outside. As I put my book back down, thinking that I should leave shortly, the door suddenly opened and Ibara walked inside.

“Hey, did something happen?”

When Chitanda muttered falteringly with a “no,” Ibara turned back towards the hallway and then spoke with a somewhat concealed voice.

“I just passed by Hina-chan over there, and she was saying she wasn’t going to join.”

### **3. Present: 14.5km; 5.5km Remaining**

A few Kamiyama High School students passed me as I hid in the darkness of the enclosed bus stop. While some of them looked as if they had just left the start line on the school grounds, others looked as if they had expended the last of their energy on the vicious uphill and downhill sections as they gasped for air. There were even some that looked like they gave up on the Hoshigaya Cup as they casually lumbered along.

Truthfully, I wanted to be able to look down at the ground and think in peace. If I were to do that, however, I would almost certainly miss Chitanda when she eventually walked by.

I planted myself on the weathered bench and raised my chin as I thought.

I was convinced that the reason Ōhinata had decided to quit was hidden somewhere in the 40 or so days between the New Recruit Festival and yesterday. If I kept that suspicion in the forefront of my mind and retraced my memories then, I could certainly remember various incidents that suddenly started to seem strange. The answer she gave to the question concerning Ibara and Satoshi seemed to back up that possibility.

But what about Chitanda? Judging by her appearance yesterday, she seemed to have an idea as to why Ōhinata had decided to quit. Perhaps she thought that the reason was the result of a gradual accumulation over that 40 or so day period. Or perhaps she thought that the entire reason was due to that small period of time yesterday after school.

If the reason took place somewhere within that 40 or so day span, then that meant this:

Chitanda was convinced that she was the one who drove Ōhinata into a corner. It might have not been inspired by any sort of clear hostility or ill-

will, but Chitanda was at least aware of the situation to the point where she had immediately assumed something like, “Because I did what I did to that extent, Ōhinata is going to quit the club.” As a fact, she thought she did something to drive Ōhinata away.

If the reason took place sometime within the short amount of time after school yesterday, then that meant this:

While I was absorbed by the thrill of reading about the incredible life of a master spy, Chitanda had made Ōhinata decidedly and undeniably angry. For example, she might have done something like squeezing lemon juice over her chicken karaage without warning nor mercy.<sup>[1]</sup> Ōhinata became furious, saying something like, “I can’t bear being around a person like you any longer!” and then stormed off to quit the club. Essentially, it was something along the lines of an explosion of repressed feelings.

Which was it, I wonder?

Without a doubt, something had been festering inside of Ōhinata for the previous 40 or so days. Only that would explain why Ōhinata had criticized Chitanda in such a roundabout manner saying “she resembled a bodhisattva on the outside.”

But in that case, did that mean Chitanda was actually a yakṣa? Had she actually continued to pressure Ōhinata mentally enough to the point where she would quit?

It gradually became clearer and cleared as to what I should have focused on.

Waiting was difficult. I wasn’t the Ōhinata of yesterday, but hanging midair was truly exhausting.

This might go without saying, but the worst part was the possibility of accidentally missing Chitanda when I might not be paying attention. If that happened, I would end up remaining at the bus stop, waiting for someone

who would never come, continuing to wait, continue waiting even longer in vain, and finally after being found, cold and starving one winter morning, eventually inspiring a theatre production entitled *Waiting for Chitanda*. At any rate, I could no longer even try to predict the distance between the two us.

I played with a certain idea.

If I didn't return to Kamiyama High School from here, the Hoshigaya Cup wouldn't end. However, running was still a pain. Or perhaps more precisely, I was exhausted. On the other hand, I was in a bus stop. Busses were certainly a method of transportation.

In that case I would really prefer it if a bus could come and take me to the high school. It would be fine; I had some loose change in my pocket after all. I had prepared it to use in a vending machine just in case I happened to get really thirsty along the way. What a splendid idea, no? If you aren't good at mental calculation, you should use a calculator. If you aren't good at English, you should use translation software. If you aren't good at running, you should consider using an alternate form of suitable transportation. I had known this from the very get-go. Might this very thing be considered the manifestation of the strength one requires to go on living? I've truly learned some great things today.

As I was engrossed in these thoughts of mine, Chitanda passed by.

For a moment, I wasn't entirely convinced by what I saw. A part of it had to do with the fact that I still wasn't used to seeing her in the white short-sleeved shirt and crimson short tights that made up the gym uniform ensemble, but her long, tied-up hair also left me with a somewhat different impression than usual. I had seen her hair put up before, for example, when we visited the shrine right after New-Year's Day. She did it to match it with her traditional clothing. Yet this was probably the first time I've seen her tie it up high like this. It was because I was so familiar with her usual demeanor that I almost missed Chitanda as she ran past me, her lips slightly open.

I stood up and broke out into a run. My moment of confusion caused me to react late, so I made an effort to hurry.

The difficult mountain pass was directly up ahead, but I couldn't see any signs of fatigue in Chitanda's running gait. Her arms were pressed to her sides as her waist shook up and down, her feet kicked off the asphalt, and her body seemed perfectly in rhythm with the white lines that pulled the road along as she ran.

The road continued in a straight line between the dense forests and the approaching, freshly-planted fields. It was possible that the road was repaved in recent years as the asphalt was a thick black, looking as if it were brand-new. I had thought there was still some time left before it reached noon, but I squinted as I looked up at the dazzling sun already sitting high in the sky. As I measured the distance between Chitanda and myself, I continued to run.

I considered suddenly rushing to catch up with her. While it was true that one was unlikely to be paying attention to others while he/she was running, there were also a lot of classmates in front of and behind us. It also felt weird to shadow her like this. I wanted to run as fast as I could while at the same time catching up with her in a natural manner.

Keeping in line with this desire, I slowly closed the gap. I didn't need to be close enough to physically reach out to her, simply close enough for my voice to reach her.

Even then, however, it was still far.

My voice struck in my throat. My legs felt heavy. Even the pain in my leg joints seemed to relapse. My breathing suddenly became more violent.

"This is bad."

The mutter barely left my mouth.

I didn't feel like catching up.

I didn't feel like catching up because I simply didn't want to. The second I did, I would have to hammer her over the head with my reasoning and deductions. As this thought crossed my mind, my legs instantly began to feel explicitly dull. Yeah, that must have been the reason. Even then, I couldn't give up.

Were there 50 meters between us? Or were 100? Perhaps there were even more than that. I remained at a fixed interval behind Chitanda; I could neither shorten nor even extend that distance. I couldn't afford to continue like this, running as I watched her ponytail sway from left to right.

I clenched my teeth. I decided I would go either now or never.

At around the same time, something unbelievable happened.

Chitanda twisted the upper-half of her body as she ran and looked back.

Our eyes met.

There was no choice but to go. I increased my pace. Although she had turned to look behind her, Chitanda most likely had no idea that I was there. Her eyes widened, and she quickly faced forward once more. No matter how you looked at it, it was dangerous to run while looking behind you. While Chitanda naturally took the Hoshigaya Cup seriously as a part of the school's physical education and didn't slow down as a result, she also didn't make any special effort to shake me off.

If I at least had the resolve to catch up with her, I'd be able to do it. Amidst the end-of-May breeze, I ran alongside Chitanda.

She never once broke her rhythm. I saw her looking at me from out of the corner of her eye, and started talking behind a mask of composure.

“Sorry. I was thinking about calling out to you, but...”

Even though I considered how weird shadowing her would be, it ended up turning out that way anyways. Although she didn't appear to be very

interested in my excuses, I could see her tense features unravel slightly as a hint of doubt crept across her face. Perhaps in an effort to save her breath, she kept her question brief.

“Why’re you here?”

She probably realized I was supposed to be far up ahead by this point. I got to the point without a moment’s hesitation.

“I want to talk about Ōhinata.”

“...”

“To that end, I want to hear your side of the story.”

At that moment, Chitanda’s breathing became somewhat shallow. Her speed didn’t change in the slightest. As the two of us continued to run, some tens of centimeters apart, I waited for her response.

Finally, Chitanda replied with a pained look in her eyes.

“It was my fault.”

“What happened yesterday, right?”

“That’s between me and Ōhinata.”

In the short amount of time it took for her to catch her breath, she continued.

“I’m sorry you went out of your way, but I can’t bother you with this.”

Although her eyes glistened with moisture, possibly due to being too dry, Chitanda looked straight ahead regardless, not saying any more. I had predicted she would try to pile all of the responsibility onto herself like this, but I now understood that she was even refusing to simply stop and tell me her side of the story.

Even then, I didn't want to give up without first revealing my trump card, so I asked once more.

"I want you to tell me what happened yesterday. Ōhinata might be misunderstanding something."

"I appreciate the thought. I really do. But..."

Chitanda turned her head slightly and showed me a soft smile.

"This isn't anyone else's fault."

Had I not been running, I would have most likely sighed then. She was so utterly convinced that that was the case. Even though there was something I knew and wanted to tell her...

I wanted to grab her shoulder to get her to stand still, but was no way I could've done that. Putting as much strength as I could behind my voice and praying that it would be enough to reach Chitanda, I spoke.

"You're wrong."

I tried to reason with that profile of hers.

"That's not what it was. *Ōhinata wasn't angry at you for peeking at her phone. That wasn't the case at all.*"

For the first time, Chitanda's infallibly rhythmic breathing began to crumble apart.

The course ran alongside the edge of the forest, but it looked less like a forest and more like some sort of grove surrounding the local shrine. The street in front of Mizunashi Shrine led to the riverside as well.

There were no traces of anyone else being in the shrine grounds. I couldn't tell exactly what kind it was, but I could hear the sound of a bird chirping in the distance. There was a water spout, the kind that didn't pour into any sort

of basin, so Chitanda stood there collecting the water running from its diagonally cut bamboo nozzle using the shrine ladle and then brought it to her mouth.

“I’m quite skilled at running long distances.”

Chitanda continued, her gym clothes impeccably aligned on her body.

“I was thinking I would try to go through the entire course without walking once.”

“Sorry.”

“The water here is really cold and delicious. You should have some.”

Because she moved aside as she said that, I washed my hands and then took some as well. The crisp water looked cold enough to sparkle, so I figured it would hurt my stomach if I drank it all in one go. I took only a little into my mouth and let it slowly trickle down my throat from there.

When looking beyond the shrine's tori, you could see the line of Kamiyama High School students running the course.<sup>[2]</sup> None of them looked through this tori and up the stone stairs to notice us standing here, however.

Chitanda suggested that we enter Mizunashi Shrine because “it wasn’t the kind of story you could tell while running on the roadside. Certainly enough, this place was very quiet, and it probably made it easier to calmly tell a story.

Chitanda’s head drooped slightly, and she stood gripping her left arm with her right hand. Watching me as I slowly drank the water, she asked me a question in a collected voice.

“You saw, right? What I did...”

“No, I didn’t. That’s why I want you to tell me everything.”

“You didn’t... see?”

Even as she muttered this, Chitanda didn't urge me to go on. I washed my hands once more beneath the stream of water. The cold sensation felt good.

"I could only see your back. That, and I also heard you say 'Yes.' I could pretty much guess what happened though."

"Did I really say something like that?"

"I guess you did it subconsciously after all."

I showed her a wry smile.

When I parsed through my memories of yesterday, I remembered a single voice saying the word "Yes." I had thought that it was somewhat sudden, but because Chitanda didn't really say anything about it, I assumed it wasn't a big deal and forgot about it accordingly.

However, when that single word brought me back into reality from the book I was reading, Chitanda and I were the only ones in the Earth Science lecture room. Thinking perhaps that Chitanda had been trying to call for me, I then replied with the typical response, "What's wrong?"

What was that all about, then? Hypothetically, even had I mistook the sound of the wind for her voice, she should have reacted instantly when I called out to her. And yet, the first time I called she didn't even turn around, and the second time I called she only briefly turned in her seat.

I should've realized the meaning behind it then and there. Essentially, Chitanda hadn't directed a single word at me. As for why...

It wasn't like she didn't like me enough to suddenly start talking to me or anything.

"That 'Yes' was the sound you make *when you answer a phone.*"

"Is... that so?"

"Was I right about you answering a phone?"

“Yes, I certainly was answering a phone. I don’t really remember, however, if I said “Yes” or “Hello” at that time.”

It wasn’t an impossible story. People don’t often say those kinds of formalities consciously. Hypothetically, had I heard her say “Hello?” instead, I would have most likely known she was on the phone.

“Even when I called you, all you did was briefly turn around without saying anything.”

“I remember that. But I mean...”

“You couldn’t listen to me because you were on the phone.”

Chitanda nodded.

Of course, Chitanda wasn’t the one who made the call, she simply received it. If that weren’t the case, she probably wouldn’t have only started with a simple “Yes.”

Chitanda didn’t own a cellphone, however. I didn’t know if there was a reason behind it, but she didn’t have one regardless. Whose was it, then?

It may have been left behind by one of the students who had a class in the Earth Sciences lecture room that day. It was possible that it suddenly started to ring after classes had ended.

Upon further consideration, however, that seemed unlikely.

“If that phone was left behind by someone in a place that was difficult to see, I’d expect that the only way you would notice it would be if it made enough noise upon receiving a call or message. Yet, I didn’t hear a single thing.”

Ringing or beeping out loud was one thing, but even someone like me who didn’t have a phone knew that they made a dull “bzzz” sound when they vibrated against a hard surface. If a sound like that had reached my desk, I would have realized it after being pulled away from my book. After all, that’s exactly what happened when I heard the small “Yes.”

That meant that there was either no sound, or that the sound was so quiet it couldn't reach me. Why was that?

"If the phone was Ōhinata's, everything would make sense."

"Ōhinata-san's phone was silent?"

"No way, that's not it. Try and remember; where was Ōhinata's cellphone?"

Chitanda quickly responded.

"It was on top of the desk. Ōhinata-san put it there after she sat down."

Thinking back on it now, something similar happened when we had all the Kagoshima artisan sweets laying around. Ōhinata placed her phone on the desk that time as well. I didn't remember doing anything like that when she was in her casual clothes, so maybe it's solely a sailor uniform custom.

"And then yesterday, you had a textbook and notes on top of your desk. If you put a cellphone on a soft surface like those, the vibrating sound would have been quieter and I wouldn't have been able to hear it."

If you were visiting someone else's house and the phone started to ring, what would you do if there was no one around to answer it. Simply ignoring it and waiting for it to stop ringing was certainly one option. However, the other option was to instead pick up the phone and inform the other party that "no one in the house is currently available." In actuality, when we went to *Blend* earlier as trial customers, Chitanda ended up arriving late precisely because she had stopped to answer the phone at someone else's house. When she realized that the cellphone was vibrating yesterday, she probably answered in order to pass on any messages.

It didn't end happily with her good intentions, however.

"When you answered the phone yesterday, Ōhinata was missing, of course. It's not like she left to go home, however. She probably just wandered off to go to the bathroom or something. That's why she quickly returned. And that's when she saw you using her phone."

Chitanda slightly nodded.

Yesterday, after hearing that single “Yes,” the strong wind blowing around the classroom had started to make me chilly, so I went to close windows. The reason the wind was circulating so much could probably be attributed to the fact that the Earth Sciences lecture room door *was open*. When Ibara came later, however, I distinctly remembered that she had *opened the door to get in*.

This meant that someone had to have closed that door at some point.

That someone was probably Ōhinata. She had probably only briefly left, returned, and then finally left for her house. She closed the door behind her at that point, saw Ibara, and then told her she was going to quit.

“Ōhinata’s cellphone started to vibrate on top of my dictionary.”

Chitanda began to speak.

“Ōhinata-san went to go wash her hands so she wasn’t around. I thought it might be bad if I went ahead and answered on my own, but what if it happened to be really important… Anyways, I picked it up. I think I pressed a strange button and it suddenly stopped vibrating. I don’t really remember myself, but if I did say ‘yes,’ then I must’ve thought it connected. However, I couldn’t hear any voices coming from the other end.

“Because it wasn’t mine and I didn’t know how to handle it, I tried placing it in the palm of my hand and seeing if I could manage to hear something. At any rate, I was desperately thinking of how I could avoid breaking it… I remember you calling out to me. Thinking about it, actually, I should’ve asked you for help.”

If she thought that the call went through, I guess it couldn’t have been helped.

“You placed it into the palm of your hand, and after that, the person on the other end didn’t say anything.”

“That’s correct.”

I fear Chitanda may have never used a cellphone before.

I’ve seen Satoshi use his phone numerous times in the past, so even I could hazard a guess as to how to use one. Ōhinata’s didn’t vibrate because it received a call. It most likely simply received a text. Chitanda probably didn’t press any strange buttons either. The phone vibrated for a predetermined number of seconds and then stopped by itself. Or perhaps it really was an incoming call, but the predetermined ringing length had expired, sending the call to voicemail. At any rate, Chitanda had held the cellphone in her palm and no call ended up going through.

Ōhinata had no way of knowing that, however.

“Ōhinata-san returned to the classroom. I had never seen her look at me with those kinds of eyes before, so I couldn’t even speak... She grabbed the phone from my hand and said, “Goodbye,” in a cold voice that it sounded like she was going to disappear forever, and then she immediately left. I’m stupid, aren’t I? It was then when I finally realized how much I messed up.”

“It was just a cellphone.”

“To me it was just a phone, but...”

Chitanda forced a bitter smile.

“All of us have something we treasure.”

Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Because I don’t have one myself, it was impossible for me to know just how much Ōhinata-san treasured her cellphone. Now I do know. To people who have one, its importance must be akin to something like that of a diary. No, perhaps even more so. If your friend peeked at your diary without telling you, wouldn’t that already be reason enough to cut ties with them? Everyone has secrets, and I thought that I knew that... It only makes sense that Ōhinata-san is angry at me.”

I could see where she was coming from. Certainly enough, things like that happened every now and then.

“What are you going to do now, then?”

“I planned on going to apologize to her once we returned to the school. After all, I couldn’t do even that yesterday.”

From Chitanda’s perspective, this was probably the obvious answer. If she tried her hardest to sincerely apologize, Ōhinata might be able to forgive her. That was if the cellphone was the only problem, however.

What happened yesterday wasn’t everything that had happened between them. Ōhinata most likely got angry when she saw Chitanda touching her phone. It might’ve even been the final straw, but it certainly wasn’t the whole problem. I responded.

“You should probably give up on that. It’s useless.”

“Yeah.”

Chitanda gave a slight nod.

“Oreki-san, you said it wasn’t because of the phone, didn’t you? If that’s true, then it probably will be useless after all. But if that’s the case, then...”

She became quiet and started to think for a little bit.

For someone often slow on the uptake, Chitanda always seemed to be sensitive during times like these. She suddenly lifted her head to look at me and started speaking, her voice dipped in loneliness.

“I’ve probably hurt her without realizing it, haven’t I?”

Things somehow ended up turning out like this.

Yesterday, before entering the clubroom, Ōhinata had been doing something quite peculiar. She had been hanging from a doorframe, looking as if she wanted to do something. In all reality, it probably wasn’t the case that she

wanted to do something at all. The Earth Sciences lecture room door had been open, so it was possible to see inside. Knowing that Chitanda was the only one inside, Ōhinata hesitated. Just like when I hesitated while chasing after Chitanda earlier.

When I would be called to the Student Guidance Room, as I would stand in front of the door, not knowing why I was called there in the first place, I would slap my cheeks to find the resolution to walk in. Whenever I received a letter from my sister and assumed that it would just be something unsavory again, I would look up to the heavens and sigh before I cut the seal. These rituals of mine that I used to strengthen my resolve were probably just like her “hanging.”

In other words, Ōhinata headed towards the classroom yesterday with the resolution of one prepared to settle a battle once-and-for-all. She had planned from the start to resolve things with Chitanda. This could also possibly explain why she looked so disappointed when I showed up.

Chitanda brought both her hands in front of her and gazed downwards with melancholic eyes. She then muttered something, almost as if sighing.

“I won’t ask you to believe me.”

“Believe what?”

“That whatever I did to her wasn’t my intent. That, although it appears that I wasn’t a good upperclassman to Ōhinata, I didn’t wish for that to happen. That I don’t know what it was that I did wrong. I won’t ask you to believe me when I say these things.”

How could she say that this late in the game? I had no idea what spawned it. Sometimes, the things Chitanda said made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

“It’s too late for that now.”

“Yes, I know.”

“If you had truly thought that you did something to wrong her, there’s no way that you’d do something like stop in the middle of the marathon. You wouldn’t do it purposefully, not on a tiring day like this one.”

Chitanda’s head came up in surprise. I was the one to turn away this time.

This was, above all, a gamble. Had Chitanda done it on purpose? Did she truly put on a beaming exterior while secretly harming Ōhinata, forcing her to quit the club?

None of the evidence denied it.

Had this been the me of one year ago, I probably would have come to that conclusion. With my subjectivity out of the picture, a lot of information seemed to be pointing to the possibility that Chitanda had indeed pressured Ōhinata. There wasn’t anything that could decisively deny that.

But this past year had happened. Even if it wasn’t everything about her, hell, even if it was nothing more than the utter smallest of fragments, I had come to know Chitanda. I had heard about the story of her uncle. I had been taken to the movie video preview. I had gone to stay over at the hot-springs inn. I had sold the anthologies at the culture festival. I had had the pointless discussion after school. I had been trapped inside the shed. I had held an umbrella up for a doll.

That’s why I denied it.

Even though Chitanda might’ve seemed different from other people because of the extraordinary tranquility surrounding her, I didn’t feel like she would have chased away a new recruit.

It was a gamble born from an extremely irrational premise full of “I didn’t feel likes,” and what I ended betting on looked something like this: “Ōhinata felt pressured by Chitanda in the 40 or so days that she had spent with us, but not only did Chitanda not intend for that to be the case, she couldn’t even think of anything aside from a simple misunderstanding that might have caused Ōhinata to become angry with her.” And somehow, it looked like I won.

Mizunashi Shrine lay surrounded by giant cedars. The birds around us cried ceaselessly. I glanced at Chitanda out of the corner of my eye, and as she stood there bathed in the spotted sunlight filtered by the branches above, I thought she looked somewhat like a lost child who had finally been found.

“Oreki-san, I...”

Unfortunately, however, I had no time to spare. Chitanda’s group was the last of the second-years to start. I needed know everything before Ōhinata caught up.

“So what kinds of things did you talk about yesterday?”

Chitanda looked like she wanted to say something, but she eventually responded with a resolute nod.

“I understand. I’ll tell you everything that happened.”

Immediately after she said that, however, I heard her mutter something else under her breath.

“But no matter how I look at it, it was your normal, everyday after-school conversation...”

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ Karaage is a method of deep-frying something without coating it with anything other than a small layer of flour.
2. ↑ The large, wooden (and often red) arches that are commonly found lining paths leading into shrines.

## **4. Present: 14.6km; 5.4km Remaining**

Yesterday, I was reviewing my English class materials.

I could tell someone was in the hallway. Because it was so quiet yesterday, I could clearly hear the sound of footsteps. I couldn't tell exactly who it was, however, until I saw you enter the class yourself. I also realized then that the person you were talking to was Ōhinata.

I could really feel that there was some kind of wall between Ōhinata and me. It was like she was always being far too polite when she said hi. That's why I was really happy when she started talking to me of her own volition yesterday.

At first, we started talking about the textbook sitting on top of my desk. Things like about how she wasn't very good at English, about how math would probably be more useful anyways, and about what subjects I myself was good at. I had thought it was a very typical kind of chat.

After that, we moved on to the weather. Because the Hoshigaya Cup was going on the next day, Ōhinata was telling me how she was hoping it would rain. Because I had assumed she was the athletic type, I believe I told her that I found her saying that to be unexpected. She laughed and then told me, "Running cross-country because I like it and running in school are two entirely different things."

It felt like this entire conversation was predetermined, however. Thinking back on it now, Ōhinata might have decided on exactly what she was going to say ahead of time. She suddenly cut herself off and looked like she wanted to say something else. I didn't encourage her to say it or anything, but I don't think I did anything to prevent her from telling me either. But she ended up taking a small breath, and said this in her usual cheery voice.

“Ibara-senpai isn’t here today, huh.”

I didn’t know whether Mayaka-san would be coming or not, so I just went along with that.

“I suppose so. Perhaps she went to the Manga Research Society?”

As soon as I said this however, I realized I made a mistake and went to correct it.

“Oh that’s right, she quit already.”

I remembered that as soon as I said this, Ōhinata started to lean in out of curiosity.

“What? Ibara-senpai was in the Manga Society?”

“That’s right. She’s really good at drawing. I think she had some friends in the club, but it’s probably for the best that she quit.”

As I said this, Ōhinata seemed to become a little tense.

“Ibara-senpai joined the Manga Society because she liked manga, right? If she had some friends there as well, why would her quitting be ‘for the best’?”

I was somewhat at a loss for words. After all, I knew that Mayaka-san had experienced many painful things while being in that club. Mayaka-san would have likely never told Ōhinata-san anything about these painful experiences herself, so I wondered if it was okay for me to talk about any of it without asking her first.

That’s why I spoke about it very broadly, making sure as to not give any specifics.

“Let’s see. I do think that Mayaka-san still has some affection for the club, but... it seems that there were a lot of people in the Manga Society who had views differing from Mayaka-san’s. I’m sure there were still ways for

everyone to agree on certain things, of course. Last year, I believe she put up with quite a bit.

“However, trying to reach an agreement while everyone continues to hold onto their differing opinions can be quite difficult. While she might have some regrets, I do think that she made the correct decision in the end.”

Ōhinata-san listened to me as I said this with uncharacteristic attention. It looked as if she were peeking into my eyes, and then as she politely lowered her head in front of me as I sat there troubled, she said this.

“Even then, you shouldn’t just abandon them, right?”

“Abandon” was such a harsh word to have chosen.

I’m sure you were also aware of this, Oreki-san, but Mayaka-san actively alienated herself from the dominating faction in the Manga Society. When talking solely about her supporters in the club, however, I suppose one could make the point that she abandoned those in the minority that looked up to her by quitting. Thinking that was Ōhinata-san’s point, I responded.

“It might’ve been painful, but Mayaka-san needed to look out for herself as well. Even though she was hurt in all the conflict, no one in the Manga Society came to her aid.

“Truthfully, there was no reason Mayaka-san had to introduce conflict into the Manga Society. It probably would have been best if she had simply remained aloof, appearing to only be concerned about the manga aspect. It’s already far too late for that however, and Mayaka-san isn’t the kind of person to do that anyways.

“...If she was going to eventually quit at some point, wouldn’t you agree that it was a good idea to do so at the start of a new academic year?”

Ōhinata-san was lost in thought. It made me feel a little happy that she was thinking of Mayaka-san to that extent.

After a little while, Ōhinata-san showed me a smile that even I knew was fake and got up from her seat, saying “I guess she didn’t choose a bad time, did she?”

She then added, “Excuse me for a second,” and proceeded to leave the classroom.

Oreki-san, I don’t get any of it! I didn’t really say anything that strange yesterday after school!

## **5. Present: 14.6km; 5.4km Remaining**

I understood what Chitanda was saying. Certainly enough, had you heard only that, all her story would amount to would be “Chitanda was worried about Ibara and supported her decision.” The story being strange or not aside, none of it even concerned Ōhinata from the start.

However, I had also heard several other stories as well. I started to understand the true nature of the invisible wall that Ōhinata had holed herself up behind. Knowing this information while listening to Chitanda’s story, I felt like I understood somewhat just what it was that welled up from within Ōhinata.

Ōhinata thought that Chitanda was a terrifying upperclassman. Chitanda thought that she had pushed Ōhinata to the point of quitting. Before today’s Hoshigaya Cup had even started, I had realized something was off.

Satoshi had said it from the very start. He found it surprising that I had been able to recruit a new student into the club. I felt indifferently about the entire thing. It’s not like we really did anything in the club after all. Whether Ōhinata joined or left, none of it mattered to me.

However, I didn’t want there to be any unresolved misunderstandings left behind. If I was the one being misunderstood, I probably wouldn’t have minded, but that wasn’t the case.

“Is there anything else I can do?”

There shouldn’t have been anything else that I absolutely needed to know. There was still something, however, that I had decided I would ask Chitanda before the race had even started.

When I retraced through my memories before arriving at Mizunashi Shrine, I realized that there was one more thing I could only confirm with Chitanda. I thought it would've been strange to ask about it when it was brought up initially, but now I understood why.

"There is. I want to ask you one more question."

"Go ahead."

"It concerns the day when all of us went to the coffee shop owned by Ōhinata's relative. Before we left, Ōhinata asked you a single question. It was about whether or not you knew a certain first-year."

As I expected, Chitanda instantly remembered.

"Yes, it was Agawa-san."

"Who is she?"

That day, if I remember correctly, Chitanda was instantly able to answer when asked by Ōhinata if she knew her. I naturally assumed that she had some relationship with Chitanda.

"Well... I don't really know anything about her."

"Really?"

"All I know is that she's a first-year in Class A."

"Even though you don't know her, you know which class she's in?"

"Even you should know, Oreki-san."

I should?

Chitanda had an incredible knack for remembering faces and names. After all, last year, she was able to remember my name after simply meeting me once in a music class that we were only briefly in together. That's why I

didn't find it strange that she might have seen Sachi Agawa's name somewhere. But I wasn't capable of doing that myself.

There shouldn't have been many opportunities for us to learn the name of an underclassman. I looked downwards as I thought.

First-year. Class A. Sachi Agawa.

"Someone I should know... Agawa... Agawa..."

"Come on."

Chitanda suddenly spoke up. She probably didn't say it like that in order to tease me. At the same time, however, it suddenly dawned on me.

Agawa from Class A.

It was likely that out of all of the girls' seating numbers, she sat at the most obvious one. This was representative of one having the best grades before entering the school.

"Was she the student representative during the entrance ceremony?"

"That's correct."

Chitanda nodded.

"The number one boy from Class A, Naoya Aikura-san, and the number one girl from the same class, Sachi Agawa-san, were the ones who said the pledge during the ceremony. Of course, I thought the question was abrupt and somewhat strange, but I just assumed she was just trying to test my recollection."

That wasn't it. There was no way that was a simple test.

"Do you know anything else about her?"

"She had extremely long hair. Because I could only see her from behind, that was all I knew."

Ōhinata probably wasn't aware of this, however.

With that, I had asked everything I had wanted to ask. All that was left was to talk to Ōhinata.

I couldn't say I wasn't anxious. It was enough to make me want to follow Ōhinata's example and try hanging from some doorframe somewhere.

"Okay, that's plenty. I should be able to take care of the rest, so you should return to the course."

As I said this, I raised my head.

Chitanda's eyes lay massive right before mine.

As I recoiled back, she said this to me.

"I'm sorry, Oreki-san. I'll leave the rest to you. Ōhinata probably won't listen to anything I have to say anymore. But..."

"If Ōhinata-san is truly suffering because of something, won't you please help her? If there was some sort of unfortunate misunderstanding, won't you please unravel it? I won't ask you to bring her back to the Classics Club, but could you do at least this?"

That was my intent. That was my intent from the very start. I nodded that I understood, and Chitanda lowered her head slightly, turning back and dashing to the road once more.

# **Chapter 5 - Approximating the Distance between Two People**

## **1. Present: 17.0km; 3.0km Remaining**

I ran without thinking for some time after.

Chitanda had started a couple minutes before I did, so I wasn't likely to catch up with her. All that was left for me to do was to wait for Ōhinata. I could've achieved this by simply standing still and waiting for her, but I ran regardless. Some of the pain in my knee still remained, but be it through the small river path that was constantly bounded by the May wind, be it on the cedar-lined road that chilled my skin with the moisture in the air, be it over the exhaust-filled sidewalk that followed the bypass, I ran regardless.

A traffic signal appeared in front of me, and the green pedestrian walk light began to blink. In front of the signal stood a General Committee member with a face looking like a first-year's appearing poised to potentially stop my rhythm. I slipped past the side and flew across the crosswalk in one go. At that moment, I realized I had finally entered the city's center once more. Residential cars and trucks came up and down the bypass, and looking up, I could see several rows of featureless apartment buildings.

Running was scary. The inside of my mind went blank. It felt like all of the events I had remembered as well as all of the ideas I had formulated were all beginning to melt and drip down from my brain. I could understand the happiness behind achieving that pure, detached mental state, but I absolutely had to remember everything at this point. And yet, I continued to run. Wasn't it possible that I had indeed forgotten something along the way, like water spilling recklessly from a cup? I knew I had to calm down, but I couldn't stop running. Just like you'd see in an actual long-distance race, my breathing was short and my arms swung bit-by-bit.

It was strange. Last year, I had experienced so many one-on-one encounters. During summer break when we watched the upperclassmen's video movie project, it was with Irisu-senpai. In the parking lot during the

culture festival, I had a face-to-face conversation with only two of us. There were probably so many others as well, but because my breathing was so rapid, I couldn't remember any of it.

I had a certain thought, however. No matter the extent to which I had confronted them at those moments, none of it weighed as heavily on my heart as it did now.

Possibly in order to steer clear of any intersections, the course that previously stretched straight alongside the bypass as it skirted the suburbs turned onto a thin street passing through a residential area. Because it was in a particularly old corner of Kamiyama City, rust and amber-colored sheet iron roofs stood out on all sides. I slipped by postboxes with their cinnabar paint peeling off and by telephone poles with fading, yellow reflectors and approached a bridge built over a small channel only several meters wide.

This place would probably be good. There was water nearby, it was cool and refreshing out, and there was a small area at the foot of the bridge I could stand on without getting in anyone's way. I steeled my nerves and stopped running. I squatted down with an "Oh, my laces came undone!" and put on a show like I was retying my dirtied shoes, but it only made me feel like a smart-ass.

I could hear the slight murmuring of the water in the channel. Students clothed in white and crimson passed me on my side.

It was difficult to smile after running a ten or so kilometer track.

There was an exhausted boy moving even more slowly than a normal walk, but he continued to move his arms up and down as he maintained a running posture. There were two girls walking side-by side, their heads hanging down, perhaps bound by some promise like "Let's run all the way to the end together!" There was another student trudging along, face contorted in agony, likely in some sort of pain. I couldn't see a single smile among any of their faces.

I figured that, by this point, essentially all of the second-years had already gone ahead. Everyone I could see now was a first-year. Judging by their faces as they ran without knowing how much longer they needed to run, they were a miserable bunch. It made me want to reassure them that if they continued running earnestly, they would reach the end in no time. If I did, I guess I would also turn into everyone's beloved "senpai," whether I wanted to become one or not.

Once I retied the laces on my right shoe, I started retying the laces on my left one. Once I retied the laces on my left shoe, I started retying the laces on my right one. This was how I earned myself time crouching there.

I saw off dozens of tired faces, and wondered how long I had been waiting there.

Then Ōhinata appeared.

Just like I had assumed would be the case, she wasn't with anyone else. With her arms hugging her flanks and her mouth slightly open, she ran at a fairly quick pace, entirely alone.

I slowly stood up and waved to her. She noticed me immediately.

I had initially thought that she might decide to ignore me. If that was the case, then it couldn't be helped, and I was prepared to give up on the entire thing altogether.

However, Ōhinata looked at me wide-eyed and began to drop her speed, eventually coming to a halt right in front of me. She calmed her slightly labored breathing, and then suddenly brought her face up to look at mine.

"You're in quite the strange location, aren't you senpai?"

It was difficult to smile after running a ten or so kilometer track.

And yet, Ōhinata showed me a beaming grin, just like she had done during the New Recruit Festival.

“What’s wrong Tomoko, who’s that?!”

Someone suddenly called out to Ōhinata in a teasing manner. Ōhinata responded to the figure.

“It’s just an upperclassman from my club!”

After finally being convinced by Ōhinata that it was nothing, the student started to run off once again. She was probably a classmate.

“She’s only shrewd when it concerns things that are none of her business.”

After jokingly complaining, Ōhinata started to squint at me.

“But seriously, senpai, what are you doing here? You were supposed to have started way ahead of me if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Wait!”

She suddenly stopped me with a sharp command and then brought a hand to her chin.

“Let me try to guess. General Committee members normally stand in places like that. But you aren’t a member, Oreki-senpai. Fukube-senpai, however, is a member, and the two of you are friends. I understand it now.”

She raised her head and asked me, “What do you think’s my guess?”

Was she perhaps unaware that she had already said it out loud?

“You think that Satoshi’s relying on me by having me serve as a replacement General Committee member.”

“Bingo!”

Her face instantly lit up. Unlike yesterday after school, it was a natural smile. Perhaps it was runner’s high? Or maybe she felt relieved of a large

burden after deciding to quit the club.

“Well? Was I right?”

I pointed at my shoes.

“My shoes have dirt on them. If I was acting as a General Committee member, I would’ve been dropped off here, so my shoes wouldn’t have gotten this dirty. They’re like this because I had to run.”

Ōhinata looked at my sneakers and pouted seemingly in disappointment.

“But only a normal person would have been able to run enough to get them that dirty. How did you manage it, Oreki-senpai?”

“I’m telling you I ran here myself. What more do you want me to say?”

“Well, why are you here then?”

“I wanted to say something, so I waited here.”

“To whom?”

After asking this, she suddenly pointed a finger at herself with a shocked expression.

“What? To me?! Yikes...”

I guess she wasn’t really averse to being ambushed like this. If anything, she seemed amazed.

“I’m sorry you took time out of your day for this.”

She briefly lowered her head in apology and then continued speaking while playing with her short hair.

“To be honest, I did expect that someone would come and say something to me, but I didn’t think it would be you during the Marathon Tournament, Oreki-senpai.”

She then stared fixedly at me and smiled.

“But I’m sorry. I’ve already made up my mind. It was a really fun club, so I’m sure someone else will join quickly enough.”

There was no way that would happen.

At the same time, I hadn’t really intended on trying to stop her from leaving either.

“That’s not what I wanted to talk with you about.”

I took a small breath.

“There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Um, I’d be in a bind if you asked me out here.”

I brushed the joke aside and hit her over the head with the single sentence I had spent my time carefully refining.

“Chitanda doesn’t know a single thing about your friend.”

“What...”

“She doesn’t know a single thing.”

Ōhinata’s expression quietly vanished from her sun-tanned face.

Chitanda didn’t know a single thing. At the same time, however, that was exactly how much I knew as well, and Ōhinata quickly realized this herself.

How long did the silence continue, I wonder. A runner enjoying his spare stamina ran by directly next to us, causing wind to form in his wake. As if riding this breeze, Ōhinata started to speak.

“If Chitanda-senpai didn’t know anything, then who told you?”

“No one did.”

“I don’t want to have a long conversation here.”

I felt the same way. We’d stand out far too much if we talked while standing directly next to the course. I had prepared for this ahead of time. I gestured with my eyes over to an alleyway lined with wooden fences in-between two old houses.

“It should be fine if we take a different road.”

“Uh...”

She was at a loss for words.

“Is that even allowed? This is the Marathon Event, right?”

“It’s the Hoshigaya Cup. Of course if you want to keep everything on record, I won’t say it’s impossible.”

Ōhinata looked at the alleyway and then at the students dutifully crossing the bridge as they progressed through the course, and she started to think. I didn’t have to wait very long for her answer.

“Alright, let’s do it. I’m a bit nervous though...”

It would be bad if we were seen blatantly leaving the course. Ōhinata and I waited for a lull in the passing line of Kamiyama High School students and then nonchalantly slipped into the alleyway.

## 2. Present: 18.6km; 1.4km Remaining

“This road leads back to Kamiyama High School, right?”

Considering she was being taken along an unfamiliar road, it was no wonder she felt uneasy.

“It connects back up to the course in front of Arekusa Shrine. It’s quite the shortcut, you know.”

“A shortcut, huh...”

Apparently still hung up on our leaving the course, I could hear her grumbling.

“You pretty much do whatever you want, don’t you Oreki-senpai.”

I wouldn’t say that was true. If I absolutely had to, even I would properly run the entire length of the course. I just couldn’t think of any others alternatives, so it couldn’t be helped that I had to resort to this.

The two of us walked. There was no longer a need for us to run.

Lined up.

“Hey, a cat,” muttered Ōhinata. I looked, and certainly enough, I saw a cat sitting atop the wooden fence. It was striped like a tiger.

“Senpai, you don’t like animals, do you?”

“I haven’t considered whether or not I do. Why’d you assume that?”

“Because animals are a pain in the ass. Don’t you dislike things that are a pain in the ass, senpai?”

She was dead-on. At the same time however, I've never really considered myself to be someone that disliked animals. I never really went out of my way to like them either, however.

“Aren’t you assuming a little too much?”

“Probably...”

Her voice became slightly quieter.

“That’s just like me. I always assume too much.”

“Give me an example.”

“I’m assuming that you’re covering for Chitanda-senpai by lying to me about her not knowing anything. If she didn’t know anyone, then how could you have known about it?”

During this Hoshigaya Cup, I had done a lot of thinking about Ōhinata. ...

“That’s not it. If you think about it, you can learn a surprisingly large number of things.”

“Really?”

I assured her that was the case, and she sighed.

“From the very start, it’s not like I even said Chitanda-senpai was the reason I was quitting.”

“You didn’t say it outright, but you told Ibara ‘Chitanda looked like a bodhisattva,’ right?”

“Isn’t that compliment?”

If that was truly the case, then why was her head hanging so low as she said it.

“‘If someone looks like a bodhisattva on the outside, then they must be a yakṣa on the inside,’ right?”

Ōhinata weakly looked up at me with a bitter smile.

“I went through the trouble of pretending I didn’t know about it, so couldn’t you just follow suit?”

“Second-years know a whole bunch. If you didn’t want us to know, you should’ve tried something harder.”

“Like Russian?”

“Like Russian.”

A small pebble rolled in front of us. Ōhinata kicked it down the street and let out a shallow sigh.

“I guess you found me out. If Chitanda-senpai really didn’t tell you anything, then how about you tell me, senpai? How was I wrong?”

“This isn’t about being wrong.”

“It was just a figure of speech.”

I had arrived at my conclusion based on what I remembered from Ōhinata’s behavior; I hadn’t heard anything from Chitanda. As long as I didn’t explain this process to her, she probably wouldn’t listen to what I had to say. There was probably no working about it, but it was difficult to arrange everything in order.

“I wonder where I should start.”

“Why not from when we first met?”

Of course that seemed to be the easiest solution, but...

“That would make it really long. I feel like it should be possible to condense it a little.”

“It’s fine if it’s long, isn’t it? After all, we...”

She paused as if to think about her choice of words, and then continued with a conflicted smile full of self-mockery.

“After all, we accidentally veered from the proper path.”

To think she could say such disreputable things about us. I even told her we would join up with the main group later...

I suppose it was true, however, that we broke off from the school event. There wasn’t a single trace of anyone in the alleyway around us under the midday sun. Even the cat that was there earlier seemed to have disappeared amidst the silence. Only the sound of our footsteps and voices resounded off the wooden fences.

“Well then, for now I guess I’ll start at the very beginning, on the day of the New Recruit Festival.”

As I said this, Ōhinata stared hard into the side of my face. I continued, slightly put off.

“On the day of the New Recruit Festival, you overheard Chitanda and I having an unimportant conversation. Even thinking back on it now, you must have ended up stopping in a really inconspicuous place.”

“It wasn’t unimportant at all. You may have potentially saved somebody’s life then.”

Now that she mentioned it, I suppose that really was a serious case of food poisoning. I hadn’t considered up to this point that what took place at our table ended up being that significant of a conversation. At the moment, however, I didn’t care to think about it.

“The biggest hint from that conversation was actually something you said.”

“Really? Me?”

She pointed at herself.

“What did I say again?”

“I don’t remember your exact choice of words, but it was something along the lines of ‘shady people don’t wear nametags.’ It was because you said that that we were able to figure out what it was that the Confectionery Society was missing.”

A somewhat happy look appeared in Ōhinata’s eyes.

“Now that you mention it, I guess I did say something like that.”

It certainly felt like it happened ages ago considering not even two months had passed since then. A recollection that had previously been trapped in my memories somehow escaped and reminded me of the smiles that Chitanda and Ōhinata had exchanged that day, completely uninhibited by worry.

“What captured my interest even more than that, however, was what you said right before it. I think it was something like this.”

I took a single breath.

“This is just something a friend told me, but...”

“...You have quite the memory.”

“After all, the second I heard it, I thought that it was probably you just expressing your own opinions.”

During the Hoshigaya Cup, I had asked Satoshi to try something for me. What would he think if I told him, “This is just something a friend told me, but no matter how you think about it, it’s pretty unfair that the General Committee doesn’t have to run.” Satoshi responded with, “So that’s what you really think, huh? I’d think something like that would make me pretty upset.” I thought it was a fairly representative answer.

“When people have something difficult to say to someone else, they often use phrases like ‘I heard this from someone,’ ‘there’s this rumor,’ or ‘I overheard this just now’ and make up some imaginary third-party to soften

the blow. This wasn't something that I said, and I don't believe it at all, but apparently it exists somewhere in the realm of thought... I suppose it feels like a way of talking to someone using their back gate."

"Using their back gate... what a roundabout way of saying that."

Ōhinata smiled bitterly.

"Just say what you're thinking and call it cowardly."

"I'm not so brazen that I could criticize somebody like that."

The alleyway continued to stretch on. I thought I saw something move out of the corner of my eye, but it simply turned out to be laundry hanging on a drying pole over someone's veranda as it swayed in the wind.

Had Ōhinata been using a method like this when talking with us? That's what I had originally thought, however...

"In your case, that back gate comparison didn't apply."

There was no response.

"This is just something a friend told me.' *This 'friend' isn't an imaginary third-party, but rather actually exists in reality.* I can't be certain that every phrase you evoked your friend for was something that they actually said, but some of them undeniably came from that very real 'friend' of yours."

Without either affirming or denying this, Ōhinata continued to stare at me with an incredibly calm expression.

"Why do you think this?"

"Your actions and your 'friend's' actions contradicted each other. Things happened that wouldn't have had you been simply using this 'friend' as a pretense for expression your own opinions."

"No way... nothing like that happened."

She complained listlessly as she stared at her feet.

“It was on the very last Sunday in April, from 2 PM onwards.”

“I don’t remember anything about that, but considering you can talk about it so specifically, I’m assuming it was on your birthday, senpai?”

“That’s correct. Let me just thank you again for celebrating it with me in the first place.”

“I’m very happy to hear that you enjoyed it.”

Even as we exchanged these pleasantries, the uncomfortable tension between us as we carefully watched each other showed no signs of letting up. It wasn’t like it was incredibly tense, but I figured I’d proceed with caution anyways.

“That day, if I remember correctly, I brought up the idea of getting some pizza. It’d be perfect for the five of us to snack on, but in the end, we didn’t order any. Do you remember why?”

“I do.”

She raised her head and responded immediately.

“It was because Ibara-senpai doesn’t like cheese.”

I nodded.

“That’s right. ...By the way, did you know that even though Ibara talked about it like she didn’t like any cheese at all, she’s apparently perfectly fine with cheesecake?”

“Oh yeah?”

I cracked a small grin.

“I’ve eaten it with her once before.”

She didn't respond to this little observation of mine. Ibara and I might've not been on the best of terms, but we had known each other for over ten years. I had seen her many times, and in one of those scenes she happened to be eating cheesecake.

"Do you remember what you said at that moment?"

After I asked that, she nodded slightly.

"I believe I said 'You don't like cheese either?' or something like that. 'One should throw away rotten mandarin oranges and spoiled milk.'"

Sure it was a normal food to dislike when divvying your likes and dislikes, but it seemed like an awfully excessive way to word it. That wasn't all, however.

"You forgot the 'This is just something a friend told me, but...' in front of it."

"Is that so."

I was sure she remembered, but she played dumb regardless.

"You have quite the memory. You get unexpectedly hung up on the small stuff, don't you senpai?"

"Even you remembered something like Ibara not liking cheese. So even I try to make it a point to remember what people can't eat. It'd be bad if I ended up recommending something bad to them even after hearing it after all."

"...Is that really how it goes?"

She scratched her check and showed me an embarrassed smile.

For a bit, the alleyway seemed to curve around an old house with sheet iron walls. A lot of water appeared to be dripping onto one of the walls from a raised gutter, and the sound it made felt refreshing to my ears.

“After that I assumed that you couldn’t eat cheese. After all, I thought that the ‘This is just something a friend told me’ simply prefaced your own words and opinions. That’s why I thought something seemed off when we went to the coffee shop.”

After reaching this point, Ōhinata seemed to be able to piece the rest together on her own.

“I see, so that’s what it was. I’m an idiot as well.”

“I thought for sure that you’d order the plain cream. Imagine my surprise when you didn’t.”

At the coffee shop started up by Ōhinata’s cousin, the only thing we could eat there were scones as well as the jam and cream to spread on top. There were two types of jam, and as for the cream, he offered us plain cream and mascarpone.

I didn’t remember most of the specifics, but the two things I did remember were that all of us had ordered a different combination of jam and cream to the shop owner’s dismay and that the same Ōhinata who had said “One should throw away rotten mandarin oranges and spoiled milk” had chosen a cheese-flavored cream.

“I realized it at that moment, although I suppose I would’ve realized it far sooner had I accepted what you always said at face value.”

Ōhinata had told us “This is just something a friend told me” from the very start. I should’ve simply accepted that for what it was rather than trying to add all sorts of complicated, unnecessary layers to it.

“You have a ‘friend’, and unlike you, this person dislikes cheese.”

Ōhinata bit her lip and didn’t reply.

She didn’t even retort with the obvious response, “Of course I have friends, what of it?”

That silence of hers spoke plenty. Ōhinata had a certain friend she didn't want anyone to know about.

The back alleyway became somewhat convoluted and it contained some small crevices along the way that only a single person could squeeze through at a time. To my surprise, I saw a nameplate attached to a wall containing the name of this particular neighborhood. That meant that even this narrow road was an actual street in the city registry. As I silently applauded myself for getting this far, Ōhinata spoke up from behind.

“Is this even an real street? Kinda suspicious if you ask me.”

Although she said this in a joking manner, her voice contained none of its usual playful lightheartedness.

“What are you planning on doing if I’m lying?”

“What are *you* planning on doing?”

“Well I’m not lying, so I have no idea.”

There was no way to continue this kind of constricted small talk. We passed through the back alleyway, carefully stepped over a flowerpot sitting in the middle of the path, and finally stepped out into a slightly larger street. I finally took a deep breath.

It was halfway up a gentle slope. Ōhinata looked left and right and muttered a question.

“Where are we?”

I had no idea how to explain it in relation to other points in the area, so I decided to just cover up that fact.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

As we started to descend the hill, Ōhinata walked alongside me.

There was no doubt that in our previous conversation, Ōhinata indicated that she indeed had a friend and had also been parroting this friend in her talks with us. There were other things I knew about that friend, however.

“By the way, that ‘friend’ is also from middle school I assume. That’s quite a special relationship. There’s also the possibility of that person being from your prep school or something else, but that aside, they must have transferred here in their third year, and after, didn’t enter Kamiyama High School with you.”

As I suddenly brought this up, Ōhinata fiercely raised her eyebrows. It was clearly a look of suspicion. There was no reason for me to repeat what I had just said.

“Chitanda didn’t tell me this.”

“But there’s no way you could know that much...”

“You said yourself that you didn’t have any friends in high school. When you, Satoshi, and I walked home after school that one day, I’m pretty sure you said just that. If you didn’t have any in high school, then it’s clear that that ‘friend’ of yours must have been from your middle school days, right?”

When Satoshi and I went to walk home that one rainy day, we ended up seeing Ōhinata right as we left the gate. Because she told us, “I haven’t really made any friends yet,” the three of us ended up walking together. I distinctly remember thinking on the inside, “Is that so? You really seem like the social type though...”

“That was...”

Even though she spoke up, she quickly became quiet again.

“You didn’t mean, however, that you didn’t have anyone you could speak intimately with. It seems like you’re on good terms with a bunch of people in your class, and yet, you don’t refer to them as friends.”

I waited a little bit for her to respond. She stayed silent.

If she continued to clam up even as I baited her like this, however, she would probably need energy equal to something like the equivalent in order to speak up once more. In reality, it looked like she had become quite depressed just from me talking like this.

I was going to tread on her feelings and thoughts and analyze this girl that I had so naturally talked to yesterday as her upperclassman. Essentially, I was going to be telling her "This is who you are." I ended up stopping as the gravity of my actions towards her flooded into the front of my mind. I had to continue.

"Because I'm going to be talking about yesterday now, I'm sure the both of us will be able to remember it perfectly. We had a little talk in the hallway before entering the clubroom. The talk itself was meaningful of course, but I was also intrigued when you mentioned being in the same class as Satoshi's little sister."

Ōhinata had known about what had happened between Satoshi and Ibara, and while not knowing the exact details, she also knew about him owing her. She had apparently heard all of this from Satoshi's little sister.

"I think that Satoshi's little sister is a considerably strange person, but apparently you don't feel the same way. By the way, someone who talks about all of her sibling's romantic entanglements to someone she isn't very close to is strange no matter how you might try and frame it.

"If you did hear about Satoshi's entanglements from that girl, then you had to at least have had a friendship with her strong enough for her to be able to tell you those kinds of things. Additionally, you said you also ate lunch with her, right? And yet, you wouldn't even refer to someone like Satoshi's little sister as a friend. I essentially realized it because you kept on simply calling her your 'classmate'."

A truck was coming up the hill towards us. The road was getting wider, but I stepped in front of Ōhinata to form a single file just in case. The sun was right in front of us. I had used this pass every now and then, but I didn't realize the hill faced the south.

Smelling the exhaust as it passed me, I lined up with Ōhinata once more. I then continued on like nothing had happened.

“Thanks to a certain strange meeting, I’ve been constantly dragged into hassle after hassle over the past year. I got to thinking in all of that and it made me realize something. The situation always required me to solve everything. At that moment, Satoshi had said I had the ‘detective’s role’, but I didn’t like the sound of that at all. It made me kind of embarrassed, and I didn’t want to be referred to in that manner.

“That act of not wanting to call it that purely due to a selfish desire that held no regard for its validity... isn’t that what you’re doing right now? You don’t want to use the word ‘friend’ like it was cheap. Since not even two months had passed since you entered high school, even though you had intimate conversations with her and sat by her side as you both ate lunch, you still couldn’t find it in you to use that word to describe Satoshi’s little sister. Isn’t that the case?”

I should’ve realized how preciously Ōhinata regarded that word a lot time ago. She even said it clearly herself when talking about what it was she treasured the most on that rainy day. Again, things turned out so convoluted and roundabout because I hadn’t taken her words at face value.

Ōhinata opened her mouth. A slight “I...” leaked out.

But in the end, she didn’t continue.

She restrained herself almost as if sighing. The problem wasn’t over yet.

“In this case, what kind of person is the one you call your ‘friend’ then? The only thing that’s certain is that that person doesn’t go to Kamiyama High School.

“Well, that kind of thing couldn’t be avoided. When I graduated from middle school, I ended up having to leave a bunch of people who I was on good terms with as well. Satoshi was about the only person that came with me.”

Although I said it like that, I couldn't actually think of any names aside from Satoshi's. What a heartless reality.

Was it a case of them being seldom seen and soon forgotten? Or was I truly a little coldhearted after all?

I suddenly began to smell the scent of miso soup drift in from somewhere. I saw a small puddle of water on the ground where some residents must have been washing something off. Most of it had already dried up under the shining spring sun. I hadn't fully realized how dead the streets would be before noon. Even though I had assumed we see the occasional neighborhood resident and had even prepared a way to talk ourselves out of their certain questioning, we didn't meet a single person. I thought it a little strange that we constantly saw these traces of human activity but never saw the people themselves. At any rate, had this not been the case, we wouldn't have had the chance to walk around the town like this on a school day.

"All Chitanda told me was what you two talked about in the clubroom after school yesterday."

As if half talking to myself, I continued.

"It was about Ibara, huh. About how she quit the Manga Society. Chitanda agreed with her decision to leave it. She probably even gave her a push. I don't really know both sides of the issue, so I can't say if I personally agree or disagree. What I do know, however, is that Ibara really calmed down after that. It may have been for the best simply on account of that alone."

"By the way, yesterday after school you clearly looked like you were preparing yourself to try and settle something. In order to clear up something and stop your feeling of perpetual suspension, you decided you were going to confirm something with Chitanda. Was it about what happened with Ibara? Did you argue with Chitanda over her decision to support Ibara because you didn't want her to leave the Manga Society?"

Of course it wasn't. Ōhinata herself quickly replied.

“It wasn’t.”

“If that was the kind of conversation that you couldn’t have without readying yourself, I would have a hard time believing that you could simply bring it up on the fly and in a single go. I figured you were just changing the subject or perhaps hiding your true intentions.

“So I tried to think further back. There was indeed a point at which you threw a sudden, unrelated question at her. It was when we were at the coffee shop started by your cousin. I believe it went something like this. Chitanda has a big face, but I wonder if she knows a certain someone? Chitanda responded by saying that person was a first year in Kamiyama High School.”

“Agawa. Sachi Agawa. Class 1-A”

“I have no idea who that is. She was simply someone you used to judge how large Chitanda’s face was, right?”

“You should know who Agawa is, Oreki-senpai.”

“Chitanda told me the same thing. She gave the pledge as the student representative this year in the entrance ceremony, but simply knowing that isn’t enough to say that you know them.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

I stopped walking and turned to face her.

“If it’s someone that I should know, then do you mean she’s from Kaburaya Middle School?”

“That’s right.”

If Ōhinata knew her, then it wouldn’t be strange if she came from Kaburaya. Unlike Chitanda, however, I couldn’t do something like remember the names and faces of underclassmen that I had no connection with. As I thought this, however, Ōhinata started talking as if reproaching me.

“She was the Health Committee president. Do you seriously not remember her?”

“...Was that so.”

Certainly enough, in the latter half of my third year in Kabuyara Middle School, I lost to the majority vote and ended up joining the Health Committee. Because none of the third-years could handle an actual position on the committee as they prepared for the testing season, a second-year was chosen as the president. I guess her name was something like that after all.

Hearing this however, I understood something else.

“I see. If that’s the case, then I can say this with even more certainty. What you wanted to confirm by asking Chitanda that question was: was her face so large that she could even accurately identify a student from Kaburaya Middle School when she herself went to Inji Middle School? When she told you she did recognize that name, I remember that it came as quite the shock to you.”

Ōhinata probably expected her to say “I don’t know” at that moment. After that expectation was shattered, she was dumbfounded. Maybe expectation was the wrong word to use. Perhaps it was her hope. Even though she understood how many people Chitanda knew, she hoped that it wouldn’t be to that extent.

“What Satoshi said was poorly worded. After all, he made it sound like she knew everyone that lived in this city. I’m telling you this just to make sure that you understand, but Chitanda doesn’t know anything about Agawa outside of the fact that she was the student who gave the pledge during the entrance ceremony.”

I had already become used to his exaggerated phrasing. That’s why I took everything he said with a grain of salt. It wouldn’t be impossible for Ōhinata to misconstrue it as the truth, however, as she had only just started to hear him speak often this year.

Ōhinata shook her head slightly however.

“I wonder about that. And I’m not talking about Fukube-senpai. Didn’t Chitanda-senpai also know about your friends as well? She got one of them to show her your old Kaburaya Middle School anthology. She even knew about when Fukube-senpai was singing in the broadcasting room in middle school.”

“You’re really afraid that Chitanda may know your ‘friend’, aren’t you.”

There was no response.

Essentially, that meant Ōhinata had yet to tell me the entire story.

This “friend” was a special existence to her. Even though it influenced her to the extent that she even borrowed phrases, Ōhinata didn’t want anyone else to know anything about it. And then, enter Chitanda. She knew about Satoshi’s and my past, and according to Satoshi’s exaggeration as well, her knowledge of others was something incredible.

“I should’ve realized you were afraid of Chitanda then and there.”

“Then and there?”

“Don’t you remember?”

Although I said this, even I myself couldn’t remember exactly when it was. Pulling it as clearly as I could from my memories, however, I continued.

“It was when we were talking about how Ibara was sharp-tongued, but we couldn’t imagine her ever snapping at Chitanda. You said maybe it was because she knew and could exploit all of Ibara’s weaknesses. Because it was so ridiculous, neither of us gave it any thought. Thinking about why you might’ve imagined something like that, however, I finally understand why.”

It was because, rather than knowing Ibara’s weaknesses, she was afraid that Chitanda would know hers.

“You were only cautious around Chitanda. Thinking rationally about it, rather than it being Chitanda who would know about your friend, shouldn’t

it be me? I went to the same middle school as you after all.”

“Oh, that’s why...”

Ōhinata’s voice seemed to be blurred with resignation as she continued.

“That’s why you said she must’ve transferred here in her third year.”

“That’s right. If she was someone in Kaburaya Middle School and yet there was no way we’d know her, she must’ve transferred in after we had already graduated. At any rate, the fact that you seemed very relaxed around us supports this. You only feared Chitanda.”

It wasn’t something that I did consciously. Before I realized it, a small sigh escaped from my lips. As if fearing that sigh alone, her body stiffened. I couldn’t see a single trace of the underclassman with the winning attitude that I had known in her.

“In order to start thinking about this, I put together a hypothesis based on what I heard about your conversation with Chitanda yesterday after school. Chitanda talked about Ibara. There was neither subtext nor an ulterior meaning. She talked about Ibara.

“But that’s not how you heard it. As you hung from the doorframe contemplating just how much Chitanda knew, you decided that you needed to bring this whole dark and shady matter to light. The conversation you had after was the result of you steeling yourself with the resolution needed to confirm your suspicions. It was possible that that was some sort of metaphor.”

If you implicitly distrusted someone, you might end up seeing them as some sort of demon.

If I accepted this to be true, then I could say that Ōhinata likely saw Chitanda as a *yakṣa*.

With that, the misunderstanding became clear.

“In her conversation with you yesterday, this is the gist of what she said. To Ibara, the Manga Society was already a detrimental lost cause. In the interest of protecting herself, Chitanda believed that her decision to quit was the correct one. To that, you responded with this. ‘Even then, you shouldn’t just abandon them, right?’ It was strange for you to suddenly use the word abandon. If I had to choose, I’d say it was the Manga Society that chased her away, and yet, why did you choose that word to describe it all of a sudden?”

I took a breath.

“If I’m wrong, just tell me.”

I prefaced it with that.

“Isn’t it that you felt Chitanda was trying telling you to abandon your own ‘friend’ in that conversation?”

Ōhinata looked up at me weakly.

“How can you say for sure that that’s not what she was getting at?”

Even as she said that, I could tell that she herself didn’t believe the words coming out of her own mouth. No one whose voice resonated in such a weak, raspy manner could think something like that.

“...Hey. Can you think of the reason why Chitanda thinks you’re quitting?”

She had a confused look in her eyes, but she didn’t respond.

“She thinks it was because she touched your cellphone without asking you that you got angry at her and wanted to quit the club.”

“What?”

“Can you believe it? Someone who just became a second-year on the verge of tears as she told me she honestly thought that that was the reason. That girl told me she was planning on going to see you after reaching the finish line to apologize for touching your cellphone yesterday.”

Ōhinata's eyes became wide and her mouth looked as if it were poised to laugh. The only thing that escaped from her throat, however, was something that sounded like a strange, choked sob.

Ōhinata lowered her head. Her shoulders started to shake.

They shook because she was silently laughing; that's what I wanted to believe.

### **3. Present: 18.9km; 1.1km Remaining**

The scenery opened up before us.

As we finally passed through the narrow residential streets, we neared Arekusa Shrine's rear approach. The street was wide and shops lined the left and right sides of the road. It normally bustled with activity on New Year's and during the spring and autumn festivals, but at this moment, it was dead silent and only the shops' banners retained their festive colors.

“So we get out here, huh.”

Ōhinata started to mutter this as if finally being convinced.

“Once you take that path through the shrine, you can connect back up with the original course. Feel better now?”

“Oh come on, it’s not like I doubted you or anything.”

I wonder about that.

The sun shone brightly as it approached midday. Our shadows took on a deep shade as they stretched along the asphalt. Summer was already just around the corner.

“Senpai.”

Ōhinata raised her arm and pointed towards a single shop. A large, old-fashioned umbrella and tatami-styled bench were set up in front of it.

“I want to eat some dango.”<sup>[1]</sup>

“What’s up with that all of a sudden?”

“I’m tired, so I decided I wanted to eat some dango.”

After making this one-sided statement, she immediately started walking to the store. I followed behind her, flustered.

“Hold on a sec. We’re technically in the middle of class right now.”

It didn’t stop her in the slightest.

“You brought me this far off the course and now you want to start talking rules? We might as well break all of them at this point.”<sup>[2]</sup>

“Do you even have money on you?”

Hearing this, she finally turned to look at me over her shoulder.

“You have some, right?”

She smiled as she said this.

“I could hear the coins clinking around in your pocket.”

Surely enough, I had brought some with me in case I wanted to buy a drink halfway through the course, but...

“I swear, you never stop once you get going. What if I don’t have enough?”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that. Do you have enough?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled them all out. In my palm, I counted ¥240 worth of ¥100 and ¥10 coins.<sup>[3]</sup>

The shop Ōhinata had pointed out was very reasonably priced. Even though there were people here who would still probably buy it at a more expensive, touristy price, the traditional-looking sign on the wall said “¥80 for one stick”.

“...I guess I do.”

“Then it’s decided.”

Ōhinata lightly sprinted over to the shop and called out in front of it.

“Excuse me, three sticks of dango please.”

Was she planning on sucking me dry? Wait a second, why was I even treating her in the first place? The questions didn’t stop coming, but I supposed it was already too late to do anything at this point anyways considering she had already ordered. I guess I could act like a good upperclassman and treat her just this once. ¥80 though... Talk about a cheap favor.

The one working the shop was an old, sweet-looking lady. The two of us must’ve looked like we ditched class considering we were still in our gym clothes, but without bringing any attention to it, she simply said, “We have mitarashi and yomogi.”<sup>[4]</sup>

“Three yomogi.”

“I think mitarashi is better.”

“It’d be annoying to deal with any questions if the bean paste got on our clothes.”

Thinking about it, that was a very good point. She really payed attention to the strangest things.

Before I fully realized what was going on, the two of us ended up sitting on a bench eating dango. Although I thought I preferred mitarashi because I didn’t like the strong, vegetation-like smell of mugwort, the yomogi’s fragrance ended up being really refreshing. The sweet taste sank into my bones.

“I feel alive again.”

As Ōhinata muttered this, I found myself nodding without realizing it. It had a certain kind of feeling to it. Even though this long-distance running

event seemed to carelessly stretch on forever, it was almost like our fatigue itself was being fatigued as well.

Five balls of dango were stuck on her skewer. She ate two more and then looked up at the sky, taking a long, drawn-out breath.

“Ah, I feel so refreshed. I haven’t felt like this in forever.”

She then suddenly said something to me.

“Senpai, there’s something you haven’t been saying on purpose, isn’t there.”

“About the dango?”

“Of course not.”

Yeah, there’s no way it would be about the dango. There was certainly a very large gap present in our previous conversation. I hadn’t intended on saying anything about it, but Ōhinata brought it up herself.

“There was a certain ‘friend’ of mine that I wanted to conceal, and I was afraid that Chitanda might’ve known about this person and me. Why was that, then? Why, do you think, was I trying to conceal the existence of this ‘friend’?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“You’re so full of it. If you’re going to be kind and tell me a lie, at least make it a good one.”

Without saying anything, I stared at the dango in my hand.

I guess she saw through me. I did have a general idea as to what might’ve happened. It might even be more accurate to say that it was precisely because I figured out what I had that I was even able to put everything together in the first place.

I hadn't intended on talking about any of it however. I thought it was something that she wouldn't have wanted anyone else to know about. That said, it wasn't like I was entirely certain that I knew the entire truth.

"Man, why did it have to come to this."

As she muttered this, Ōhinata pulled another dango off with her teeth.

She then started to speak.

"I thought she was a good person. Just like you said, senpai, she... that girl transferred here in her third year. She was a really strange one. I didn't know if she had trouble making friends or if she didn't even care about having any in the first place, but she was really independent."

"I was her very first friend and probably her only friend in this entire city. She told me this herself, after all. The two of us made a promise that'd we'd never leave each other."

"That's a tough promise to keep."

"I didn't think so when I made it, apparently. I was pretty dumb."

She beamed at me.

"I mean, I was in middle school after all. Kids in middle school are all pretty dumb, aren't they."

You're one to talk considering you just graduated from it two months ago.

"We didn't really talk that much while we were in school. It felt like a secret between the two of us. That's why I don't think anyone really knew about us being friends even though we were in the same grade. The second school got out, however, she'd show me all sorts of ways to have a good time. She took me to concerts, she taught me billiards, and we even started something like a little band. She was also the one who taught me about 'MilleFleur' jam, like the one we saw on your birthday. I told you I got this snow tan from when I went skiing, but it was the first time I ever tried it when she took me on a ski trip. It was really fun."

“It wasn’t snowboarding?”

“I keep saying it was skiing, jeez.”

As someone who had embraced the energy-saving lifestyle, I didn’t really know a lot about the different ways one could mess around.

That said, there was something that I did understand about the whole thing. To have that kind of fun, you needed money.

Ōhinata had gone on a ski trip to Iwate. She had followed a band on tour from Sendai to Fukuoka. As I heard her mention these things, I always wondered what she was doing about the money.

My sister travelled the world on a whim, but the only reason she could do that was because she earned enough money to make that possible. Ōhinata wouldn’t have that ability most likely as a middle school student. I had originally thought that her family was simply wealthy enough for those kinds of expenses to be covered by her allowance, but judging by the complaints she accidentally talked about while in *Blend*, I ruled that out as being impossible.

“And then... I ran out of money.”

Only her mouth was still smiling.

“If I remember correctly, your family doesn’t let you work part-time, right?”

“That’s right. They’re pretty strict.”

“Even though they let you go on those trips?”

“Only because I was with someone else. Essentially, they don’t trust me.”

Ōhinata then muttered something else, almost sounding like she herself hadn’t thought of it up until this very moment.

“Even if they said it was okay for me to get a part-time, I’m not even sure I would have wanted to do it to support that kind of fun anyways...”

Ōhinata had previously said “it was really fun.” I couldn’t imagine that being a lie, however it also looked as if she couldn’t truly enjoy it from the bottom of her heart because of the wasteful spending that accompanied it.

“Even though I made it a point to say, ‘Sorry, I don’t have any money at the moment,’ I don’t think it quite got through to her. She was quite peculiar, you see, so she’d just tell me to take care of it somehow so we could continue doing stuff together. I couldn’t do anything about what didn’t exist however, and besides, I had exams coming up. While I was at a loss for what to do, she told me, ‘Just leave it to me.’ She told me, ‘It’s fine. We’re friends, aren’t we?’”

There were any number of ways to get your hands on some money, even for a middle school student. The only problem was how you would go about implementing them.

After talking to this point, Ōhinata started to fumble around with her words. She was likely still on the fence about if she should continue or not. It would probably be for the best if I helped her out.

“...When you have something you want to avoid talking about at all costs, it’s really difficult when you end up face-to-face with another thing that brings that very subject up.”

Ōhinata tilted her head to the side as if unsure about what to say.

“If that kind of thing remains out in the open, someone is bound to suddenly become curious regarding it. If you make a concerted effort to hide it, however, people are liable to become even more interested in why you did that.”

Take my birthday, for example. I was constantly distressed about how I might go about dealing with the lucky cat that pointed to the fact that Chitanda had come to my house once before. As long as it sat there on the

table, I wasn't sure when it'd be brought up in conversation. It was too unnatural for me to simply remove it, however, so I couldn't do that either.

"By the time Chitanda arrived, something had disappeared unnaturally. I could pretty much guess what had happened because of that."

"Chitanda-senpai? When?"

"When we went to the coffee shop."

Ōhinata probably did it subconsciously, which was also probably why she didn't understand what I was getting at right away. When she did, however, her eyes opened wide and she stared at me unblinkingly.

"Oh, now that you mention it...! Senpai, you even noticed that?"

When we were at the coffee shop, Ōhinata had hid something.

The magazine *Shinsou*.

If I recall correctly, Satoshi had noticed the copy of *Shinsou* in the magazine rack and had asked Ōhinata if she could grab it for him. She had had a difficult time pulling it out. The rack was so crammed tight with various newspapers and magazines that she had to hold it down with one hand as she pulled the copy of *Shinsou* out.

Before Chitanda arrived, the conversation had turned to be about the weather report. I forgot the details, but while we were leaving I went to go pull out the newspaper from the magazine rack to verify if what I had said initially about the weather was correct. At that point, the newspaper had easily slid out.

*There was space where the copy of Shinsou had previously been.*

*Shinsou* had disappeared from the magazine rack. Of course, it wasn't left behind on the counter either. It wasn't really that important where it had disappeared to; it was probably simply hidden somewhere. What was strange, however, was why it had disappeared in the first place. It wasn't

obvious at all. Someone had done it on purpose, and if it was on purpose, why would they do it?

“The Suitou Co. incident... In other words, it was because of the story involving the stolen money con featured in that copy of *Shinsou*. You casually took it with you when you went to go use the restrooms. To think it would be exposed by something like that though...”

Ōhinata let loose an unnatural sigh.

“Forget Chitanda-senpai, I should’ve been more wary of you, Oreki-senpai.”

“How rude. I treated you to dango, didn’t I?”

“They really are delicious.”

She ate another ball, and only one more yomogi remained.

“I’m such an idiot. There’s no way of knowing for sure that that just having the magazine in the rack would automatically steer the conversation that way.”

“It’s true.”

“What the hell was I doing? Maybe even I don’t know the answer to that...”

After muttering this to herself, she turned to face me and nodded slightly.

“It looks like you basically understand what happened, Oreki-senpai, so I’ll just say it. That girl’s uncle was part of a rich family. Even I wouldn’t be scared if Chitanda-senpai simply had a lot of connections. The fact was, however, that she belonged to an old family, so they would naturally have a lot of old connections to other houses as well, right? She could’ve one day simply said with a smile that she went over to that very house to exchange greetings, couldn’t she have?”

It was an undeniable possibility.

“That’s right. My ‘friend’ deceived her own uncle to get money.”

“A lot of money?”

“It was a lot of money.”

Ōhinata stared at the last remaining dango as she continued.

“I was so scared. Had the police... no, that’s not it. Even had they found out everything, the police would’ve only arrested her, not me. I had nothing to do with it. However, I was afraid of her. If it was in order to be with her ‘friend’, she would do anything. She could even casually laugh off committing a crime. And that ‘friend’ was me. I didn’t know what to do. I had completely misjudged the distance between us. That’s what I’ve always thought.”

Although the sun shone so fiercely above us, Ōhinata’s body shivered for a second.

“After she learned that I was coming to Kamiyama High School, she said so many things to me. Things like ‘Oh yeah? So that’s the kind of person you are?’ and ‘You’re just bursting at the seams with lies, aren’t you?’ She was barely a couple points short on her exam so she couldn’t get in. In the end, however, even though we were going to different schools, we once more promised that we would remain friends and then promptly graduated. After entering high school, I’ve came to realize something. I was so incredibly relieved.”

Her voice gradually became louder.

“But that’s a terrible story, isn’t it. Even though its shape is twisted in her head, she still thinks of me as her only ‘friend’. ...I don’t want to abandon her. If there was some kind of misunderstanding between the two of us, shouldn’t I try to remedy that? I can’t abandon her. I’m not allowed to abandon her. It would be wrong for me as a human being. That’s what I kept telling myself.

“And yet I’m so afraid of it all. I’m afraid of her crime being exposed and I’m afraid of my friendship with her being exposed. The second the idea of Chitanda-senpai coming up to me and saying “You’re friends with her, right?” entered my mind, I couldn’t bear to face her any longer.”

Ōhinata then faced the asphalt in front of us and started to scream like she wanted to crush her words into it.

“I’m... I’m such an idiot!”

The dango shop’s owner came out and handed us both tea. We graciously accepted it but there was nothing else we needed. We had been able to rest up completely during this stop in our journey, but we had to eventually reach the finish line.

I stood up and spoke to Ōhinata as she remained sitting.

“Chitanda would be really happy if you joined the club. Ibara and Satoshi as well.”

When she raised her head however, she showed me a faint smile as she lightly shook her head.

“I got all scared on my own and then went and blamed it on Chitanda-senpai, and I even ended up saying all those terrible things to her. How could I possibly face her after all that?”

“It was just a moment of anxiety. Things will go back to normal before you realize it. Chitanda doesn’t hold anything against you; in fact she might even be able to help.”

Even I knew that that was impossible at this point. I may have cleared up the misunderstanding between them, but that only proved that Chitanda was entirely unrelated to Ōhinata’s problem.

“I know you’ve been hurt, but you can’t take it out on us.” That was all I said.

And then, as expected, Ōhinata started to shake her head once more.

“I’ll go and apologize to Chitanda-senpai eventually, but I don’t think that I can bear being in the same place as her yet.”

“I see. I’ll be going ahead then.”

The second I turned to leave, she called out to me.

“Do you remember, senpai? Do you remember what I said to you in the front gardens when I decided to join the Classics Club amidst all the recruiting?”

I relaxed my shoulders as I responded.

“Not really.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I could tell she was smiling regardless.

“You’re so full of it.”

How was she always able to tell? Was I really that easy to read?

“Seeing friends with each other makes me happier than anything else in the world. I mean it. So what I’m saying, senpai, is... these past two months... I think they really saved me.”

At this moment, maybe I should’ve turned around and said something else to her. “If you ever feel like it, feel free to stop by anytime.” In the end, however, I couldn’t. Her words came out much faster.

“The dango were good. ...Thank you very much.”

## Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ A Japanese, ball-shaped sweet usually made from rice and flour, often sold in 3s on a stick.
2. ↑ Originally the Japanese idiom, “If you end up eating poison, you might as well finish the plate.” (毒を食らわば皿まで)
3. ↑ ¥240 ≈ \$2.40
4. ↑ Mitarashi dango is the more common rice-flour type dipped in a soy/sugar sauce, while yomogi is a steamed rice type flavored with mugwort.

# **Epilogue - You Should Be Able to Extend Your Reach Anywhere**

## 1. Present: 19.1km; 0.9km Remaining

I firmly tied my laces together. The pain in my right leg had begun to lessen as well. I had finished everything I had needed to do in the span of the Hoshigaya Cup. The finish line wasn't very far off anymore, but I didn't feel like running. I walked haphazardly towards the shrine's empty approach. The road continued straight forward in a gentle decline.

I passed beneath the back approach's massive tori and entered the shrine grounds. It was a straight path to the end, so I assumed that Ōhinata wouldn't get lost. Even though I still continued to worry, I stopped myself from turning around to verify it. I lightly closed my eyes and opened them again, and I suddenly noticed a familiar mountain bike parked by the side of the road. Looking around, I saw Satoshi leaning on a nearby lantern, arms crossed.

Before I could even open my mouth, he called out to me.

"Hey. How should I put this... the walls have ears, you know?"<sup>[1]</sup> The General Committee vice-president heard that a pair of students left the course and decided to come here hunting them down himself."

So someone saw us, huh? Not only that, but to think they even politely notified the committee.

"Pretty impressive of you to guess this spot."

"Of course, considering the alleyway that we were told the pair walked down was the exact path I told you about myself, Hōtarō."

Was that so? I couldn't really remember it all too well. I didn't recall searching for the street myself, so that was probably the case.

“Are things going to get annoying then?”

Hearing this, Satoshi shrugged.

“I came here to take care of it myself, didn’t I?”

“As long as you aren’t a police officer.”

“Then I’ll be revenue officer. Or did you want me to properly reprimand you, perhaps?”

He said this without sounding amused, and then asked me another question without waiting for my answer.

“So how did it go?”

After retracing my memories and hearing various stories over a 20 kilometer distance, how did it go? This was my conclusion.

“She’s not going to join.”

“I see.”

Satoshi looked like he had expected it, but he let out a small sigh regardless.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said.

He then sized me up from behind.

“It looks like you know the reason why she won’t join at least.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If you didn’t, Hōtarō, there wouldn’t be any reason for you to talk with her in person. If it’s alright, would you mind sharing it with me?”

I couldn’t nod, however. I couldn’t tell him Ōhinata’s reason, nor could I tell him the truth behind why she had denounced Chitanda and feared her to

the point of avoiding her. Even if it was Satoshi Fukube, I felt conflicted. Possibly noticing my hesitation, Satoshi started to walk ahead of me.

“I won’t force it out of you. At any rate, let’s just walk. If you don’t hurry up and pass the finish line, I’ll never be able to leave.”

I stood next to Satoshi as he pushed his mountain bike and walked along the stone-paved road just like we had done shortly after starting from the Kamiyama High School grounds.

Just like he had promised, Satoshi didn’t push the issue. That was probably why I couldn’t remain silent about the whole thing without letting at least one small thing spill from my mouth.

“The problem didn’t have anything to do with us.”

The thing that Ōhinata feared was from her past, and her friend currently went to a different school. The problem concerning Ōhinata’s “friend” was something entirely unrelated to Kamiyama High School.

“I had a feeling...” said Satoshi. “I had a feeling that that was the case. I’m much more forgiving than you are, but even if we overlooked everything during this Hoshigaya Cup, I doubt things would be able to go back to the way they were. If this is unrelated to school, there’s nothing we can do about it after all.”

Thinking back on it, Satoshi had told me something right after the race had started. Make sure I don’t take it all on myself. After all, I’m not responsible for anything.

“How did you know?”

He relaxed his shoulders while still dexterously holding onto the mountain bike’s handlebar.

“No real reason. I was just thinking that nothing really happens to anyone on campus right after they enter school. Additionally, we kept seeing Ōhinata off-campus as well.”

He then looked forward and continued.

“Above all, we’re students. We can’t extend our reach beyond the school. There was nothing we could’ve done from the start, Hōtarō.”

Was that really the case?

In reality, what Satoshi was saying was true. When we were in middle school, Kaburaya was everything we could see. Now that we were in high school, we couldn’t do anything beyond Kamiyama High.

But was that really, truly the case? If we were to lead our high school lives without a hitch, we would complete our second year and eventually go beyond Kamiyama High School. If we were to dutifully continue this for six more years, we would eventually leave the place called school altogether. If we continued to think that we couldn’t extend our reach beyond school during this entire duration, we would be suddenly thrusted out into an unknown wasteland, bewildered as the sun started to set.

He was probably wrong.

Just like Chitanda had already carried out various dealings in society, just like my sister had been travelling the world, you should be able to extend your reach anywhere. The only thing inhibiting that was whether or not you had the will to do it.

As an energy-conserving advocate, I didn’t possess this will of course. At this moment, however, the smallest semblance of it could be found residing sedimented in the bottommost depths of my heart.

Chitanda had told me that if Ōhinata was truly suffering because of something, she wanted me to help her. I told her that I would. In the end, however, I couldn’t do anything.

I could make any number of excuses. Above all was the fact that after I cleared up the misunderstanding between them, the rest fell on Ōhinata to sort out; anything further than that would just be unnecessary meddling on my part.

But what if when I said, “I would just be meddling, so I shouldn’t get involved,” I was actually thinking “Talking about those kinds of things is a pain, so I don’t want to get involved” instead? Rather than it being an issue of whether or not I could even do anything to help, wasn’t I simply throwing her feelings aside and abandoning her?

...I was so incredible tired. My thoughts wouldn’t come together. Without responding to Satoshi as he tried to console me, I ended up asking something that was simply floating around in my head at the time.

“Satoshi. Do you recall hearing the name ‘Sonoko Sōda’ before?”

I ended up muttering it far too quietly however.

“What’d you say?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

No matter how much Ōhinata had feared the issue of her “friend” being brought to light, I felt that there had to have been inciting incident, a moment that had led her to start doubting Chitanda in the first place. For example, a moment at which she accidentally ended up saying that friend’s name.

Thinking about it like this, I could only remember one instance during which Chitanda had clearly said a name in front of Ōhinata; it was when she referenced “Sōda” while talking about finding my address in one of my old class anthologies. Hadn’t Ōhinata started to fear Chitanda from the moment she mentioned she was an acquaintance of Sōda’s?

Without that first name, “Sonoko,” she might’ve thought that it was simply another ambiguous family with the same name. When I was talking with her earlier, Ōhinata referenced her “friend” using “sonoko” only once, correcting it to “anoko” quickly after.<sup>[2]</sup> Couldn’t it have sounded similar to her friend’s name and thus inspired the fear from then on?

It was simply a guess, founded on absolutely nothing concrete, so I’d have to confirm it with Chitanda. And yet, if I didn’t have the resolve to try and

save Ōhinata, I probably didn't even have the right to ask her in the first place.

As we approached the edge of the shrine gate beneath the massive tori, Satoshi climbed on top of his mountain bike once more.

"From here on, it's an official school event. Make sure you run properly."

I nodded and saw him off as he pedaled away. I then started to move slowly and gradually picked up speed from there, returning to the Hoshigaya Cup course. All of the second-years were probably already at the finish line as I could only see first-years in front of and behind me. I looked up and saw the white Rengō Hospital. Beyond it, I should begin to be able to see Kamiyama High School.

I turned back following a gust of wind, but as I looked across the group of suffering first-years, I couldn't find that smiling, suntanned face. As for how far back she was, there was no longer any way anyone could approximate that now.

## **Translator's Notes and References**

1. ↑ The original idiom is “the paper walls have eyes.”
2. ↑ *Sonoko* and *anoko* both mean “that person,” but they also sound somewhat like they could be a girl’s first name.

# Afterword

Good afternoon. Honobu Yonezawa here.

I was inspired to write this volume after first seeing Michael Z. Lewin's book, *Type-A Girl*, although I suppose that's only its name in Japan. More accurately, it's called *Ask the Right Question*.

When I initially saw the Japanese title, I thought, "What could this possibly be about?" and the mystery I imagined formed the basis for this volume. (By the way, the novel turned out to be entirely different than what I had imagined. It was still a great read, however.)

Additionally, I had Stephen King's *The Long Walk* in mind as I was designing it as well. When I had initially read it a long time ago, it was so scary and had such an impact on me that I couldn't put it down, so it was probably only natural that it continued to float around in my head as I was writing this book.

I realized, however, that there was a decisive difference between his book and mine from the very get-go.

*The Long Walk*'s protagonist had companions while walking.

In this book, the protagonist walked alone.

It couldn't be helped. If he was going to be walking the Marathon Event, there was no way he'd be able to match his pace with others.

Now then, I hope that the story of the <Classics Club> will be able to reach you next time as well.

Thank you very much.

April, 2012

Honobu Yonezawa

*This novel was translated by Manlyflower.*

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