

やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

3
three

GAGAGA

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"EVEN IF THINGS GOT
IN THE WAY AND WE
DIDN'T GET OFF TO A
GOOD START,
NOTHING WAS A LIE
OR FAKE... I REALLY
DO LOVE YOU... I
GUESS..."

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama



雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

"I WASN'T ABLE
TO CONVEY THIS
TO YOU BECAUSE
OF THE WAY I AM.
BUT I WANT TO
TALK STRAIGHT
WITH YOU."

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Bonus Track! "Like This Birthday Song"



やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

登場人物【character】

three



Hikigaya Hachiman Our protagonist. Grade 11. A contrarian.

Yukinoshita Yukino Leader of the Service Club. A perfectionist.

Yuigahama Yui Hachiman's classmate. Pays attention to others.

Zaimokuza Yoshiteru Otaku. Dreams of becoming a light novel author.

Totsuka Saika Tennis club member. Exudes cuteness. A boy, alas.

Hiratsuka Shizuka Japanese teacher. In charge of educational guidance. Single.

Hikigaya Komachi Hachiman's little sister. Middle school student.

Kamakura The Hikigaya family cat.

Sable The Yuigahama family dog.

I appreciate how you didn't
use your own name

No one uses these overly
long titles anymore

Protagonist: Ashikaga Yoshiteru

The legitimate successor of the Ashikaga shogunate. The reincarnated form of Ashikaga Yoshiteru.

Normally, he hid his powers, but-

In times of trouble, he fought valiantly with his dark longsword of love - the "Kagedachi". He learned swordplay from his grandfather, but when he was still a child, his grandfather died protecting him from an enemy attack.

From then on, those around him avoid meeting his eyes out of fear, and so he chooses to fight alone.

A loneliness he takes upon himself. Nobody understands that he shuns others to protect them, but he does not hold it against them.

He is the most powerful swordsman of his day, and it is said that his talent surpasses even that of the master fencer general.

His secret longsword "Nihility" cancels his opponent's abilities, putting an end to all conflicts.

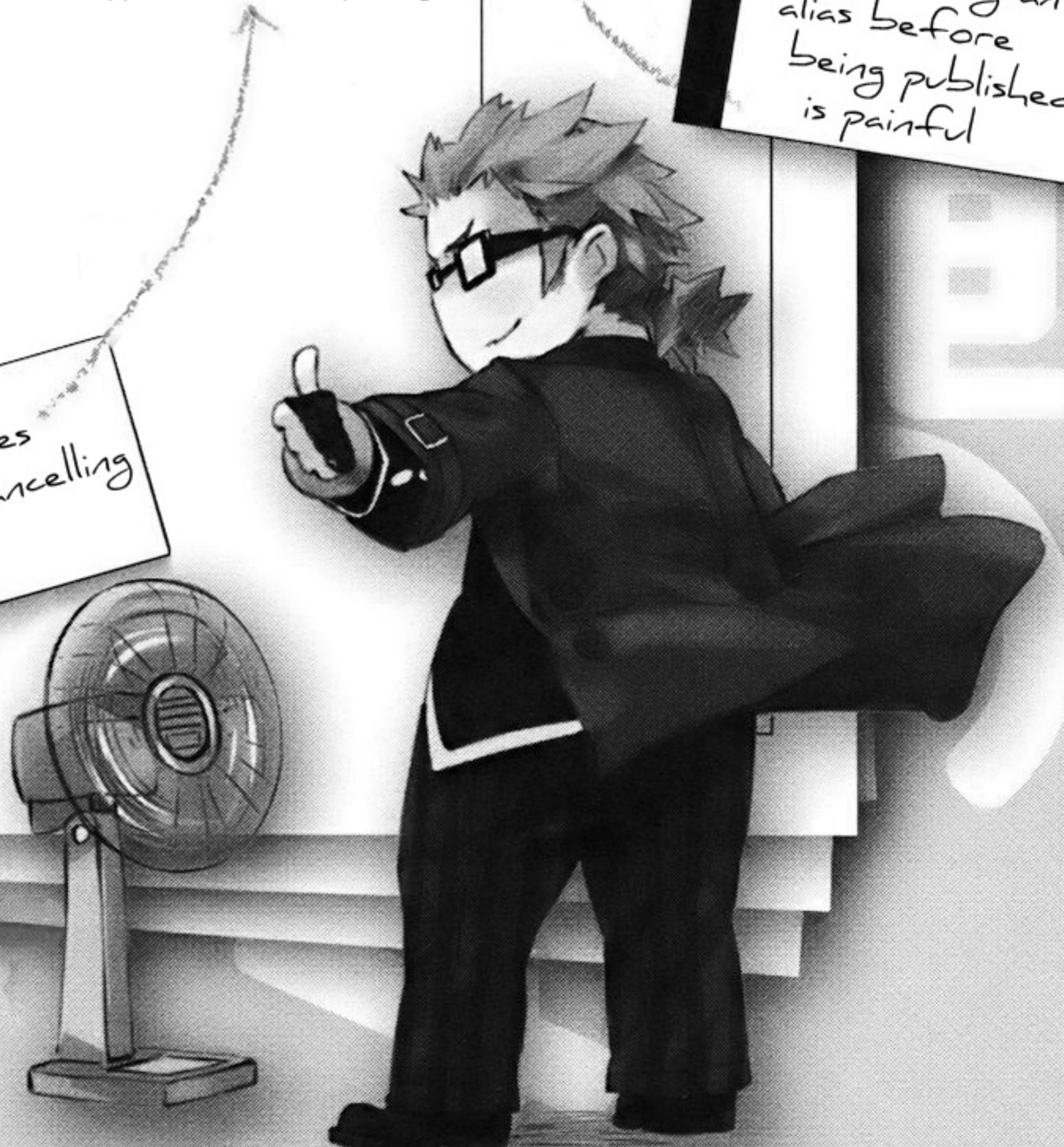
Hang on, just when
did he learn
swordplay?

You chunibyō types
really love cancelling
abilities

Entangling
Dual Blades
and the
Vicissitude of
the Inverted
World

[Alias: Hashiharu]

Stop. Using an
alias before
being published
is painful



Familiar: Nakuharu

Small fry. A pathetic weakling who easily betrays others.

Bright made her his subordinate for now out of pity. Dead weight.

Slender build, short stature, likes gaudy clothes, brown hair.

Likes to do things in groups, tells people off a lot. Wears something like a hairband. Favourite sayings are "Argh, you're so lazy" and "Something reeks!"

Dies straight away.

You chunintypes
really love copying
abilities

I value your hard work in
translating your name into
cool-sounding Engrish

Rival: Bright "Swordian Star" Woodstock

Age: 17. The last boss. The chief of the mirror world and the strongest sword user. Yoshiteru's isotope.

As Yoshiteru was born into the original world, he was also born into the mirror world.

He came to doubt the validity of his world, and so he sought the meaning of his own existence, and he battles in the original world alone. His secret sword Kagami-taru Senken no Senkou ("Thousand Blades of Mirage") copies all of his opponent's abilities in an instant and strikes the opponent rapidly a thousand times.

If he comes across the same ability, it is inevitable he will win because of its superior strength. Therefore, it is the strongest secret sword. The opponent dies.

Only this char is such a riajuu. You
based this off a real person for
sure. Who? Someone in class C?
You really let your grudges slip out

Do you even know what an
isotope is? Google it
properly

Chapter 1: And Thus, Hiratsuka-sensei Sparks a New Conflict

I slammed a sheaf of papers against the table. Its contents were as eyebrow-raising as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

“...what the hell is this?”

It was early morning. As my eyes fell over the words on the page, a strange chill ran down my spine. The cause of this uncomfortable sense of *déjà vu* was, of course, the outline for the next volume of Zaimokuza Yoshiteru-sensei’s story, which he had put excruciating detail into. Would it have killed him to finish the first volume before starting the next one?

The story made no sense whatsoever, and there were glaring plot holes just from the outline. The only thing I liked about it was that the protagonist was a lone swordsman.

Those who are above everyone else are, by definition, alone. True heroes are loners. To be a loner is to have strength. Having no attachment to others means having nothing to protect. The urge to protect is basically nothing but a weakness. Achilles, the Ancient Greek hero, and Benkei, the most powerful warrior monk, were both defeated precisely because they had a weakness. If only they had no weaknesses, they would undoubtedly have gone down in history as the victors.

It stood to reason that someone who has no weaknesses, no burdens protect and no attachment to others is the strongest for those exact reasons.

In other words, I am the strongest.

The trashy setting Zaimokuza came up with revolved entirely around his overpowered swordsman, to the extent that he came off as a hack. Everything else was crap, so I wrote it in red. *This. Is. Crap.* ...there, all good.

Just as a feeling of blissful satisfaction came over me from doing my job, my little sister Komachi finished preparing breakfast. Since both our parents had already left for work, only Komachi and I remained in the living room.

An apron-clad Komachi set down two servings of breakfast with a clatter. If you ask me, wearing an apron over a tank top and shorts is really not a good idea. It looked like she was wearing a naked apron.

She set down the golden brown scones and coffee right in front of me. Oh, and a jar of jam was propped up next to them. The appetising scent of perfectly cooked scones and the aroma of well-made coffee resounded beautifully, playing a musical suite. The various kinds of jams were suite (get it?) as well - it was a Pretty Cure breakfast¹.

"Itadakimasu," I said.

"Yep yep, it's chow time," Komachi sang. "Itadakimasu for me too." The two of us clapped our hands together and then crammed scones into our mouths. "I went for something a bit more exotic for breakfast today. Scones are Ingrish, aren't they?"

"...what's 'Ingrish' supposed to be? Some new killer move?"

"Nope, it means super English-y."

¹ A reference to *Suite Pretty Cure*, a magical girl anime series aimed at young girls. And if you didn't get Hachiman's wordplay, suite = sweet.



"You serious? I thought for sure it was British."

"No way, onii-chan. There's no such country as British."

"...England is a part of Great Britain, which is known internationally as the United Kingdom. So UK-style means British. Just a bit of trivia for you."

"W-whatever! Ingrish is a Japanese word now! Like *great-o g'day-o!*"

...*great-o g'day-o* didn't sound like English or Japanese to me.

Ignoring Komachi's lame excuses, I picked up the condensed milk. That reminded me - you could say putting condensed milk in your cup and drinking it MAX Coffee style is Chiba-ish, or *Chibash* for short. While we're at it, you could call a basketball anime set in the near future *Basquash*.

"You know," I said, "when you think of English people, doesn't grey tea come to mind?"

"Yeah, I know, but you like coffee better, onii-chan. I thought that would make my Komachi points go up."

"Mm. I reckon your points went up a bit. When you have a point system, it's nice when it's easy to understand."

Even better if the choices "yes" and "no" were displayed clearly, along with her affection levels. There'd be no such thing as misunderstandings if you chose "no" and you could clearly see her affection levels going down, so giving up on her would be an easy matter. That alone would save countless hapless boys, I can assure you.

As I uttered my answer, stirring my (fake) MAX Coffee, Komachi dropped her scone with a start. Her face was pale and her shoulders trembled all over.

"O-onii-chan, you're acting weird..."

"Huh?"

"It's strange! Usually, you get annoyed and treat me like an idiot when I say this sort of stuff. I feel your love through your coldness!"

"And you call *me* weird." Just how sensitive was she?

"Anyway, that was a joke."

So Komachi said, but it was scary that I couldn't tell how much of it was really a joke. If my little sister was a pervert who got off on being given the cold shoulder, then I had no idea how to interact with her from now on. It bothered me. It seemed as if snubbing her every day had made her points go up steadily. What was with this warped sibling love?

"Onii-chan, you've been weird lately, you know? You've got no ambition...? That's normal for you, though. I got it - your eyes look off...? But they were like that from the beginning. Uh, your comebacks are half-assed...? That's also pretty much inborn. Hm. Anyway, you're acting weird!"

"Either insult me or show your concern for me. Pick one." I couldn't decide whether she loved me or hated me. "Anyway, it's been humid lately. It's easy for things to go off - your eyes and your nature."

"Ooh, what you said is pretty true!"

Komachi's plain show of admiration kind of bothered me a little. I puffed out my chest and chuckled boastfully, but when I thought about it, she had actually said something fairly mean-spirited to me, hadn't she?

"But, you know, it's awful around June," I went on. "No public holidays, it rains a lot, and it's kinda humid. They call June the month of joy, but there's nothing joyful about it. What's up with that?"

"You just suck."

"I-I see..."

Komachi was a surprisingly harsh judge. It was strangely alienating for something you said so proudly to be utterly denied. I think I understood Hiratsuka-sensei's feelings a little better now.

Speaking of Hiratsuka-sensei, I realised I had to get going to school about now. I'd be subjected to her iron fist as punishment yet again if I was late. I scoffed down the remainder of my scone and slurped down my Chiba-ish coffee.

"I gotta go now," I called out to Komachi.

"Oh, I'll go with you." Her cheeks bulging with scones like a squirrel's face, Komachi eagerly started changing her clothes. I've told her this before, but could she *please* not change in front of me?

"I'm going ahead."

As Komachi's drawn-out groan sounded behind me, I walked out the entrance and into the outside world, where the distinctive muggy atmosphere of the rainy season wrapped itself around me like a coil.

Ever since the workplace tour, I could not recall seeing an open blue sky.

1-2

The muggy air lingered inside the school building. The discomfort was further exacerbated by the crowd that had gathered around the entrance in the morning rush to school.

The word loner makes you think of someone hiding in a dark corner, but when you reached my level of loner, you'd rather wear your loner qualities on your sleeve. And so, as I stood alone at school, my surroundings formed an air pocket like the eye of a hurricane.

It had to be tough on people with friends, what with the humidity from being surrounding by so many people causing the protein in their bodies to rise above 36 degrees. A loner could spend the entire rainy season in summer with abnormal levels of comfort. With good ventilation, they could live a peaceful school life.

As I was changing into my indoor shoes at the entrance, I looked up and encountered a familiar face.

“Oh...”

Yuigahama, who was fitting on a pair of loafers, averted her face. She seemed awfully lost.

I didn't look away. “Yo,” I called out to her in my usual tone of voice.

“...um, hi.”

And without saying anything more, I slung my schoolbag over my shoulder.

Between the two of us, only one set of footsteps sounded against the linoleum floor. And those footsteps were swallowed up by the sounds of everyone else's footsteps.

The delicate situation between Yuigahama and I had not changed over Saturday and Sunday, and it went on and on for some days after that until before we knew it, it was Friday.

She didn't holler some morning greeting at me, and we didn't walk side-by-side all the way up to the classroom. We had returned to an exceedingly uneventful life, just the same as before.

Okay. I'd played it cool. Everything was back to square one.

Originally, a loner existed not to get in other people's way. They couldn't hurt people they were never involved with. They were a clean, eco-friendly, LOHAS-approved organism¹.

I regained my peace of mind by pressing the reset button and Yuigahama was free to return to her riajuu life, no longer constrained by her sense of guilt. By all accounts, it was not the wrong choice to take. You could even say it was the *right* choice.

There was really no need for her to be nice to me over saving her dog. That was just a thing of chance. It was on the same level as picking up someone's lost wallet or giving up a seat for an elderly person. Afterwards, you'd smile to yourself and say, "Whoa! I did a super good deed! Now I know how all those idiotic showoffs feel!" That was all it amounted to.

There was no need to keep on worrying over a coincidence of that scale, and since I was fated to become a loner anyway after enrolling, that was all the more reason not to worry about me.

So I would end the matter here. Hitting reset and going back to our ordinary lives was for the best. Life has no reset button, but you *can* reset your relationships. Source: me. Not a single classmate from middle school ever contacted me... wait, that was a deletion, not a reset. Heh.

¹ LOHAS = Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability. It refers to consumers who seek eco-friendly lifestyles.

1-3

Sixth period finally ended after boring me to tears.

Since I was a steady and diligent student, I didn't talk to anyone during class and spent the time in silence. Incidentally, sixth period was an oral communication class, so I was forced to converse in English to the person sitting next to me. But the moment it began, the girl next to me started playing with her phone. I thought I would get told off by the teacher who was looking around, but she didn't notice me thanks to my unique skill of erasing my presence, so I could relax. I expected no less of myself.

...except I couldn't actually turn that skill off.

Even after homeroom, my skill continued to function impeccably and no one noticed my existence as I packed my schoolbag unobtrusively. What was I, a spy?

Crap. Those CIA scouts might come for me. If I got it wrong and the AIC scouts came instead, I wouldn't be complaining - I'd make a *Tenchi Muyo* OVA¹.

As those thoughts went through my mind, a silly commotion was unfolding behind me, as if saying, "This is youth!"

The sports club members were pumping themselves up by talking shit about their older members and advisor for a while as they idly prepared for their club activities.

The culture club members were exchanging pleasant smiles and chatting about what they brought for snacks today.

Then there were those who didn't belong to any club at all, talking languidly to each other about how they planned to spend their free time.

¹ AIC is an anime studio. *Tenchi Muyo* is a classic harem anime series. OVA stands for "Original Video Animation".

Among them was a person messing about in a conspicuously loud voice. “The soccer club’s advisor is taking a day off. I’m totes jealous!”

Casually looking up, I noticed Hayama and his friends, a mixed-gender group which consisted of seven people. They were bunched up together and sitting in a circle, yabbering away.

Among them, Ooka from the baseball club (the virgin fence-sitter) revealed his dissatisfaction. To that, Yamato from the rugby club (the airy-fairy one) nodded in agreement.

Tobe (the easily excited one) promptly broke out into a ruckus about it. “Oh crap, but you guys and your club activities crack me up! Damn. What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?”

“I’ll leave it to you.” As Miura played with her cell phone in her right hand with palpable disinterest, she yanked on Tobe’s drill-shaped hair with her left hand. Ebina-san and Yuigahama trailed behind her. The queen was ruling with her iron fist as usual.

Tobe was suddenly fired up upon being manhandled by Miura. “Oh! So is Baskin-Robbins or something no good? Or is that *not* no good?”

In that moment, Miura closed her cell phone with a snap. “Hm? Nah.”

...she wasn’t leaving it to him at all!

Without thinking, I did a mental tsukkomi to their conversation². Every day, I was honing my loner tsukkomi skills.

Inadvertently, my eyes went over to Miura and the others. When I did that, my eyes met with Yuigahama, who was among them.

She said nothing. I said nothing.

² A tsukkomi is the straight man who points out the stupidity of what he sees around him.

Even though we were aware of each other's presences, no words were spoken, and we just furtively glanced at each other.

It was pretty much like when you used the station in your hometown and you come across your middle school classmate at the other entrance of the platform.

You realise, "Oh crap, it's Oofuna-kun..." and the other guy is like, "Uh... who are you again...? Hi-Hiki... meh, screw it." He just gave up trying to remember my name, the bastard.

Anyway, that was how it was. I-it wasn't as if the other person didn't know who I was - I just had a good memory. My brain is superb. Loners are surprisingly good at remembering people's names. It was because whenever they got spoken to, their hearts would beat like crazy.

My memory was so good that I remembered the name of a girl I'd never spoken to once. When I called out to her, her face contorted with fear. "*How does this guy know my name...? I'm scared...*" But that's enough of that story.

Anyway, in that moment the relationship between Yuigahama and I was like that of master fencers gauging their distance from each other. The atmosphere was that of a temporary stalemate.

The one who broke that peculiar atmosphere was Miura.

"I reckon we should go bowling after all."

Without any logical reason for it, Ebina nodded at the proposal Miura came up with. "I get it! The pins definitely look like pe-"

"Ebina, shut the hell up. Wipe your nosebleed," a disgusted Miura said as she handed Ebina a tissue. "Cover it up or something."

Giving out a tissue was a surprisingly kind gesture on Miura's part, but no matter how you looked at it, it was one of those tissues people gave out on the street advertising a dating service, so it was kind of a delicate situation.

"Bowling is totally awesome! Man, I can't even think of anything besides bowling!"

"I know, right?" Miura did a victory twirl upon seeing Tobe agree with her.

But Hayama stroked his chin somewhat thoughtfully, as if he did not think the same way. "But we did that last week too... why don't we play darts or something since it's been ages?"

Miura changed her tune in a flash. "If you say so, Hayato," she sang. How two-faced could you get?

"Shall we go, then?" Hayama said as he stood up from his chair and began to walk. "Tell me if any of you haven't played before so I can teach you."

Miura, Tobe and Ebina-san followed him. But, upon noticing someone else trailing behind, Miura turned around and called out to her.

"Yui, what are you doing? Come on!"

"...oh, uh... um, okay! Coming now!"

Yuigahama, who had been a passive participant in the conversation up until then, clutched her schoolbag as if startled into movement. She stood up and broke out into a half run, but when she passed me by the side, her steps slowed.

Was she caught in indecision, perhaps? About whether she should go with Miura and the others as she was doing now or whether she should go to the Service Club instead? I wouldn't be surprised - she was a nice girl. Even though she had no reason to care about me.

And yet, even though I told her not to worry, here she was caught in the precipice between her two worlds and agonising over it.

This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Loners never caused other people trouble.

I decided to leave this place ahead of her. Hikigaya Hachiman withdraws coolly³. I was too cool for school, if you want to know how cool I was.

COOL! COOL! COOL!

As I did my very best to avoid looking in Yuigahama's direction, I furtively slipped out of the classroom.

³ A reference to a meme from *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*: "Speedwagon withdraws coolly."

1-4

In the special room on the fourth floor, Yukinoshita Yukino was sitting in her normal spot in the very heart of the Service Club with her usual cold, unchanging expression.

What was different about her was that she was reading a fashion magazine rather than her usual paperback novel. How uncharacteristic of her.

If I could put my finger on something else that had changed, it was that she had shifted over to the summer dress code. Instead of her blazer, she was wearing the school-prescribed summer vest. School-prescribed was a synonym for tacky-looking, but Yukinoshita gave off a refined air when she wore it, and she looked mysteriously good in it.

“Yo,” I said.

Yukinoshita let out a short, terse sigh. “Oh, it’s you, Hikigaya-kun.” Her eyes instantly dropped to the fashion magazine.

“Um, could you stop reacting like a girl I’d just been assigned to sit next to? That actually kind of hurt.”

There is no school event that breeds trauma like seat-changing. It brings out the seeds of trauma in your normal easygoing lifestyle. No, it doesn’t actually create drama, but it’s all very nasty since it brings out people’s true natures.

The monthly seat changes are pretty much a prime example of that.

“Seriously, why do they treat me like a bad smell when I haven’t even done anything wrong? They draw lots and when they end up having to sit next to me they moan over their bad luck, geez.”

“So you acknowledge that the seat next to you is the most unappealing...”

"I didn't say it was the most unappealing, per se. That was your own embellishment."

"I apologise. I'm afraid I wasn't thinking," Yukinoshita said with a small giggle. (Her lack of awareness was what caused so much unnecessary pain, though...) "I spoke again just now without thinking, so please don't mind it. I thought for sure you were talking about Yuigahama-san."

"Oh, so that's how it is, huh?"

Yukinoshita had a good reason for thinking the way she did. Yuigahama hadn't showed her face at the clubroom for the past few days. Perhaps Yukinoshita had been hoping Yuigahama would come today.

"The day before yesterday she had a physical examination at the vet's, and yesterday she had some errands to run at home..." Yukinoshita whispered quietly as she gazed at the screen of her cell phone. She was probably looking at the text messages Yuigahama had sent her - the messages that had never reached me.

Like clockwork, I found myself wondering if Yuigahama would come to club activities today. If she did, there was no doubt she'd act stiffly around me as she did this morning.

I knew all too well what would result from this kind of interaction. We'd end up sort of drifting away from each other and not really communicate anymore, and eventually, we'd stop seeing each other altogether. Source: me.

My elementary school classmates, my middle school classmates - it was how I stopped seeing all of them. The same thing would probably happen with Yuigahama.

It was quiet in the clubroom.

The only noise that could be heard was the flimsy sound of Yukinoshita turning the pages of her magazine.



That reminded me. Our club had been full of ruckus lately. In the beginning, when only Yukinoshita and I were around, silence had reigned. When it didn't, the two of us were just abusing each other.

In only one or two months, this had all become a thing of the past, and as I gazed vacantly at the door, Yukinoshita opened her mouth as if she had seen right through me. "If you're expecting Yuigahama-san, she won't be coming today. I just received a text from her."

"I-I see... n-not like I was worrying about Yuigahama or anything!"

"I don't understand your negative tone..."

As the relief washed over me, I took my attention away from the door and looked at Yukinoshita. She was sighing softly.

"I wonder if Yuigahama-san no longer intends to come..."

"Why don't you ask her?"

Yuigahama was still keeping in contact with Yukinoshita, so she would probably answer Yukinoshita if she asked.

But Yukinoshita shook her head weakly. "I won't go that far. If I asked her, she would probably answer that she would come. Even if, perhaps, she did not want to... she would most likely do it anyway."

"Yeah, I guess..."

Yuigahama Yui was that kind of person. She prioritised other things over her own feelings. And so she would even talk to a loner and come over to you if you texted her.

But that was kindness and sympathy and mere obligation. And yet that was all it took for a boy with low experience points to misunderstand her. "*H-huh? C-could it be that she likes me?*" It was all too easy to become a burden to her. I wish these things were easier to come to terms with, I really do.

Perhaps we'd all be better off if texts from girls were generated by an automated software program and written in stiff, formal Japanese. In that case, boys wouldn't be agonising over unrealistic expectations.

...wait. I could totally make money off this.

As I was fantasising about making my fortune in one stroke, Yukinoshita stared at me silently. Being gazed at so intently made my heart pound. With fear.

"Y-you want something?"

"...did something happen between you and Yuigahama-san?"

"Nah, nothing," I answered promptly.

"If it was nothing, I don't believe Yuigahama-san would stop coming. Did you have a fight?"

"No, we didn't. I think." I clammed up inadvertently at what Yukinoshita said.

Only, it wasn't a lie. I had no way of judging whether it was a fight or not. I wasn't close enough to anyone to have a fight with them in the first place. Loners are pacifists, you see. Before non-resistance comes non-contact. If you think about it from a historical perspective, I'm pretty much Gandhi.

The only kind of fight I knew about was sibling squabbles, and that was all history by the time I finished elementary school. Komachi would invariably tell our dad on me and that would knock out all my life points before the fight even began. If we fought when our father wasn't around, she'd activate her trap card (read: our mother), and it would be my loss anyway.

My parents would lecture me, and then at dinner we'd make up and sit close together at the table, and that would be the end of our sibling squabble.

As I contemplated all of this, Yukinoshita opened her mouth again as if on cue. "Yuigahama-san is indiscrete and has no dignity. She blurts things out without thinking, she constantly intrudes on someone else's personal space, she lies to get out of trouble, and she's noisy."

"You're the one who sounds like she's having a fight with her..."

Yuigahama would probably cry if she heard all of that.

"Don't interrupt me. She has many shortcomings, but... but she is not a bad person."

Predictably enough, she had been listing Yuigahama's shortcomings before concluding she wasn't a bad person and that her faults weren't serious. Yet when I saw how she blushed and looked away furtively as her murmuring voice trailed off into silence, I understood that this was the highest compliment Yukinoshita had ever uttered. Yuigahama would probably cry if she heard all of that - from happiness.

"Nah, I get it too. We're not really fighting or anything. You can only have a fight with someone if you're close to them in the first place, pretty much. So it wasn't really a fight but more like..."

As I trailed off and scratched my head furiously, Yukinoshita put a hand on her chin in contemplation. "A dispute, perhaps?"

"Ah, close but no cigar. Not a bad guess, I suppose."

"A battle, then?"

"Getting colder."

"A slaughter then."

"Weren't you listening? You're way off."

Why was she thinking of progressively more violent situations? Her instincts were way too much like Oda Nobunaga's.

"So... you were having communication issues, perhaps?"

"Mm, more or less."

That had to be it. We were getting the Masayuki map¹. There was this one time in middle school when the class was using wireless communications and they were all like, “Who is this 8man?”

But man, I really wish they would quit it with the wireless communication function in games. I’m still okay with playing competitively on the net, but a game based around face-to-face communication was “death to loners” for sure. Thanks to that, I wasn’t able to evolve my Pokemon and complete my Pokedex.

“I see. So it can’t be helped.” Yukinoshita closed her magazine with a small sigh. Behind her nonchalant words, her attitude was resigned, and she seemed so very frail.

With that, she stopped asking questions. Yukinoshita and I kept up our usual distance.

The way we held on to our emotional distance was probably rather similar. It was quite rare for her to encroach on someone’s privacy by gossiping or focusing on one aspect about them. “How old are you?” “Where do you live?” “When’s your birthday?” “Do you have siblings?” “Where do your parents work?” I’d never heard her ask those sorts of things herself.

I could suspect any number of reasons for that. Perhaps she had little interest in the hobbies of others, or perhaps she didn’t want to step on any landmines. Or perhaps she was just bad at asking questions, as loners tend to be. Without any logical reason behind it, asking questions made them extremely uncomfortable.

Without prying or stepping on someone’s toes, they size each other up like swordsmen in a duel.

“You know how it is in these situations. It’s those once-in-a-lifetime encounters. If there’s a meeting there’s always a breakup.”

¹ A map full of rare monsters in *Dragon Quest IX*, which players can obtain by using the Nintendo DS wireless communications.

"Pretty words, but you got the meaning mixed up..." Yukinoshita said disgustedly, but really, life is full of these once-in-a-lifetime encounters.

It was like that time back in elementary school, when some of my classmates were transferring to another school. Even when they promised to write letters, I was the only one they didn't reply to and I never sent them another letter. I did get a reply from Kenji-kun, though...

A wise man does not court danger; he does not outstay his welcome. That was probably the only way not to lose to risks.

"And yet... staying connected to people is indeed a surprisingly difficult matter," Yukinoshita whispered. "Bonds can break so easily from such a trivial thing."

Her eyes welled with pain directed at herself.

At that moment, the door suddenly swung open with creak.

"But you can also fix those trivial things, Yukinoshita. It's still not time to give up."

The person spouting cool lines at random as she walked towards us, her white coat fluttering, was none other than my sworn enemy Hiratsuka-sensei.

"Sensei, knock first..."

Completely disregarding Yukinoshita's demand, Hiratsuka-sensei surveyed the room. "Hm. So Yuigahama hasn't turned up for a week now, huh... I thought you guys would have done something about it by now. Don't tell me you had a serious illness till now. How like you," she said with misplaced admiration.

"Um, sensei... what do you want?" I asked.

"Oh, right. Hikigaya, I told you about it before - about the conditions for your hypothetical 'contest'."

Hearing the word contest made me remember. Indeed, it was something about deciding who was better at helping people - Yukinoshita or me. *Robattle*²!

That kind of thing - not Robonpon³. In a manner very much reminiscent of a game company, Hiratsuka-sensei had announced that she wanted to change part of the rules. Her business today probably had something to do with these new rules of hers.

“I came to present the new rules.” Hiratsuka-sensei folded her arms and towered over us. Yukinoshita and I fixed our postures and sat up attentively.

Looking at the two of us in turn, Hiratsuka-sensei sighed in satisfaction. Her laid-back behaviour aroused feelings of anxiety in me instead. It was so silent you could hear a pin drop.

In order to break the overwhelming silence, Hiratsuka-sensei opened her mouth solemnly.

“You kill each other off till there's only one left⁴.”

² A reference to the battle call in *Medabots*. I referred to the terribly corny English dub for this.

³ A Gameboy Color game series with a battle system a lot like Pokemon's.

⁴ A quote from *Battle Royale*.

1-5

“...how old.”

You wouldn’t even see that on Friday Roadshow these days¹. Also, why did they keep showing reruns of *Laputa*? I already had the DVD. Ged oh Ged². (I hadn’t actually bought that movie.)

Come to think of it, high schoolers these days wouldn’t even know that movie, I thought as I looked at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita was looking at Hiratsuka-sensei with the sort of cold gaze you’d normally reserve for trash on the roadside.

With keen understanding of what Yukinoshita’s piercing glare meant, Hiratsuka-sensei coughed sheepishly. “Ahem. A-anyway! To put it simply, it’s making use of the rules of *Battle Royale*. Having a three-way battle is a surefire way of lengthening a battle manga. Basically, that’s how the arcs work in *Y@iba*³.

“Yet another classic title...”

“Since it’s a three-way battle royale, naturally there will be alliances too. Not only will you guys be fending each other off, you’d also do well to lend each other your strength.”

I see. It was true that conspiring with the weaker combatants and killing them off later was an established tactic in a battle royale.

“So what you are saying is that Hikigaya-kun will always be fighting with a disadvantage...”

“Pretty much.” I accepted that scenario without any resistance. No matter how you thought about it, it was going to end up as a “me vs two” arrangement.

¹ A TV show dedicated to weekend movies.

² A reference to *Tales of Earthsea*, a film by Studio Ghibli, the same studio which made *Laputa*.

³ A reference to *Yaiba*, an old shonen manga about a samurai.

But, opposite of my resigned attitude, Hiratsuka-sensei let out a fearless smile. “Rest easy. This time, new members can be recruited at will. Of course, you’ll be the ones doing the recruiting. In other words, you can increase your number of comrades through your actions. Gotta catch ‘em all! Aim for 151!”

Hiratsuka-sensei spoke with such authority on the subject, but the number of comrades she mentioned really showed her age. It was closer to 500 these days, you know.

But come on, increasing your number of comrades was easier said than done.

“Either way, these rules put Hikigaya-kun at a disadvantage,” Yukinoshita said.
“He is unfit for recruiting.”

“That’s a bit rich coming from you...” I said.

“What, I’m just asking you to recruit one person,” Hiratsuka-sensei insisted.
“Don’t think too hard about it.”

Well, when she put it that way she was right. It wasn’t really about being the very best, like no one ever was.

Actually, the one who *was* the very best at this sort of thing was Yuigahama, who wasn’t around anymore. As if realising that too, Hiratsuka-sensei’s expression clouded slightly.

“Come to think of it, that Yuigahama hasn’t been coming around these days... this is a good opportunity. Even if it means filling a vacant position, you ought to embrace this chance to acquire a new club member,” Hiratsuka-sensei said, prompting Yukinoshita to lift her face in surprise.

“Hold on just a second. It’s not as if Yuigahama-san qu-”

“It’s the same thing if she never shows up. I, for one, have no use for a ghost club member.”

As soon as I saw the look on her face, the pleasant atmosphere from before vanished. Yukinoshita and I recoiled from Hiratsuka-sensei’s cold, hard gaze.

"You guys are caught up in some misunderstanding, aren't you?" She did not say it like a question. From the way she phrased it, it was an implicit reprimand meant to stir up guilt in us.

Yukinoshita and I fell silent without answering, and Hiratsuka-sensei went on.

"This is not a club for you to play friendsies. Go somewhere else for that wishy-washy teenage nonsense. You're here in this club to change yourselves for the better. It's not a place to get complacent and lie to yourselves."

Silence.

Her lips pursed tightly, Yukinoshita furtively avoided Hiratsuka-sensei's eyes.

"The Service Club isn't a game. It is a recognised club activity at Soubu High School. And, as you guys know, you only deal with unmotivated people until compulsory education is over. People came to this place out of their own volition, and those without the dedication have no choice but to leave."

Motivation and dedication, huh...?

"E-excuse me... can I please leave since I don't have the motivation nor the dedication...?"

"You think you have any choice in the matter when you're being punished?" Hiratsuka-sensei cracked her fists and glared at me.

"I-I thought as much..." So I really couldn't run away from this, huh...

After she was done subjecting me to her light intimidation, Hiratsuka-sensei turned to Yukinoshita. Even as Yukinoshita remained stony-faced, it was easy to see how disgruntled she was.

Having noticed that, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled somewhat uneasily. "But you know, thanks to Yuigahama, I now see that there is a positive correlation between club activities and member count. It would be good to have another member to balance things out. With that in mind... you have until Monday to find a replacement possessing the motivation and dedication to be in this club."

"A motivated and dedicated person by Monday... that's no tall order... hey, won't this end with me getting eaten by a wildcat?"

"You really like Miyazawa Kenji..."⁴ Yukinoshita remarked.

It was an exchange that could only occur between the third and first ranked students in Japanese respectively.

If Monday was the deadline, though, then we only had four days if we included today and Monday itself. Finding someone motivated to join the Service Club and dedicated to changing themselves for the better in that span of time was an extremely tough task, in my opinion. What was this? The tale of the bamboo cutter? Ah, so *this* might be why Hiratsuka-sensei couldn't get married. Just like Kaguya-hime, she'd have to leave home sooner or later⁵.

"You tyrant..." I said bitterly. The words came out easily.

Hiratsuka-sensei smiled broadly. "I'm sorry you think that way. This is my way of being nice to you."

"I don't see any niceness..."

"It's fine if you don't see it. Right, today's club activities are over. Time to think about getting the job done," Hiratsuka-sensei said as she pushed Yukinoshita and me out of the room. As she slammed the door shut, our schoolbags fell to the floor outside the room.

She locked the door promptly, and with that she started walking away briskly.

⁴ Miyazawa Kenji is a popular children's author. The reference is to *The Restaurant of Many Orders*, a short story which you can read in English [here](#).

⁵ The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter is a famous Japanese folktale about Princess Kaguya, who originated from the moon. She must eventually return to where she came from, and so she refuses to marry any of the rich lords and even the emperor himself. To avoid marrying, she invents impossible tasks for her suitors.

Yukinoshita called out to her back. "Hiratsuka-sensei. I want to confirm one thing, and that is whether we are permitted to fill the vacancy with anyone, are we not?"

"Indeed, Yukinoshita." And with single, short statement, Hiratsuka-sensei left.

Only, when she looked back over her shoulder, I could see a sort of smile on her face.

As we waved Hiratsuka-sensei off, Yukinoshita and I looked at each other.

"So, how do you plan to fill the vacancy?" I asked.

"Who knows. I have never once invited someone so I wouldn't know. But I do happen to know someone close to joining."

"Who? Totsuka? Totsuka, right? It has to Totsuka."

There was no one else who came to mind. I could think of nothing but Totsuka.

Yukinoshita regarded my boundless passion for Totsuka with boredom. "Wrong. Although he might join if asked..." she mused. "Is there not a simpler way?"

So Yukinoshita said, but there really weren't that many other people who spoke to us. When I really thought about it, I suppose there was Hayama Hayato, one of the rare pure riajuu. He might help us out if we asked, I guess. But I doubted he fulfilled the motivated and dedicated categories. I really couldn't think of anyone else. Hm? Zaimokuza? What funny spelling for a name. So who was he again?

As I lost interest in that train of thought, Yukinoshita looked at me and let out a small sigh.

"You don't get it? I'm talking about Yuigahama-san."

"Huh? B-but hasn't she quit?" I said.

Yukinoshita flicked her hair over her shoulder and looked at me with an undeniably steely gaze. There, I could see none of the resignation she had shown up until now.

"So what?" she asked. "We only need to get her to join again. Hiratsuka-sensei did say it was fine as long as the vacancy was replaced."

"Yeah, I guess..."

Indeed, filling the vacancy would solve the problem. Still, the lack of motivation was a spanner in the works. In any case, Yuigahama would never come by the clubroom in the first place unless we fixed her motivation.

Yukinoshita seemed to have realised this herself, because she stroked her chin tentatively. "In any case," she said after a pause, "I'll try to come up with a way to get Yuigahama-san to return to her usual self."

"She had some serious motivation," I said, prompting Yukinoshita to smile bitterly at herself.

"Indeed." She was silent for a moment. "I only realised this just now, but I have grown fond of that part of her over these last two months."

I stared slack-jawed at her. For Yukinoshita to utter such a thing...

Dismayed by my silence, Yukinoshita's face reddened slightly. "W-what? You had a weird look on your face."

"Oh, nah. It's nothing. And I didn't have a weird look on my face, seriously."

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't."

"Allow me to correct myself. You *currently* have a weird look on your face."

Yukinoshita began to walk as if telling herself to get a move on. From the side of her face, I could see none of the depression from before, only an expression of utter self-assurance. Yukinoshita was back.

Chapter 2: My Teen Romcom With Totsuka Saika Is Right as Expected

Twenty minutes after I received my tyrannical orders, I was at the bicycle parking area, completely at a loss.

Just as Yukinoshita said, motivating Yuigahama to return to the Service Club was our number one priority. It wasn't like I had any objections to Yuigahama coming back or anything. Now that I'd already hit the reset button, there should be an appropriate distance between us. There would be no problem if I could just maintain that distance.

Now then, how could I get Yuigahama motivated?

It wasn't like I could just throw a lasso around her neck and drag her back, and asking her straight out to come back would bring out the unpleasant atmosphere from before, which really didn't appeal to me.

So now what?

I thought about it for a bit. But... I didn't know. Should I apologise? Nah, it wasn't like I did anything wrong...

My fights with Komachi always ended in quite a vague sort of way. Somehow I got the feeling things work out on their own this time...

As I was scratching my head with a stiff expression on my face, I heard someone call out to me all of a sudden. "Hachiman? Oh, it really is you, Hachiman."

When I turned around, Totsuka Saika was fidgeting shyly, the brilliant glow of the evening sun shining down upon him. The dust in the air turned to particles of light just from him standing there - Totsuka was a total angel.

I was instantly entranced, but I decided to act as coolly as it was humanly possible to do. "Yo."

"Yo to you too." Totsuka raised one hand as if he was trying to imitate me. The brusque gesture must have embarrassed him, because he laughed sheepishly and a bashful smile came over his face. God damn it, he was too cute. "Are you going home now too, Hachiman?"

"Yeah. So is the tennis club also done for the day, Totsuka?"

Totsuka, who was dressed in his jersey, adjusted the racquet on his back and thought about it for a little before shaking his head. "Not yet, but I get coached at night so... I left ahead of time."

"Coached?"

What, was Totsuka just so cute he was attending the Okinawa Actors School to become an idol? Right, I'll buy 100 of his CDs! I mean, I'd buy as many as needed so I could draw out a handshake event ticket¹.

"Mm, at tennis school, you see. The club here focuses mainly on practicing the basics."

"Ohh... you're quite the professional."

"I-it's nothing to brag about, really... but... it's what I love."

"Huh? Sorry, could you say that again?"

"Um... it's nothing to brag about?"

"No, the bit after that."

"...w-what I love."

"Okay, got it this time."

I mentally pressed the save button and carved his words into my heart.

¹ This is a reference to the business model of the super popular idol group AKB48, which consists entirely of cute girls. Certain CDs come with tickets that allow you to come to a handshake event, where you can meet the members of the idol group in person.

As I sighed with bliss, a bemused Totsuka cocked his head slightly and made a puzzled noise. Anyway, I had achieved my goal. Mission complete.

“Oh, sorry about that,” I said. “So you’re going to get coached, right, Totsuka? Yeah. Later, then.”

Waving casually, I got on my bike and was about to start pedalling. Yet at that moment, I felt a tug of resistance against my back. When I turned around, Totsuka was clutching my shirt.

“Um, you know... coaching happens at night. So I have a bit of time before then... it’s close to the station, so... I can just walk straight there... I mean, do you want to hang out for a while?”

“Wha...”

“If you’re free, that is...”

I doubted there was anyone in the world that would refuse after being asked out like that. Like, even if I had to go to a part-time job after that, I’d be confident taking a day off from work. I’d probably get sick of working and quit altogether thanks to him.

If this were a girl inviting me, I’d first check my surroundings for her friends forcing her to play a penalty game, and even then I’d turn her down just to cover my bases, but...

Totsuka was a boy.

...a boy, damn it.

But still. I was cushioned by an absolute sense of security because Totsuka was a boy.

In his case, he could be as nice as he liked to me without me misunderstanding. If I confessed to him with my overwhelming passion and got turned down harshly, it wouldn’t inflict too much damage on me. Then again, confessing and so forth to a boy would cause me no end of damage socially.

That being the case, I found I had no reason to refuse him. "Sure, it's not like I had anything better to do than read a book at home."

There was nothing really surprising about that. Read a book, read a manga, watch an anime I'd taped, play a game, study when I was bored - those were my prospects. My life was just so full of fun and games, it was my curse.

"I see, that's good to hear... s-so shall we go to the station?"

"You gonna ride behind me?" I asked, patting my bike's seat lightly.

It was not so unusual for two guys to ride on a bike together. More like it was a common sight. So I did not think there was a single thing that was strange about Totsuka sitting on the bicycle seat, wrapping his arms around me and saying, "Hachiman... your back is so broad."

But Totsuka shook his head.

"I-it's fine. I'm heavy, you see..."

Whichever way you squinted, he looked lighter than a girl did... I was about to say something to that effect, but I held myself back and answered only with an "I see". Totsuka didn't really like being treated like a girl.

"It's a bit of a hike to the station, but let's walk there together." With a bashful smile, Totsuka started down the path.

I followed a step behind, pushing my bike along.

Along the way, he would look up at me from time to time, as if he was peeping at my expression. He took five steps and peeped at me, and then at eight steps he peeped again. Um, he really didn't have to worry so much about whether I was actually following him.

Without saying anything to each other, we turned at the corner of the park adjacent to Saize and advanced onto the path past the pedestrian bridge. Like a middle school couple on a date, the right opportunity to open our mouths slipped away in front of us, even as we exchanged furtive glances.

There was a sweet agony to it. My heart throbbed so much I thought I would die.

The bridge crossing over the national highway was a two-layered structure; the automobiles were on the top layer and the pedestrians were on the bottom one. As the wind blew the exhaust fumes away, a cool breeze carried over to the shade.

"What a nice breeze, Hachiman." As if on cue, Totsuka turned around on the fifth step.

I wanted to take a photo of that invigorating smile of his and save it as a JPEG - it was that kind of beautiful early summer scene.

"Mm yeah," I said. "This would be the perfect place to have a nap."

"Hachiman, you sleep so much during recess and you *still* want to sleep now?" Totsuka said with a giggle - although he was wrong about me. I didn't have anyone to talk to in particular, and since there was nothing to do, I figured I'd just sleep for now...

"You know, in Spain they have a tradition called the siesta, and depending on how you do it, your sleepiness and sluggishness go away and your work efficiency rises in the afternoon. I heard it's common over there."

"Wow... you really put a lot of thought into your sleeping habits, Hachiman."

"Er, I guess."

Of course, I didn't intend that at all and just made up a whole lot of bullshit, but he lapped it all up anyway. That threw me off a little bit. I was kind of baffled over how much faith Totsuka had in me, judging by easy it was to pull the wool over his eyes. He could get taken advantage of by a bad guy one day, which was worrying. I had to protect him!

2-2

Once we finished crossing the pedestrian bridge, it wouldn't be long until we reached the station. The two of us progressed on the path straight ahead at the speed we had become accustomed to. As the station came into view, Totsuka's walking pace slackened somewhat. He seemed to be torn about where to go.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Um... somewhere to relax for a short time."

"...so you've built up some stress, I take it?"

What was this paralysing sense of guilt that came over me? Oh, yeah, it reminded me of that one time our cat only hung around me and I pestered him so much I ended up getting scalped... and thanks to that, our cat still wouldn't let me hold him in my arms to this day. When you pestered these domestic pet-types too much, they really built up stress, you know. It was best to step lightly when it came to Totsuka.

"Er, uh, it's not about me..."

"I don't really understand what you're getting at, but you could go to karaoke or to the arcade, I guess."

"Either one is fine?" Totsuka asked me in indecision.

That got me thinking for a while.

Karaoke was bound to be relaxing. It felt quite good to silently go on inputting songs by yourself and to sing your heart out on a superb song. Only, your throat and your spirit were already wrecked by the fifth number, and when the shop assistant came in with the drinks and saw you like that, words could not express how disheartening it felt. And that feeling of "What am I doing with my life...?" after you finished was just awful.

The arcade was similarly relaxing. The fighting games were monopolised by the veterans, and any plebs who came in were just easy pickings. You *could* have fun playing the quiz games. Since internet competitions were all the rage these days, national-level challengers and tournaments had also popped up too. It certainly feels good to whisper “Heh, ignorant fools” as you wipe the floor with your opponents. It would take me three hours to realise I was aiming for something on the scale of conquering Shanghai or the Great Wall of China and that it was a colossal waste of time. That feeling of “What am I doing with my life...?” after I finished was also strong.

The fact that either way it would end in me wondering what I was doing with my life was quite a problem.

Karaoke or the arcade - it was in the vein of the Dotch Cooking Show where you were forced to pick one. That was Chiba for you. I came prepared for moments like these.

“Well, if we go to the Big Mu, it has both those places.”

The Big Mu was a multi-purpose amusement park, so naturally it came equipped with a karaoke bar, an arcade and even a bowling center, billiards room and tavern. Well, the gaming areas were populated by all the usual suspects, so in the event we did go I wanted to take enough self-defence measures beforehand.

“I see... then let's go to the Big Mu.”

At Totsuka’s urgings, I pushed my bike out of the traffic circle at the station and stopped it at the bicycle parking area at the Big Mu.

Once we reached the top floor on the elevator, we walked to the arcade, having decided to check that place out first. When I put my foot in the hall, it was as if I was dragged into a flood of sounds as a whole different world opened up in front of me in a flash: twinkling decorative lights, tobacco smoke rising on end, the cries of laughter that refused to be drowned out by all the cacophony.

Right in front of me, there was a crane game corner.

The instant I saw a couple operating the crane, making a god awful noise with their laughing, I wanted to go home. Damn it, Delinquent-san, what was taking you guys so long? Please hunt down these plebs already, and while you're at it, please do the police a favour and beat each other up...

The boy seemed to be having a tough time with the crane game, since he was negotiating with one of the employees and having one of the soft toys moved for him. It looked like getting the toys for your customers was part of the service these days. Sure was getting more slack these days...

Slipping past the couple, Totsuka and I turned to the video game corner.

“Whoa, this is so cool...” Totsuka blurted out.

It was a sight I was well accustomed to, but it seemed for Totsuka it was shiny and brand new.

There were fighting games in front of me, and at the heart of the arcade, there were tabletop-type games like puzzles and mahjong, with the shooting games squeezed in between. To my right was the card games table. It seemed in this arcade, card games were particularly successful. The fighting games and mahjong were reasonably popular, while only a couple of people were scattered here and there for the quiz game. Where you really couldn't let your guard down at was the shooting games and the puzzle games. Sometimes, you came across zombie-like people who didn't seem to have any life outside of getting stupidly high scores, and sometimes a crowd gathered around them to watch as they played.

“Hachiman, what do you usually play?”

“Uh... the quiz game and Shanghai, I guess.”

As you'd expect, I wasn't able to say strip mahjong.

Anyway, if it was just the two of us playing around, the quiz game was a safe option. The Quiz Magic Academy game I usually played was tucked away near the fighting games. “Totsuka, over here,” I said, waving as I spoke because of our noisy surroundings.

Totsuka nodded, and then he clung to the sleeve of my shirt. Well, uh... I guess since it was Totsuka's first time coming here and all, he pretty much *had* to do this so he wouldn't get lost. Yep, there was nothing unnatural about it at all. It was the very epitome of natural. It was *super* natural.

Then, as we were passing through the fighting games corner, I caught sight of a familiar coat-wearing figure. His arms were folded imperiously and he wore power bracers around his wrists, and every time he cackled in laughter, the bun tied at the back of his head wobbled a little bit.

He was standing with a bunch of people gathered around the fighting game players, and occasionally, he'd whisper something to another person and they'd make friendly chatter.

"Um, Hachiman..." Totsuka's expression had confusion written all over it. "Is that Zaimo-?"

"That's someone else." I interrupted his question.

Sure, he looked familiar. But we didn't know each other.

There was no one among my acquaintances who could talk so comfortably to another person. After all, he was that guy who had no friends.

"Oh, I see... I thought it was Zaimokuza-kun..."

"Damn it, Totsuka, don't call out his name."

"Hmm? A voice speaketh my name... my oh my! If it isn't Hachiman!"

...so he noticed us, huh.

2-3

One of the special traits of a loner was known as “overreacting when hearing one’s name”. Normally, hardly anyone ever said their name, so on the odd occasion a loner *did* hear their name called, they tended to make a big show of it. Source: me. They’d make some dumbass reaction like squawk in excessive surprise. Like, it was on the level of answering reflexively when the announcer said, “The next stop is Ichigaya,” on the Soubu train line.

“Who would’ve thought I’d encounter you at this place. Why are you here?” Zaimokuza paused for a moment. “This is a battlefield, you know. A place only for those prepared to throw their lives away.”

“Um, I just got invited here by Totsuka like a normal person,” I pointed out, refusing to play along with Zaimokuza’s irritating play-act.

Zaimokuza’s reaction was to make puppy eyes at me. Not cute. “So Hachiman, did you have some kind of work to do here?”

“Nah, I just came to chill.”

“Say what?! Hold it. You’re doing this with Sir Totsuka?” Zaimokuza peered at Totsuka, his eyes wide with exaggerated shock. That made Totsuka flinch and retreat behind my back.

“Uh, yeah...” I said.

“Oho, I shall be with you presently.” Zaimokuza tottered away from us, a broad yet unpleasant grin on his face. It looked like he was saying his goodbyes to the person he had been talking to just before. Less than a minute passed before he came back, wheezing heavily. “Now then, let us be off.”

“Um, you realise we never invited you...”

Zaimokuza, who had at some unknown point in time made up his mind to hang around the two of us, went on wheezing until his shoulders shook. He wiped his sweat with his sleeve, as if he had no time to spare for my lazy objection.

“Hey, Zaimokuza, was that guy from before your friend or something?”

“Nay. He’s an Arcanabro.”

“Uh, I wasn’t asking to know that guy’s handle name, you know.”

“Hm? That’s not his handle name. His handle name is Ash the Bloodhound.”

“How cheesy...”

“When he finally knocks his opponents out in *Tekken*, they get furious and punch and kick the machine and the ashtray, but the ashtray part really caught on and made him infamous. He’s a veteran at the Big Mu. His real name’s a mystery. Everyone calls him Ash-san, you see.”

“Oh, I see...”

Wow. That was probably the most useless information ever. I could not think of a single occasion where knowing the origins of Ash’s name would come in handy.

“Okay, so what’s an Arcanabro?” Totsuka, who had been listening to the conversation, asked the exact same question at the exact same moment I did.

Seriously, Zaimokuza, stop assuming we understand your jargon. (Not that I was exactly dying to know.)

“Well, it refers to someone playing the same game as you. You can use it for titles and regions. For instance, you could say, ‘Among Arcanabros, the Chibabros are the biggest trash of the lot.’”

Chibabros, trash... I liked that word - Chibabro. Mainly for the Chiba part.

“Soooo, was he your friend?” I asked.

“Nay, he was an Arcanabro.”

"So you're saying he's not your friend..." Talking to Zaimokuza tired me out. We were both Japanese, but we didn't speak the same language. What the hell? Seriously, what language was Arcanabro even from? Did the bro in Arcanabro come from brother? Well, I guess that word *was* used to refer to people in your in-group.

Zaimokuza pondered slightly over my question. "Hm, I wonder. We talk when we meet up and we text each other battling tips. We go to events outside the prefecture together too... and yet, I know naught of his true name, nor of what he does for a living. I speak only of gaming and anime to him." He paused. "H-hey, would you call Ash-san my friend?"

"Don't ask me... didn't they teach you not to answer a question with a question at school?"

"Hmm, I feel more comfortable calling him my gaming comrade than my friend. To me, that is a word I can place more faith in than 'friend'."

"Gaming comrade, huh... I like how it's easy to understand. It's got a nice ring to it."

It sure beat the vagueness of the word 'friends', so I was kind of partial to that expression.

There are many things in the world that cannot be defined but are so easily used in conversation. Like, instead of saying marriage or love or romance, it would be easier to comprehend if people said they wanted a relationship of mutual gain, or they wanted your money, or they wanted to look good in the eyes of society, or they wanted to have descendants, and so on. Saying you want someone for their money is really horrible, though.

"Indeed," said Zaimokuza. "In other words, you could say you and I are gymbros, Hachiman."

"Huh, you think?"

Somehow, he made that sound distinctly unappealing, which kind of turned me off. Basically, he was saying that among Soubu Highbros, the gymbros are the biggest trash of the lot.

Still, I had to thank Zaimokuza for clarifying that we were not friends. We just had to talk to each other since we were gymbros.

“Okay,” said Totsuka, “so if I get paired up with you in gym class, Hachiman, we’re gymbros too.”

“Oh, y-you think...?”

So Totsuka and I weren’t friends, huh... that came as a shock.

I needed only to wait, though. If we weren’t friends, the possibility that we could be lovers still remained, after all. Yeah, baby! Crap, I was screwed either way.

“Still, it’s amazing how you make so many acquaintances through gaming,” Totsuka remarked.

“Hm. I-is that so?” Zaimokuza answered tremblingly.

“Oh, I think that’s pretty cool too,” I said. “Here I was thinking it was more of a loner thing.”

“No, that is by no means the case. There are national-level team battle tournaments for fighting games like *Gekido*. They’re quite intense. At the old tournaments there were also events where warriors would duke it out for the sake of their fallen gaming comrades. Everyone in the hall would get so emotional. It was enough to make me shed a tear too.”

“Sounds like Koshien¹.”

“Mm, I suppose it is.”

¹ The national high school baseball championship in Japan. It gets broadcasted on TV and everything.

Well now... so even this guy had a community he fit right into, surprisingly enough.

"Whoa, that's so cool..." Totsuka clapped his hands together in praise.

With that, Zaimokuza started getting carried away all of a sudden. As soon as a topic we loners knew a lot about came up, the blabbering would start right away. It was a bad habit of ours. "Indeed it is so! Games are marvellous things in general, not just fighting games. To begin with, fellow gamers make games together, which are then enjoyed by other fellow gamers, some of whom will go on to create the next generation of games. Is that cycle not beautiful? One day, I too shall stand among the creators."

"Huh? You're gonna be a game creator, Zaimokuza-kun? How cool!" said Totsuka.

"I-indeed! Ohohohohoho!"

...um, what?

"What happened to your dream of becoming a light novelist...?"

"Oh, that. I quit," he declared readily without any hesitation whatsoever.

"So you switched careers yet again...?"

"Well, a light novel author is self-employed, after all. There is no insurance if you fail and one must continue writing for countless years on end. Earning money is no guarantee regardless of how much you write, which is a terrible concern. A game company is preferable in that regard, for just being at the office would guarantee you a salary."

"You're just out to make yourself feel good, you piece of trash!"

"Hmph! As if you can talk, Hachiman!"

He had a point. Since I didn't want to work and all, it was pretty much the same thing as being a stay-at-home husband.

"But you don't have any game making skills," I pointed out.

“Hmph. In that case, I will be the game scenario writer. That will make use of my ideas and my literary prowess. I will live a stable life making the things I love with the company’s money!”

“I-I see... good luck...”

I didn’t give a shit anymore. I felt like an idiot for thinking about that guy’s future seriously for even a moment.

2-4

“More importantly, Hachiman, did you not come here to have fun? This is my home base; therefore I will be your guide. Is there anything you want to do?” Zaimokuza was really summoning up the energy as if here he was in his element.

Considering how I could more or less see where everything was just from looking around, it was impressive how useless his guidance would be.

“Oh, I want to try out the photo booth.” Totsuka, who was looking around the interior just like I was doing, pointed towards the far left where the photo booth corner was situated. “Hachiman, would you take a photo with me?”

“Come on... it’s pretty much got ‘girls/couples-only zone’ written all over it.”

The photo booth corner was forbidden to boys. It looked like you could only enter if you were a girl or you had a girlfriend. What blatant discrimination. It was a modern apartheid. The United Nations ought to hurry up and deal with this.

Our group consisted of three guys. We did not satisfy any of the conditions.

“I-I guess, yeah... no good, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s *no good*, exactly...” Seriously, when he asked for things the way he did, it was much tougher to say no to him.

“Ohohohoho, worry not. Hachiman, I told you this was my home base. They’d given me a free pass for being a regular.”

“Wow, you can do it? That’s awesome. Must be super handy being able to rely on free passes.”

So it wasn’t just false advertising. It was kind of awesome how employees and regulars both got benefits. That was Zaimokuza-san for you.

“Leave it to me. Follow my lead,” Zaimokuza declared as he led the way into the photo booth corner.

His majestic appearance was overflowing with self-confidence, not betraying a hint of unease. His mannerisms were fit for a king. That was Zaimokuza-san for you.

With that, he approached the counter in front of the photo booth corner.

“Excuse me, sir, what are you doing? It doesn’t look good for only boys to enter.”

“Er, um, uh, s-sorry...”

Nine times out of ten, all it took to stop him in his tracks was an employee’s nonchalant comment. That was Zaimokuza-san for you.

Seeing how this was all well within expectations, Totsuka and I looked at each other without any particular surprise.

“Just as I thought...” I muttered.

“...ahaha, that’s the way it goes.”

But the next moment, a miracle happened.

“scuse me, you’re in the way. Move outside, thanks.”

As the employee’s brother nonchalantly drove Zaimokuza right out of the corner, he cleared the way for us. Zaimokuza was getting carried off without any show of resistance, like a cat being dragged by the scruff of its neck.

“...wh-what was that?” The reason why Totsuka blinked his eyes wide in surprise was undoubtedly written across his face.

“...who knows? Whatever, he cleared the way for us so let’s go.”

“Y-yeah...” Totsuka followed me, his expression less than fully satisfied.

Inside the corner, there was every kind of machine imaginable. Honestly, the way the lights blinked and sparkled oh so radiantly and beautifully gave off an air like Kabukicho in Shinjuku¹.

And holy crap, look at those sample images. Shots of people who looked like models were printed on the curtain and the cubicle and everywhere in-between. It was so creepy how they all had the same face. Why do these chicks all look the same way? You could only distinguish them by their hairstyle and clothing. Did they use a template or something?

“Whoa... how slutty...”

Compared to the likes of Yuigahama and that Miura chick, I got a neat and clean vibe from it. So these were the people who “belonged to another world”, huh? It gave me the creeps.

“Okay, here’ll do,” said Totsuka. “Hachiman, you’re okay with it?”

“...yeah, I’m good.”

Honestly, it couldn’t be more messed up.

Totsuka entered the cubicle and started reading the instructions diligently. “So, let’s see. Choose the background and... okay, this looks good,” he said, holding my arm and dragging me several steps down.

“H-huh? What, is it starting? Whatcha s’posed to do?! It’s blinding me!”

The flash blinked suddenly. Wait, wasn’t Solar Flare the only ability Tien Shinhan could use²? Could Goku use the photo booth as well?

“*Let’s do one more~*”

¹ The red-light district in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

² Tien Shinhan was an antagonist in *Dragon Ball* and a side character in *Dragon Ball Z*. Here’s an image of [him](#).

After the synthetic voice filled the cubicle, the flash blinked a number of times.
Lend me your power, Tien Shinhan!

"And that's that! Don't forget to add your own touches when you leave!"

"Our own touches, huh...?" said Totsuka. "I wonder how I should do mine."

We pulled the curtain aside and moved to a separate booth for editing photos. On the screen there was a countdown showing how much time you had to edit.

"So you check the photo and... wh-whoa! There's a ghost in it?!" As soon as he opened the screen, Totsuka clung way too tightly onto my arm in shock.

Whoa, th-that gave me a shock! As I kept my quickened heartbeat under control, I looked at the ghost photo or whatever it was and saw for myself that a boy with a scowling face was indeed half-visible.

And his name was Zaimokuza.

When I opened the curtains in search for him, he was squatting on the floor.

"Oh, I get it now," Totsuka said. "So it was Zaimokuza-kun, huh...? Thank goodness for that."

"What are you doing here...?" I asked Zaimokuza.

"Oho, I crawled in here so that I would not be discovered. So then I thought, seeing as you were having an intimate moment with Sir Totsuka, that I would ruin it for you by appearing in the photo myself! Have at you! Your memories have been tainted through my hand!"

"Doesn't it make you sad to say that about yourself?"

"...hmph, I overcame that level of misery during the photo sales after the school trip. To wit, the girls were crying simply because I was in the photo with them."

Whoa, so this guy had his scars too... "Ohh. Um, how do I say it? S-sorry to hear that, Zaimokuza."

Zaimokuza made an indignant sound. "Fret not over me," he said as he furtively wiped the tears sprouting in the corner of his eyes.

Zaimokuza wasn't a bad guy, though. The photo sales were the real evil here.

"But you know, that photo sale system is full of BS and they ought to put a stop to it. When you secretly buy a photo of the girl you like and everyone around you finds out and makes fun of you, it sucks. That's how it works."

"...i-indeed, something similar happened to me."

"H-Hachiman... let's make lots of memories from now on." Totsuka comforted me with all of his might. "I'll be with you whenever I can."

That would be just *weird*... although I suppose it would be common sense if he were a middle schooler.

2-5

As we were mucking around, doing this and that, the editing time elapsed and the photos were printed.

“My skin’s so white...” said Totsuka.

“That’s some serious augmentation...” I remarked.

“Indeed,” Zaimokuza said with a cough. “And yet seeing Hachiman sparkling sends a shiver down my spine... he’s sparkling yet his eyes remain rotten...”

Well, it went without saying that an overexposed photo was the result of the flash being turned on so high. The whitening effect was plainly visible on Zaimokuza. As for Totsuka, it exhibited his pretty girl qualities to such a degree that it wouldn’t be a stretch to call him a bishojo.

“Right, here. This is yours, Hachiman.” Totsuka handed me one of three photos he had cut out neatly from the pile. “And this is for you, Zaimokuza-kun.”

“O-oh? I may procure one as well?”

“Huh? Yeah,” Totsuka said with a smile more radiant than any augment a photo booth could produce.

Zaimokuza perked in response. “Oh, good. Th-then I accept.” He took it, handling it like treasure, and he gazed at it with a dazed sort of happiness.

I cast my eyes onto the photos in my hand the same way he did.

Since there wasn’t much time in the editing cubicle, only three of my photos had any writing on them. On one photo, “Gymbros” was written in Totsuka’s somewhat cursive handwriting. I liked that nickname, it was cute...

Another photo had the word “nakayoshi” - buddies.

Zaimokuza snorted. “Hachiman and I are not buddies.”

“Pretty much. We’re not buddies.”

“You think so? I think you get along just fine.” Totsuka shook his head mysteriously.

“Nah, I’m more of a Ribon fan than a Nakayoshi fan¹.”

“Indeed,” said Zaimokuza. “*Kodocha* was quite good...”

“I know right? I followed the manga right up to the end.”

“Oh, really? The anime version was better.”

Zaimokuza and I turned away from each other with a huff.

I growled.

He growled.

As the sparks crackled and the two of us prepared for all-out war, Totsuka broke out into a giggle. “You two really are buddies.”

“Huh? What part...?”

Zaimokuza grunted. “Seriously.”

“Well, you know how it is. In deference to Totsuka’s super cute smile, I’ll forgive you. I’ll bring the manga over on Monday and you better read it and write me an essay on it.”

“Hmph. Then I, too, shall bring the DVDs and you’d better prepare a full report on it.” Zaimokuza whipped his gaze away and shoved the photos in his hand into his wallet. “Honestly, Hachiman, had you not been causing a ruckus, I would have obtained the augmented photos. I only managed to get two of them. As punishment, you must choose volleyball for gym class next month. Should you fail in doing that, I will be alone.”

¹ Ribon and Nakayoshi are two shojo magazines aimed at little girls.

"Yeah, I planned to pick volleyball from the start since I didn't wanna run. Wait. Did you say two photos?"

Really now? I thought, and was about to check this for certain when I felt something tug against my sleeve. I turned around to see Totsuka putting a finger against his lips, shushing me.

I kept the photo in my palm and opened it furtively, only to find myself kind of embarrassed by what was written on the remaining augmented photo:
"HACHIMAN SAIKA"

I mean, holy crap. I was definitely blushing.

"Ah, it's already gotten so late," Totsuka said. "I have to get going..."

"Oh, tennis school."

Oh, right. Totsuka had come here to pass the time before tennis school. I felt kind of bad for not sparing a moment to think about giving Totsuka a good time.

"Okay, I'm going now. Looks like you've cheered up too, Hachiman."

"Huh?"

"You seemed kinda down lately. So I thought you needed a change of pace."

Now that he mentioned it, I got the feeling Komachi said something like that this morning too. I hadn't really cared then since my sister is a total nutjob and all, but if a man of common sense like Totsuka was saying the same thing, then it really was concerning.

"I don't really know if something's happened to you, but... I like you best when you act yourself, Hachiman," Totsuka said. Then, checking the time on his phone, he uttered a "Right, let's hang out again sometime!" and broke out into a sprint. Just before he was out of sight, he turned around and let out a hearty wave.



In answer, I raised my hand high, too.

Zaimokuza grunted. "Sir Totsuka sure is kind-hearted. Not that there is any worth in being kind to you, Hachiman..."

"Huh? What? You're still here? And you know what, you're one to talk."

"Oho, it's just what you'd expect from my friend, Sir Totsuka. What a splendid warrior."

"...you're planning on becoming Totsuka's friend?"

"Er, a-am I not his friend...?"

"Don't ask me. Stop shaking so obviously."

Wasn't this guy's character getting shafted lately? Was he okay?

"Oh, hey, what are you doing? You're not allowed to come in here, yo." The nonchalant voice of the store employee interrupted the moment.

"Oh, crap," said Zaimokuza. "It is here we part ways! Farewell!"

"This isn't an all-you-can-eat restaurant..."

With that unintelligent exchange, the two of us fled from the scene. I could see Zaimokuza getting surrounded by employees through the corner of my eye.

Just as Totsuka said, it wasn't like Hikigaya Hachiman to brood and worry over things. My default style is to "give up when the going gets tough". It was best to act totally as if nothing was wrong. Only changing my attitude when something happened was the kind of hypocrisy I wouldn't stand for.

Before I got on my bicycle, I secretly put the booth photos I was holding into my wallet. Now to go buy a frame or something and hang it up.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

* One day, Hachiman and Komachi *

NOW THEN, I WONDER IF ONII-CHAN IS
DOING OKAY AT SCHOOL~
I'M GONNA CHECK UP ON HIM FOR A BIT...



Regarding
Yukinoshita Yukino

I-I'm not getting bullied at all!

Let's see... hypothetically speaking, she's like a high-spec PC with a great design and computation powers, but no matching keyboard or mouse.

Was that hard to get? To put it simply, she's like a train that gets from Tokyo to Chiba quite fast but all the platforms besides Tokyo Station are too far away.

The Soubu line is far away too, you know. You have to go up these huge stairs, but it's underground.

Onii-chan,
how's school?

Oh um,
I mean it differently from the way mum says it.
I phrased it badly.
Like, you've got Yukino-san and Yui-san,
so I was wondering what you talk about with those two.
What's Yukino-san like?
Does she treat you nice?

Um yeah. I get it already.
So, onii-chan, what do you think of Yukino-san?

Uhhh?
I don't really use computers, so...

Ohh, right. That is way too far away.

Yeah, and none of the stations on the Soubu line go to Tokyo Station....what were we talking about again?



Chapter 3: Yukinoshita Yukino Really Does Like Cats

Out of all the days in the week, Saturday has to be the mightiest. Do you not tremble before its overwhelming superiority? It's a holiday and so is the day after that. It's pretty much a Super Saiyan bargain sale.

I too loved Saturday with all my heart and soul, and I wanted to live every day like it was Saturday when I grew up. Sundays were depressing because all day you're thinking to yourself, "Starting tomorrow I've got work again..."

The first thing I did in the morning was skim the newspaper idly. *Kobo the Li'l Rascal* was the best part of the newspaper, as per usual¹. Or rather, you could say that was the only part I actually read.

Once I finished reading the newspaper - and by that I mean *Kobo the Li'l Rascal* - I checked the discount leaflets. Whenever I saw something cheap, I put a red circle around it and handed it to Komachi, who then noted it down on her shopping list. Either Komachi or mum did the shopping in our family.

Then I noticed the conspicuously bright font in the middle of the leaflet. The font was so bright you might as well call it a photon instead. I'm talking about particles of light, not a person².

"K-Komachi! Look at this!" Without thinking, I yanked her arm with unrestrained eagerness. "They're having the Tokyo Cats and Dogs Show this year too!"

It was like that one scene from *The Lion King*. I might end up yelling out a battle cry without thinking, too. *U-Ra-Ra!!* Wasn't that Geronimo's catchphrase³?

"Omigosh! You're right! This is awesome! You've got a sharp eye, onii-chan!"

"Hahaha! Worship me, you pleb!"

¹ A popular comic strip published in the *Yomiuri Shinbun*. Think of it as a Japanese *Garfield* or *Peanuts*.

² The Japanese word for photon is 光子, which can also be read as a girl's name.

³ Geronimo is a character from *Kinnikuman*, a popular shonen comic.

"Wow, you're so amazing! My onii-chan's amazing!"

"...quiet, you two. You're being annoying." Our mother crawled out of her bedroom, cursing and looking very much like a golem. She had bed hair, her glasses were on crooked and she had shadows under her eyes that wouldn't go away.

"S-sorry..." I apologised, to which my mother nodded curtly and retreated to her bedroom. It seemed she was planning to have a long nap.

...sure is tough being a career woman. I pity the woman who marries me. I would be more than that guy who relies on a woman's paycheck - I would be a total waste of society's resources.

As she put her hand on the bedroom door, my mother looked over her shoulder. "You," she said. "You're free to leave the house, but watch out for cars. Since it's humid and the cars start playing up in this sort of weather, it's easy for an accident to happen. Don't do something stupid like let Komachi ride on the bike with you."

"Yeah, yeah. As if I'd make Komachi go through something so dangerous."

The love my parents felt towards my sister was very deep. Yeah, it was because she was a girl, but she did the chores all the time and she was so good at everything she tried, not to mention she was just soooo adorable. No wonder my parents treated her like glass.

As for the elder brother, on the other hand, I doubted they felt the same way.

At that very moment, my mother was sighing deeply as she looked at my face.
"I'm worried about you, you idiot."

"...huh?"

I got choked up in spite of myself. To think she worried about me all this time... I thought for sure I was unloved seeing as she never woke me in the morning, preferred to give a measly 500 yen coin over a home-cooked lunch and occasionally bought me really crappy-looking shirts at the nearby store. Seriously, what was with my parents' hideous taste in clothing? It was so bad it was a crying shame. I swear they hated me.

Still... the relationship between a parent and child is a beautiful one. My eyes were getting watery.

"M-mum..."

"I really am worried. If you got your sister hurt, your father would kill you."

"Th-the old man..."

I got choked up in spite of myself.

The old man in question was currently in dreamland, indulging in sleep.

Honestly, things were never good when my father was around. He doted on Komachi so much and looked at me with half-suspicious eyes, I knew. But he only told me things that were irrelevant to me, like watch out for those extortionists out to ruin your reputation, or that women who chat you up on the street are only interested in your wallet, or that investing in future funds is more or less a scam, or that to work is to lose. And what really made it awful was that almost all of that came from my father's own experience, so I couldn't ignore it.

Whenever he left the house, he slammed the door as hard as he could, disturbing me when I dozed.

"There's no need to worry since we're going by bus!" Komachi turned to our mother, laughing sheepishly. "Ah, we'll need the bus fare!"

"Alright then," said my mother, "how much was the two-way ticket again?"

“Uhh...” Komachi started counting on her fingers. Um, if a one-way ticket was 150 yen, then a two-way ticket was 300 yen. I did not see how she needed to use her fingers to work that out.

“It’s 300 yen,” I answered in the end, before Komachi could finish her calculations.

To that, my mother responded with an “okay” as she dug out a small coin from her wallet. “Here you go, 300 yen.”

“Thanks!” said Komachi.

“Excuse me, mother. I’m going too, you know...” There was a somewhat stiff feeling to my words, like I was Masuo-san talking to Fune⁴.

“Oh, you need your fare too?” My mother put her hand in her wallet again as if she had only *just* realised my existence.

“And I’ll be eating out today so I need some lunch money toooooo!” Komachi sang.

“Huh? I suppose it can’t be helped...”

At Komachi’s request (which was just oozing with opportunism) our mother handed over two whole bank notes.

Wow, Komachi sure was amazing. That said, my lunch money was the usual 500 yen, so why that translated into 1000 yen when my sister was the one asking was beyond me. Please, enlighten me, mother.

“Thanks! ‘kay, let’s go, onii-chan.”

“Mm.”

“All right, have a nice day out.” My mother waved us off languidly before disappearing into her bedroom once again. Sleep tight, mother.

⁴ Masuo is a character from *Sazae-san*. Fune is his mother-in-law. They have an awkward and distant relationship.

Then, as I was leaving the house, I grasped the door with every fibre of my being and slammed it shut.

That noise was just for you. Rise and shine, father!

3-2

It took a grand total of fifteen minutes for the bus to get to the venue of the Tokyo Cats and Dogs Show, the Makuhari Expo Hall. Even though it was the TokyoCats and Dogs Show, I was surprised that it was being held in Chiba. I didn't have the money to go if I mistook it for the Tokyo Big Sight or something.

The venue was populated by a reasonably high amount of people. There were also a number of those who brought their pets inside.

Komachi and I tentatively held hands since that was what we were supposed to do. It wasn't like we were buddies on a date or anything, but we'd done this so often when we went out as kids that it was force of habit now. Komachi hummed a tune as she swung my hand back and forth. I almost got a dislocation from that.

I could see that Komachi was brighter and more cheerful than usual, perhaps because of what she was wearing: a border tank top matched by a flimsy pink cutsew with a broad neckline, along with short pants that went down to her thighs, somewhat in the vein of a low-rise skirt. Plus, she had on a carefree million-dollar grin that threatened to split her face in two. Whenever that little sister of mine smiled like that, she looked so unapologetically proud of herself. Not that she smiled like that just anywhere.

Anyway, it might have been called the Tokyo Cats and Dogs Show, but it was pretty much a pet sale with the commodities on display (e.g. the cats and dogs). On the other hand, I was quite amused to see how some kind of rare animals were also on display. There was no admission fee or anything either - it was an event to be feared. Chiba really was the greatest.

As soon as we got in, Komachi started pointing at things very excitedly. "Look, onii-chan! Penguins! So many penguins walking around! How adorable!"

"Oh, that reminds me. I heard the word penguin derives from the Latin word for 'fat'. When you think about it, they're like obese salarymen waddling around outside the office."

"Oh, wow. Suddenly, I can't think of them as cute anymore..." Komachi lowered her arm, dejected. She turned on me and glared resentfully. "Thanks to your useless trivia, I'm gonna think of the word 'fat' every time I look at a penguin, onii-chan..." she muttered in complaint, not that it would have done any good saying that to me. Blame it on the guy who named the penguins in the first place. "You know, onii-chan, you're not meant to say that kind of stuff on a date, you know? If a girl says, 'How adorable!' you're supposed to say, 'Yeah, but you're even more adorable.'"

"...how dumb."

Even the penguins living in the South Pole would catch a cold if they were subjected to such a chilly conversation, in my opinion.

"It's fine, it's fine. It wasn't like I was telling you to say that seriously to me, you know. I already know I'm adorable."

"Saying it yourself ruins the effect..."

What a sparkling conversation to have while dogs and cats and penguins mill around in the background.

"Thanks for the pointless commentary! Anyway, look, look! Let's look over there for a sec," Komachi said as she broke off into a run, yanking my hand.

"Oi, hang on, don't rush it. You'll hit something."

Somehow or other, we ended up in what looked like the bird zone, populated by parrots of all shapes and sizes. A world of blindingly rich colours opened up before our eyes. Yellow, red, green... all the primary colours were splashed around here and there so vividly it hurt my eyes to look. Whenever the birds spread their wings and soared, light shone on their feathers, showing off their brilliance.

But among that flood of brilliant colours, what really stood out was a glossy head of black hair.

Every time the owner of that glossy black hair buried her nose in the Tokyo Cats and Dogs Show pamphlet she held in one hand, her twintails swished back and forth.

“Isn’t that... Yukino-san?” It seemed Komachi had recognised her too.

Seriously, there was no one who stood out so obviously like she did. She was drawing quite a lot of attention to herself. Clad in a quarter-size cream-coloured cardigan and a neat, fluffy one-piece dress with a ribbon tied just a little below her chest, she gave off a softer impression than usual. Whenever she walked, the simple strap sandals she wore over her bare feet made a light, cool sound. But the girl in question seemed to pay no heed to the gazes around her, looking around stone-facedly just like she did in the clubroom.

Yukinoshita checked the hall number and looked down at the pamphlet. Then she looked around herself and down at the pamphlet once more. And then she let out a sigh of resignation.

What was up with her? Was she *lost*?

Yukinoshita snapped the pamphlet shut as if she had made her mind up about something and broke out into a jaunty walk - straight towards the wall.

“Oi, that’s a dead end,” I blurted out to her, unable to bear watching in silence any longer.

That prompted an openly hostile glare from Yukinoshita’s direction. *Meep*.

But as soon as she realised that I was the one who called out to her, a somewhat enigmatic look came over her face and she made her way over to us. “What have we here? An unusual animal, I see.”

“Could you *not* call me a Homo sapiens sapiens in passing? You’re denying my humanity.”



“Am I not correct?”

“You’re correct, but you’re missing the point...”

The first thing she did when she opened her mouth was treat me like a primate hominid. While she was absolutely correct from a biological standpoint, you couldn’t get much worse of a greeting than that.

“So why were you walking towards a wall?”

“...I was lost,” Yukinoshita said darkly with an expression that could only be described as... defeat. It was like she was on the verge of committing seppuku. Her eyes were brim with annoyance as she opened up the pamphlet and pored over it yet again.

“Uh, this place isn’t big enough to get lost in, you know...”

So she had no sense of direction, huh... well, I guess there were times when you got lost even when you had a map. Maps weren’t really useful, especially when you were in a facility where each block looked the same as the one before it. Like Comiket or the underground level of Shinjuku Station. Umeda Station was so bad you’d be left stranded if you didn’t bring graph paper and map it out yourself.

“Good afternoon, Yukino-san!”

“Ah, so you came along too, Komachi-san. Good afternoon.”

“Still, I didn’t expect to see you here,” I said. “You came to see something?”

“...well, a few things here and there, I suppose.”

The cats, basically. She’d drawn a giant red circle around the cat corner...

Having noticed my gaze, Yukinoshita calmly folded up the pamphlet as if nothing was wrong. “Hi-Hikya...” She tried to play it cool, but she totally stumbled over her words. “Ahem, what are you doing here, Hikigaya-kun?”

For my part, I also acted as if I hadn't noticed a thing, all the while doing my very best to resist making fun of her. After all, if I did say anything she'd probably get back at me five times over...

"I come here every year with my sister."

"This was where we met our cat, too!" Komachi piped in.

Like Komachi said, this was the place we had encountered our cat Kamakura for the first time. He might have been a cheeky rascal, but he had a pedigree. The moment Komachi said she wanted him for a pet, it was a done deal. I felt sorry for our father, who only got called over to foot the bill.

Yukinoshita looked at Komachi and me, a smile showing clearly on her face. Not again. She had this look on her face before.

"...you two get along as well as ever, I see."

"Not really, it's like an all-year-round event."

"Okay." There was a pause. "Bye, then."

"Yeah, bye."

The two of us uttered parting words, avoiding any further entanglement.

"Hold on just a second here, Yukino-san. Since you came all the here, let's hang out together!" Komachi tugged on Yukinoshita's sleeve before she could leave.
"My bro is a total downer whenever he opens his mouth. I'd have much more fun being with you, Yukino-san."

"I-is that so?" Yukinoshita asked in reply, taking half a step away from Komachi, who was pressing against her incessantly.

Komachi nodded eagerly in response. "Yep yep!" she answered. "C'moooon!"

"It won't be getting in the way? ...Hikigaya-kun, I mean."

I was being sidelined as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hold it, what's this crap you're spouting? I shut up when there's people around so I'm never in the way at all, you hear?"

"In other words, you blend into your surroundings, I see... in that sense, you have an amazing talent..."

Yukinoshita looked neither surprised nor amazed. But well, in actuality, if you're part of the group and you go quiet, everyone makes a real fuss over you.

"...very well, we'll look around together," Yukinoshita said. "Is there something you'd like to see? If there's nothing in particular..."

"Let's see..." Komachi hit her hand as if she had come up with a bright idea. "Since we came all the way here, let's look at stuff you can't normally see!"

"...I honestly can't tell if you can read the atmosphere or not," I said.

"Huh? What?" Komachi cocked her head in puzzlement.

"...I'll go along to your suggestion." Yukinoshita sighed in resignation.

It was hard to know what to say. I mentally apologised for my little sister.

When it came to things like rare animals, there wasn't much space for the larger types as you'd expect. Given the situation, the bird zone had a pretty much even ratio. That was probably because the rare ones didn't eat up much space.

After leaving the booth featuring gaudy birds from Southern countries behind us, we went to an area with a ridiculously awesome display. That area, which was blocked off by a handrail made of reinforced steel, was home to majestic birds of sharp beaks, sharpened talons and sturdy wings.

"Ch-check that out, Komachi! Eagles! Falcons! Hawks! Oh man, I wish we had one of those."

How cool... I almost stopped walked and scaled the handrail without thinking. If there was one symptom of chuunibyou I'd contracted, it was my inability *not* to be moved by such an impressive sight as this. That was probably how an American soldier or a total chuuni would see it.

But Komachi, who seemed unable to grasp what was so awesome about it, snorted at me. "Eh? That's not cute. It reeks of chuuni."

"Oi, what's this crap you're spouting? Isn't it cute how it twists its head, see?" I turned around, intending to persuade her, but Komachi had already left me behind. How cruel.

"There is nothing cute about it." Instead of my cold-hearted sister, the one who answered me was Yukinoshita. "But I do think it's majestic and beautiful," she added, surprisingly enough.

It seemed she wasn't lying. Yukinoshita stood beside me, gripping the handrail, her gaze focused solely on the birds of prey.

"Whoa! So you *do* understand the awesomeness! You're a chuuni at heart!"

"...that I do *not* understand."

Alas, this dame understands it not...

Oh, crap. Any more of that and I'd start sounding like Zaimokuza...

**Curséd chuunibyou
This incurable illness
A disease of the heart (too many syllables)**

A haiku, written by Hachiman. Incidentally, chuunibyou is the word that indicates what season the poem is about. Chuunibyou is the spring of youth.

3-3

We slipped out of the bird zone and into the small animal zone. This was the zone that grouped together pets like the hamsters, rabbits and ferrets.

Komachi really got into the Petting Corner, as evidenced by all the oohing and aahing she made and how she just refused to budge an inch from where she stood. Yukinoshita, on the other hand, cocked her head after a short-lived attempt to pet the animals. It seemed the feel of their fur wasn't quite the sensation she was looking for. She was more hung up about it than I expected...

Incidentally, the animals scampered away whenever I got near them. Well, damn. Don't tell me I was hated even by small animals.

"Komachi, let's move on..."

"Eeek, how cute! I almost stood on it! Oh, huh. Onii-chan, you can go on ahead. I'm gonna stick around a little longer here."

"That so..." The reason she thought it was cute wasn't cute at all. Was this girl okay?

Since I'd received Komachi's permission and all, I decided to move on. If I recalled correctly, the dog zone was up ahead and the cat zone was probably after that.

"Okay, Yukinoshita. The zone after the next is the cat zone. Sorry, but could you watch Komachi for me?"

"I don't really mind, but Komachi-san is old enough to take care of herself, I believe. Aren't you being overprotective?"

"Nope. It's called keeping an eye on her so that she doesn't step on the animals."

"I do *not* step on them," Komachi interjected. "Oh, Yukino-san, you do know you can go ahead and look at the cats too, right?"

"Oh, i-is that so? W-well, since we've come this far already..." Yukinoshita said, standing up hastily. Just how much did she want to see those damn cats? "Well then, let's be off."

Then, ignoring my existence completely, she boldly stepped forward into uncharted waters.

But the moment the phrase "dog zone" came into view, she did a double take.

"Something the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing..."

Yukinoshita slackened her walking pace, and then slowly she walked around me so that she was behind my back, leaving me to take the initiative. *Crap, she's got my back! I'm screwed!* I thought, but at the same time I didn't feel any particular malicious intent from her.

-oh right, it was because of the dogs. She *really* didn't like them, huh.

"I'm pretty sure you already know this, but you do realise they're just puppies."

Since this event also functioned as a sale, the particularly familiar types of pets on display - the cats and dogs - were puppies and kittens. It was all very sad, but it *was* a business.

I had no idea whether my words got through to her, but Yukinoshita averted her gaze. "Puppies are even wo... I-I'm only saying this to be clear about it, but it's not as if I'm bad with dogs or anything, you understand? That is... they're not particularly my strong suit, you could say."

"You know, in our society that means the same thing as being bad at it."

"It's within the margin of error."

Really now...? Well, if she said so.

"Hikigaya-kun... are you a dog person?"

“I’m neutral. I decided not to join any party or faction.”

True warriors don’t join groups. Loners will always oppose the entire world. The whole “Me versus the world” thing was like something out of a Steven Seagal film. I thought like Steven Seagal, so I was totally him.

But there was not a glimmer of approval on Yukinoshita’s face. “I take that to mean no one would take you?”

“Pretty much. But whatever, let’s go.”

She really was pretty much right, so I voiced no objections. Verbally sparring with Yukinoshita would only bring me pain and misery, so I decided to cut my losses and move on.

“I thought for sure you would be a dog person,” Yukinoshita muttered idly as she started walking behind me.

“Huh? Why?” I asked, looking over my shoulder.

But Yukinoshita’s answer didn’t offer much in the way of hints. “It’s because you were that desperate.”

Was there a time Yukinoshita saw me get desperate over something? Only one thing came to mind. It was probably from *that time*.

Totsuka’s tennis match.

Yeah, I really was desperate that time. I fought hard for Totsuka’s sake. I mean, he’s so cute and all. Back then, Totsuka had been all precious like a Chihuahua, so I would count myself as a dog person, indeed.

In that case, it was probably correct to say I was a Totsuka person. I think I loved Totsuka *too* much.

As I scratched my head, thinking “*Oh, now I’ve done it*”, Yukinoshita tapped my shoulder repeatedly. “Can you please get going already?”

“Oh, right.”

Egged on by Yukinoshita, I went through a cheap gate with “Woof Woof Zone” written on it. A huge mass of potential buyers were gathered in the corner of the pet shop, mingling with each other. It seemed a lot of customers were there - the dogs attracted that much attention. The popular small-sized breeds like the Chihuahuas, Dachshunds, Shiba Inus and the Corgis were first on the list, followed by the standard breeds like the Labradors, Golden Retrievers, Beagles, Bulldogs and so on. The breeder explaining all of these things spoke with such authority he looked like he was something of a pedigree himself, what with all the titles he used that were hard to understand, like GRAND CHAMPION and FESTIVAL NOMINEE and WORLD SELECTION and GOOD DESIGN.

From the moment we entered the dog zone, Yukinoshita refused to open her mouth. She was so damn quiet I almost assumed she'd stopped breathing. All it took to get me all bothered was a person deep in silence in a bustling surrounding. Seriously, it was too noisy around here. Especially with all those squealing girls snapping photos.

...and wait, that was Hiratsuka-sensei over there. Let's just pretend I didn't see her. Sensei... please go on a date or something when it's your day off.

Meh, once we get out of here we can hurry up and get to the cat corner, I thought, but at that moment Yukinoshita let out a short gasp.

Just ahead of us in our line of us was a section with “Trimming Corner” written on it.

“Hm, what?” I asked. “Do they process photos?”

“No. They trim the dogs, combing their hair and bringing out the lustre in their fur. It's widely known as grooming.”

Grooming... Up Jaja Uma? That was a super famous manga¹.

¹ He's flipping around the title of *Jaja Uma Grooming Up!*

As I was thinking about the four sisters at Watarai Ranch, Yukinoshita went on.
“To put it in lay terms, it’s a beauty parlour,” she said condescendingly.

“Eh, that so? How extravagant. I’m sure the Fifth Shogun would approve².”

“Not only do they perform grooming, there are classrooms for obedience training.
Perhaps you should give it a shot?”

She just casually put me on the same level as a dog without so much as blinking.
I was used to it by now, so whatever.

As we were having our pointless discussion, it seemed one dog had just finished getting trimmed. A Dachshund with a long coat trotted out, its mouth yawning wide. So, uh, what happened to the owner?

“H-hold on, Sable! Bad boy, you’re not on your leash!”

The loose Dachshund turned its head around at the order, only to cheerfully ignore it. Then it dashed towards the exit like a bullet - in other words, towards us. Even though it was just a dog.

“H-Hikigaya-kun. Th-that dog is...” Yukinoshita was in a panic, not knowing what to do. She looked around wildly and her hands were flailing all over the place.

...it was rare to see her react like this. It was kind of a pleasant change, really, so I was tempted to leave her be, but the noise she was making was a pain in the arse.

“Look here,” I said, seizing the dog by the scruff of its neck. I didn’t hold down our cat whenever it got pissed at me and tried to run away every day for nothing. Catching animals by hand was a special talent of mine.

The dog was looking at me with miserable eyes, but once it got over its surprise, it brought its nose up to me and sniffed me before licking my fingers enthusiastically. Startled, I let go of the dog without thinking.

² The Fifth Shogun, Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, was a notorious shogun known for being eccentric and a tyrant. He also had a thing for dogs, which is why he’s also called the Dog Emperor.

“Whoops, I let it slip...”

“Ugh, you imbecile,” Yukinoshita said scornfully. “If you let go of it...”

But far from running away, the dog played around with my feet and rolled over leisurely. It showed me its stomach, its tongue wagging.

What was up with this dog...? It sure was overly attached to me.

“This dog...” Yukinoshita peered at the dog closely from behind my back. Um, not that it was really such a scary life form, in my opinion...

“S-Sable! I’m so sorry!” The owner, who came sprinting into view, held the dog in her arms and lowered her head in profuse apology. Her hairstyle, all bunched up like a dumpling ball, swayed with the motion. “I apologise for what Sable-”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Yuigahama-san,” Yukinoshita declared, prompting the owner to look up with plain confusion written across her face.

That hairstyle, that voice, that attitude of hers - there was no mistaking it. It was Yuigahama.

3-4

“Huh? Y-Yukinon?” Then she turned to me mechanically. “Oh. Oh. Huh? Hikki? You’re with Yukinon?” Yukinoshita looked at Yukinoshita and me in turn, uttering words of plain bewilderment.

“Yep,” I said.

“Oh. O-okay...”

An extremely awkward silence reigned between us. Damn, this was hard...

The awkward silence was broken when the dog Yuigahama was holding let out a bark. Yukinoshita, who had merely been hiding in my shadow this whole time, flinched in response and closed the distance between us. It seemed her default reaction in times of danger was to use me as a shield.

“...oh, uuuuh. Um...” As Yuigahama gently stroked her dog on the head, her gaze wandering over the space between Yukinoshita and me. I could detect a sense of distance from that action.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” Yukinoshita said to Yuigahama, causing her to flinch and shake a little in response.

“Y-yeah. Why are you and... Hikki together, Yukinon? I mean, it’s rare to see the two of you together...” Yuigahama spoke to Yukinoshita rather stiffly, as if they hadn’t seen each other for days. She clutched her pet dog against her chest tightly, not meeting Yukinoshita’s eyes.

She might have asked us why we were together, but there was no reason for it at all since our meeting was a total coincidence. Yukinoshita and I exchanged glances before opening our mouths at the exact same moment. “See, the thing is—”

Yuigahama interrupted us. "Oh, never mind after all! It's okay, I'm good. You don't have to tell me... it's obvious if you're out together on a day off, right? Yeah... I never noticed at all, silly me. And here I thought the only thing I was good at was reading the mood," she said with a strained smile.

As she scrunched her eyes shut, a strained laugh issued from her mouth. I wondered if she was having some kind of weird misunderstanding. Did it really look like Yukinoshita and I were dating to her? Well, she'd probably realise that right away if she thought about it a little, and besides, coming out and saying something so obvious like "We're not really going out" felt, well, *stupid*. I was way too self-conscious to do anything like that.

Misunderstandings were misinterpretations of the facts. They weren't the truth. In that case, it was best to keep it all to myself. I didn't care what anyone thought of me. Wait, the more you constantly misunderstand things, the more likely you'd end up on the wrong path. Whatever, I give up.

The dog in Yuigahama's arms looked up at its owner's face and let out a lonely whine. Yuigahama stroked Sable's head, uttering soothing words. Her face was downcast. "Th-then I should get going now."

She began to walk, her gaze pointed at her feet. She was stopped in her tracks when Yukinoshita called out to her.

"Yuigahama-san."

Yukinoshita's voice resounded clearly in the middle of the hustle and bustle. Only her voice reached my ears, as if all the noise in the background had faded away. Yuigahama, whose eyes had been downcast just a moment before, instinctively looked in Yukinoshita's direction.

"There's something I need to tell you about us, so could you please come to the clubroom on Monday?"

“...oh,ahaha... I might not really want to hear it... like, there’s no point telling me now, when it’s not my business,” Yuigahama said softly. Although there was a troubled smile on her face, her words carried a definite refusal.

Yukinoshita lowered her eyes slightly, dismayed by Yuigahama’s attitude. The level of noise in the background went up a notch - or maybe I tricked myself into believing that. Swamped by all the surrounding noise, Yukinoshita fumbled for words.

“...I wasn’t able to convey this to you because of the way I am.” She paused, searching for the right thing to say. “But I want to talk straight with you.”

For a long moment, Yuigahama said nothing, before finally mustering a dull “mmm” in response. It was neither acceptance nor rejection. A suspicious look came over her eyes as she glanced sideways at Yukinoshita, although she quickly averted her gaze. Then she swung around and started walking away. Yukinoshita and I watched her retreating figure in silence.

It was only when Yuigahama’s small, hunched back had disappeared into the crowd that I asked Yukinoshita, who was standing next to me, “Hey. What did you want to talk about with Yuigahama?”

“June 18th. Do you know what day that is?” Yukinoshita asked, peering at my face from below.

Yukinoshita’s face was so close to mine I took half a step back reflexively. “Well, it’s not a national holiday, that’s for sure,” I said belatedly.

Satisfied that I had no idea, Yukinoshita puffed out her chest. “It’s Yuigahama’s birthday,” she announced proudly. “I think,” she added.

“Really? ...and wait. You *think*? ”

“Yes, her phone address had 0618 in it, that’s why.”

“So you never asked her straight...” That was Yukinoshita’s communicative powers for you.

"That's why I want to celebrate Yuigahama-san's birthday. Even if she never comes back to the Service Club... I would like to thank her properly for everything she has done," Yukinoshita said blushingly, her eyes lowered furtively.

"I see..."

There was no doubt that to Yukinoshita, whose personality left much to be desired and whose high specs continued to inspire flames of envy on a daily basis, Yuigahama was the first friend she had ever made. I doubted her desire to thank Yuigahama was a lie. Much as her words were coated with self-defeat, she was probably desperate not to lose that friendship.

...ohhhh. So did all of this happen because of what I said to Yuigahama?

Feeling slightly guilty, I peered sideways at Yukinoshita, who recoiled in discomfort, having noticed I was looking at her. Ahh, she'd probably tell me not to look her because I was a disgusting creep all over again. With that on my mind, I averted my eyes quickly before she could say anything. I coughed, my cheeks reddening somewhat.

"Hey, Hikigaya-kun..."

"Yeah?"

Yukinoshita turned around, her hands held tightly against her own chest. She made a strained noise, as if she was nervous or something. In an attempt to hide her flushing pink cheeks, she looked at me with her moist, upturned eyes.

Now I was getting nervous too, no thanks to looking her in the eyes.

Yukinoshita's next words came out in a small whisper, as if something was caught in her throat.

"Er, that is... w-would you go out with me?"

"...huh?"

Chapter 4: Hikigaya Komachi Cunningly Plots Her Scheme

Sunday.

It was fine weather, what one would call a rare sunny patch during the rainy season. Today was the day I was supposed to be going out with Yukinoshita.

Just a little bit of time until it was exactly ten o'clock. Had I turned up a little too early, I wonder? It seemed this whole affair was really throwing me off-kilter. To think *Yukinoshita*, of all people, would ask me out...

What to do...? Maybe I should turn her down after all... my mind had been in a jumble at the time. I'm sure I lost my usual sense of judgement thanks to Yukinoshita saying things I couldn't have imagined.

As I gripped my head, suppressing the urge to yell out my frustration, a voice called out behind me. "Sorry to have kept you waiting."

A cool gust of wind blew as Yukinoshita slowly walked towards me. She was wearing a faint blue sleeveless shirt with a classy-looking stand-up collar. Unusually enough for her, her black hair was tied up in a ponytail, which fell down to her waist and fluttered like a scarf. Her skirt, which went to her knees, danced every time she walked.

"It wasn't like I was waiting a long time," I mumbled.

"Is that so? Good, then. Now let us be off."

Yukinoshita hitched her rattan bag as she peered around restlessly, as if trying to spot someone in the surroundings.

"If you're looking for Komachi, she went to the convenience store, so you'll have to wait a bit."

"I see." Yukinoshita was silent for a moment. "Still, I feel I ought to apologise for asking her to meet me on a day off..."

"It's no biggie. Even if you and I were to buy a birthday present for Yuigahama, I sincerely doubt it'd be any good. Plus, Komachi was happy to come along, so it's fine."

"Yes, that's all well and good, but..."

And with that, allow me to unveil the obvious reveal. When she said "go out with me", she really just wanted to go and buy a present for Yuigahama's birthday. And it wasn't me she wanted - it was Komachi.

Well, it was an intelligent decision. Up until now, we'd always rely on Yuigahama for these things, but we couldn't exactly rely on her this time when it was for her sake we were doing this. That being the case, the only person the antisocial Yukinoshita could count on was Komachi.

For two whole minutes we waited in silence, until Komachi finally showed up.

Perhaps it was because she was aware she was going out with Yukinoshita today, but Komachi's clothing sense had taken a turn for the classier. She wore a summer vest over her half-sleeve blouse and a pleated skirt with knee socks over her lower half, while the loafers on her feet completed the posh lady look. But the somewhat frivolous newsboy cap she wore on her head gave off a perky sort of impression. In her hand, she held a plastic bottle with green tea in it.

"Hi there, Yukino-san! Good day."

"Sorry for calling you out on your day off," Yukinoshita apologised.

Komachi responded with a broad grin. "No problem. I want to buy a present for Yui-san too, and plus I'm looking forward to spending the day out with you, Yukino-san."

Knowing this chick, she really did love Yukinoshita with all her heart, so I didn't think she was lying. I guess that means Yukinoshita attracts the airheaded girls. She was the most popular person with the girls I knew of next to Hayama, seriously.

"The train's about to arrive, so let's go," I said, urging on the two of them.

We all made our way down to the ticket barrier. Today, our destination was the widely loved LaLaport Tokyo Bay, a place frequently used as a date spot if the rumours were to be believed. Filled with various shops and decked out with ample space for film events, it was the cream of the crop when it came to leisure spots in the prefecture.

The interior of the train carriage was fairly congested in its own right. We held onto the hanging straps for five whole minutes as the train shook and jolted us around. In all likelihood, if it was just Yukinoshita and me, we probably wouldn't have said anything, but since Komachi was there today, she spoke to Yukinoshita about this, that and the other.

"Have you decided what you're going to buy yet, Yukino-san?"

"...no, I've looked around here and there, but it's all somewhat beyond me," Yukinoshita said with a small sigh.

Perhaps Yukinoshita had been thinking about Yuigahama's birthday present when she was reading that magazine in the clubroom. It didn't seem like Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had similar taste...

"And I've never received a birthday present from a friend myself..." Yukinoshita admitted, her expression somewhat gloomy.

When Komachi heard that, she went quiet, the smile fading from her face too. She seemed to be struggling about what to say to that.

I eventually broke the silence by humming in interest. "So you really *are* like that. Now me, on the other hand, I totally received presents."

"Huh? You're not lying?"

Yukinoshita's stunned reaction somehow came across to me as rather impolite. "No, I'm not," I insisted. "There'd be no point in me trying to show off to you after all this time."

Yukinoshita nodded in admiration for some reason. “That certainly is true... I spoke on impulse. I apologise. I mustn’t treat you solely with suspicion. From now on, I will fully trust in your worthlessness.”

“If that was your idea of a compliment, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“So, what did you receive? I’m asking you for future reference.”

“Corn...”

That caused a wide-eyed Yukinoshita to blink multiple times. “Huh?” she asked in response, as if she didn’t hear me properly.

“C-corn...”

“Come again?”

“Well, you see! He came from a farming family! Let me just say that it tasted awesome! His mum steamed it for me, you see!”

“O-onii-chan. Y-you don’t have to look so teary-eyed...”

I wasn’t crying. I was absolutely not crying or anything remotely like that. See, it was only a bit of water coming out of my eyes. “Yes, that was the story of my summer vacation in fourth grade...”

“Onii-chan randomly started talking to himself...” Komachi said, rolling her eyes.

But Yukinoshita was willing to listen. She nodded, urging me to continue.

“Since our mums were friends or whatever, Takatsu-kun came to our house. It was the first time a classmate had ever come over for my birthday, so I was kind of elated. When I went to the front of the entrance, Takatsu-kun was sitting on his mountain bike, and as he shifted to fifth gear, he handed me this bundle wrapped up in newspaper.

“Today’s your birthday, right? Here, my mum told me to give this to you.’

“Th-thanks...’

“He said nothing. Then I said, ‘You coming inside?’”

“Huh? Ohhh, um. I promised to play at Shin-chan’s place.”

“Oh, okay...’

“WHAT THE-? HE DIDN’T INVITE ME? I was kind of on the verge of tears at that point, since I thought I got along so well with Shin-chan. Takatsu-kun said ‘See you later’ and started pedalling away on his mountain bike. After I watched him go, I opened up the package and inside there was fresh corn, all wet from the morning dew. When I realised that, a single tear poured out, and then another...”

Yukinoshita sighed a little bit at the end of the tale. “So in the end, you never received a present from a friend.”

“...egad, you’re right! Me and Takatsu-kun weren’t friends!”

I was realising the truth seven years after the fact. In that case, I doubted if Shin-chan was my friend either.

It seemed my anguished cries reached Yukinoshita, because she had a faraway look in her eyes. “But indeed, that does happen when parents go out...” she murmured. “I really wish parents would stop leaving the children to their own devices whilst they chat among each other.”

“Yeah, that kind of thing happens. Children’s groups and day cares sure were tough... I didn’t even get along with the kids in my own year level, let alone the others, you know? I was always reading a book on my own... the net result was good since I came across a bunch of good books, though.”

“I also have memories of reading books most of the time... still, I had fun because I’ve always liked reading and writing.”

“Whoa whoaaaa! What nice weather outside!” Komachi started looking out the window suddenly, breaking the gloomy, oppressive atmosphere.

The blue sky stretched out endlessly, signifying the beginning of summer. Today would be a hot day, it seemed.

4-2

When you walk a short distance from Minami-Funabashi station, there's an IKEA to the left-hand side. On top of being a fancy furniture shop, it was one of the popular spots to hang out. A long time ago, the leisure spots around here used to form a giant, all-encompassing labyrinth, and after that it became an indoor ski building. The old structure was, of course, no longer around. I could sense how much time had passed. Before I knew it, I'd become a grownup.

The whole "ski without protection" slogan really brought back memories. Nowadays when I hear the word "without protection", I can only think of condoms. I could sense how much time had passed. Before I knew it, I'd become a grownup...

Once we finished crossing the pedestrian bridge, the entrance to the shopping mall was connected to it. As she peered at the directory board on the premises, Yukinoshita folded her arms in thought. "I'm surprised... this place is quite enormous."

"Yep," said Komachi. "Let's see, we'd be better off dividing up the zones and narrowing down what we want."

This place might have been right next door to my own neighbourhood, but it was the pièce de résistance of shopping malls. I wouldn't be able to tell you its exact size, but it would probably take the whole day just to walk from one end to the other if you were taking your time about it. If we were going to mess around here, we needed to map out our course precisely, it seemed.

"Right, we ought to take efficiency into account when we circle the place. Okay, I'll go around here." I pointed to the right of the directory board.

Yukinoshita responded by pointing to the left. "Indeed. Then I'll take the opposite direction."

Yessss, that ought to split the work in half. All I needed to do now was assign Komachi's place and our efficiency would be perfect.

"Right, you go down that way, Koma-"

"Stop right there," Komachi said in a singsong voice as she yanked on my index finger, which was pointed at the directory board.

"What the hell...? Goddamn it, you hurt my finger..."

Komachi watched me curse under my breath and let out a big sigh, shrugging. She did the whole "Man, this guy really doesn't get" reaction, just like an American. Damn, did that attitude piss me right off.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who was baffled by that attitude, because Yukinoshita cocked her head as she peered at Komachi. "Is there some kind of problem?"

"Both of you oughta quit taking the loner option by default, onii-chan, Yukino-san. Since we came all this way as a group, why not look around together? That way we can exchange advice, which helps."

"But I doubt we'd be able to complete the circuit..."

"No biggie! According to my expert opinion, we should have no problems if we focus on this place with Yui-san's interests in mind," Komachi said as she took out a pamphlet located underneath the directory board and opened it.

The place Komachi was pointing to was located in the heart of the first floor. It was lined up with names like "Love Craft", which was crawling with love, and "Lisa Lisa", which was the sort of name that could teach you how to use the Ripple¹. The whole place was probably piled with shops stocked with products aimed at young girls.

¹ "Love Craft" is a reference to the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, and the crawling with love part is a reference to *Haiyore! Nyaruko-san* (lit. 'Nyaruko-san: Crawling with Love'), which is a light novel series full of references of H.P. Lovecraft. Lisa Lisa is a character from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. She teaches the protagonists how to use the Ripple, which is the main source of power in Part Two of the manga.

"Right, shall we go there?" I said, to which Yukinoshita nodded as if she had no particular objections either.

And with that, we were off.

The girly zone was two or three blocks ahead. A bunch of different brand name shops selling various goods aimed at boys and both genders were lined up on the way there. There was so much different stuff I couldn't help but admire it - you really couldn't take it all in at one glance. I took the lead on the way there, but since I didn't normally come to these types of huge shopping malls, I had absolutely no confidence about where to go.

For once I had something in common with Yukinoshita, who was turning her head distractedly, looking this way and that. Except she had this serene smile plastered over her face. At the very least she didn't seem bored. Sometimes, she stopped in her tracks and stared at the products on display. But the moment a shop assistant approached her, she detected their presence and darted away.

...ah, I understood how she felt all too well. I really wish they'd stop talking to you when you're picking out clothes. Clothing shop assistants ought to master the skill of sensing the "don't talk to me" aura that exudes from loners. If they did that, I reckon their sales would probably go up.

As all of this was going on, we came to a fork in the road, where one could move onto another block to the left and to the right. Moreover, I could see each path had an escalator going up.

Recalling the directory board, I turned to Komachi as I pointed to the right.
"Komachi, do we just go straight from here?"

But when I turned around, Komachi wasn't there.

"H-huh?"

Komachi was nowhere to be seen no matter how much I looked around. As for what I *could* see instead, it was only a weird panda plushie with evil eyes and sharpened claws, along with fangs that glinted in the light. Yukinoshita was pulling its cheeks with a totally straight look on her face.

It was the popular character from Tokyo Disneyland, Pan-san the Panda. The “Pan-san’s Bamboo Hunt” was such a popular attraction it was common to wait two or three hours for it².

Tokyo Disneyland, a tourist attraction which needs no introduction. As much as it was Chiba’s pride and soul, it was quite a funky existence that reeked of humiliation, seeing as it had to call itself *Tokyo* Disneyland even though it was in Chiba. It was located in Maihama, but the original reason for that was because it resembled Miami Beach an awful lot, apparently. And that was your Chiba Prefecture lesson for the day.

“Yukinoshita,” I called out to her.

Yukinoshita hastily put the thingshe had been playing with up till now back on the shelf and flicked her hair coolly. “*What?*” she demanded with her eyes alone.

Er, um... it wasn’t like I was about to say anything in particular... I knew from that whole cat incident from yesterday that, when faced with Yukinoshita’s attitude, the correct response was not to bring it up.

“You haven’t seen Komachi, have you? Looks like she wandered off somewhere.”

“I haven’t seen her, come to think of it... why don’t you ring her?”

“Okay.”

I tried calling Komachi promptly. As soon as I did that, this weird music I couldn’t wrap my head around rang out once again. So, um, why was this chick’s cell phone singing?

² A reference to Pooh’s Hunny Hunt.

The call had gotten through all right, but Komachi wasn't there to answer. Upon hearing the answering service, I gave up and ended the call.

"She's not picking up..."

While I was on the phone, Yukinoshita's baggage had been piling up. She was holding this insanely bright and gaudy plastic bag along with her rattan bag. So she went ahead and bought it, huh...

Perhaps realising that I was peering at her with a look of faint disgust, Yukinoshita pretended not to notice me as she stuffed her purchase into her bag. "I wonder if something caught Komachi-san's attention..." she said nonchalantly. "Indeed, there are certain products one would buy on impulse."

"So like you, then." My gaze went to her bag.

Yukinoshita coughed abruptly. "Anyway. Since Komachi-san is aware of our ultimate destination, we ought to meet there. There's no point dawdling here."

"Yeah, I guess..."

After I sent Komachi a text saying, "Ring me, you fool. I'm going on ahead," I decided to get a move on.

"...soooo, we turn right here and go straight ahead, hmm?" I asked, confirming aloud because I already knew where to go.

Yukinoshita gazed blankly in response. "Isn't it left?"

The correct answer was right.

4-3

The surrounding atmosphere turned bright. Pastels and vivid hues blended in the open room, where a flowery and soapy scent wafted through the air. We'd come to a place for girls indeed: clothing stores and accessory shops, shops specialising in shoes and others in kitchen utensils. And then, of course, the lingerie stores. An uncomfortable, otherworldly place was opening up before me.

"This seems to be the place, I imagine," Yukinoshita said with a cool face.

But as for me, I was completely worn out. "Oh man, to think we'd get lost four times... you're really bad at stuff like mathematical shapes."

"That's a bit rich coming from you..."

"You don't need maths when you're doing liberal arts at a private university. I threw it away from the beginning. So getting the lowest score doesn't mean squat to me."

"The lowest score, you say... just how low are you talking?"

"A nine out of a hundred has to be the lowest score. Source: me."

"...can you even move on to the next grade?"

Yes, with make-up tests after you get called in for supplementary lessons. Since the questions they make you do on the supplementary worksheets appear on the make-up test too, it's a battle of memorisation. Well, I guess being held back a year would be a pain in the arse for the teacher too, seeing as they took all those relief measures so they wouldn't have to do the attendance.

"So anyway, what are you gonna buy?" I asked.

"...hmm, perhaps a durable type of item that can be used over a long period of time."

"That's a pretty long-winded way of saying office supplies." No matter how I looked at it, I doubted that was the standard by which you should buy a present for a young girl.

"I was considering buying those."

"So you were actually considering it, huh..."

"But they did not seem like the kind of thing Yuigahama-san would be happy over... indeed, I don't believe she'd be happy over a fountain pen or a tool set either."

"What an astute judgement..."

Indeed, I could hardly imagine Yuigahama saying, "Whoa! I always wanted this set of screwdrivers! Oh, there's even an Allen key! Yippee! A crowbar too! Yukinon, thank you sooooo much!" But I got the feeling it would be kind of a prevalent reaction among female machinery geeks.

"Soooo," I said, "you decided to get something in line with Yuigahama's interests."

"Indeed. I want to make her happy whatever way I can..."

Yukinoshita had this serene smile on her face. If Yuigahama saw that expression, I imagine she would have been beyond happy.

"Right, then let's hurry up and pick something out, huh?"

"Hold on just a second. What about Komachi-san?"

Ah, that reminded me she never called back. Without Komachi around, we wouldn't be able to get any detailed advice. She might have narrowed down Yuigahama's preferred genre for us, but we couldn't make the final purchase if we didn't know what to get. I might need some help for the finer aspects, but at least I wasn't as out of touch with teenage girls as Yukinoshita was. Fountain pens and tool sets did not seem legit to me.

I looked over my cell phone, but there was no word from Komachi. When I tried calling her, the familiar music from Komachi's phone made a cacophony every time. I mean seriously, why was this chick's cell phone singing?

"Helloooooo!"

"Hey, where are you right now? We're here already. We're waiting now so hurry up."

"Huh? ...ohhh. There were all these things I wanted to buy so I totally forgot."

"To think my little sister could be such an airhead... I'm kind of shocked I'm related to you."

Wow, I didn't know her memory was *this* bad. No wonder she was always slipping up at subjects that required memorisation. As I was dwelling on that thought, I heard an extremely ridiculing sigh from the other end of the phone.

"...man, you can't get it through your thick skull, huh, onii-chan? Well, whatever. Looks like I'll just go home by myself since I'll probs take another five hours yet. Godspeed, you two!"

"Uh, wait, hang on a minute!"

"What, is Yukino-san nervous about being alone with you? There's no need to worry at all - I think."

"Uh, I really don't give a damn about that, but are you okay on your own? I mean, this is really not the kind of place a middle schooler should be..."

I mean, it was a place where so many different types of people mingled on days off. There was a possibility that you could get wrapped up in some incident or accident. Not to mention Komachi was still a girl in middle school. And she was cute because she was my sister and all. She might put me down and do stuff that pissed me off, but I couldn't help but worry about her.

Komachi didn't say anything for a moment. "*Man, I wish you were this considerate about other things. I'll be okay. It's me we're talking about.*"

"Uh, I'm worried because it's you we're talking about."

She'd probably easily go with someone if they bought her sweets or dazzled her with money, after all...

"*Onii-chan, who do you take me for? You do know I'm your sister?*"

Whoa, she kind of said something really moving.

"*That's why you're completely fine by yourself! In fact, being alone is what makes you come alive!*"

The reason itself was really saddening.

But actually, since being alone did make me come alive, there was nothing I could say to object. See, the thing is, I say heaps when I'm playing games or whatever. Like "Maaaan, no waaaay!" or "Oho, so you came, huh?" or "Rinko, I love you". Thanks to that I'd get into this bind where my mother says something like, "Oh, so you have friends over?" and I'd get all flustered and respond, "Er, I-I'm on the phone..." It was no longer safe to play *Love Plus* at my house¹.

"Fine... call me straight away if anything happens. No, wait, call me even if nothing happens."

"*Okay, okay. Right, I'm hanging up now! Good luck, onii-chan!*" And with that, the call ended. All that was left was a robotic beeping noise.

Not that you needed luck to do shopping...

I closed my phone and turned to Yukinoshita. "Seems Komachi wants to buy some things. So she's left all the hard work to us."

"I see... well, she did make the effort to come all the way here on a day off, so I have no right to complain," said Yukinoshita, sounding somewhat disappointed. "We know about Yuigahama-san's preferred genre, so let's make do with that," she added to get herself psyched again.

¹ *Love Plus* is a popular dating sim game for the DS. Rinko is one of the dateable heroines.

Shit, now I'm worried.

Indifferent to my anxiety, Yukinoshita promptly made for the nearby clothing store. As soon as she was inside, she picked up the products on display and inspected them with a straight face. I decided to walk into the store, following suit.

I regretted it almost immediately.

For a start, it was painful how all these various women stared at a guy who had just come in. It was like they thought I was an insect. What's more was that the shop assistant sprang on her feet suddenly, as if wary of my every move. Everyone in the room gave me a wide berth.

Why, damn it...? I mean, there were other guys in the store! Was I being discriminated against? I was, wasn't I?! After all, the guys in the store were all riajuu-types. They had scarves around their necks even though it wasn't cold and they wore vests that made them look like hunters. I could see very plainly that they were riajuu-types. What was with those weird strings on their pants? What purpose did they serve?

"Um, sir... are you looking for something?" a female shop assistant asked me, hiding her wariness of me underneath a tight-lipped smile.

"Uh, no, um... s-sorry," I apologised on impulse.

My unnecessary apology must have incited the female shop assistant's feelings of suspicion even further, because another one soon came in. Crap, she'd called her allies! This wasn't gonna end well!

If I kept dawdling around, she'd call even more allies. Just as I was thinking of making a break for it, I was offered a helping hand.

"Hikigaya-kun... what did you do? Try on the ladies clothes? You ought to do that sort of thing at home."

"You don't do that anywhere! And besides, I didn't do anything, okay..."

Yukinoshita approached me, looking down on me imperiously. As a result, the suspicion faded from the shop assistants' eyes. Just as you'd expect from Yukinoshita. Making people back off was her area of expertise.

"Oh, you were waiting on your girlfriend, I see. Please take your time," said the sole remaining shop assistant in understanding before she turned to leave.

"No, that wasn't what I was doing at all..."

"You weren't? Then you really are a suspicious person..."

Her eyes changed from blue to red! I'd made the wrong choice! Now she was on the offensive! At this rate, I was headed straight for the bad end.

"Good lord... Hikigaya-kun, let's go." In an attempt to escape from the shop assistants who were bursting into the scene, Yukinoshita pulled on my hand. That was all it took to ward them off.

Once we were outside the store, the tension finally eased.

"...say, am I really that suspicious-looking?"

With the heavy expression on my face, my eyes were a million times more rotten than usual, I suspected. I reckon if I were to say it in English, I had MEGA rotten eyes.

Yukinoshita didn't pretend to ridicule me for my suspicious-looking appearance, perhaps out of her own way of showing sympathy. "A lone male will be regarded with suspicion either way. From what I saw, all the males in that store were part of a couple."

I get it now. It was a girls/couples-only zone, just like the photo booths. That being the case, there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't have the guts or the determination to get past that barrier again.

"...right, then I'll just stand over there," I said, pointing at a bench some distance away.

The store itself was crawling with girls. If I were alone among them, it wasn't hard to imagine I'd cop a heap of strange looks. At any rate, it was as bad as being stared at oddly in the classroom. But if I were sitting on a far-off bench, then I expected nobody to blow the whistle on me. As long as I didn't act suspicious, I'd be okay. I think. Maybe. *Would I be okay? Whatever, better prepare for the worst,* I thought as I made my way to the bench.

"Hold it right there."

"Huh?"

I turned around to see Yukinoshita walking towards me, her head held high.

"Do you plan to leave things to my judgement? I don't mean to sound arrogant, but my standards are very far removed from the average teenage girl."

"So you knew..."

Well, this was the girl who was thinking of buying a tool set for a present just a while ago.

"So, uh... I'd appreciate it if you'd help me out - or something..." Yukinoshita said with immense difficulty, her head furrowed. Her gaze, which was pointed at the soles of her feet, flitted around nervously from side to side.

She really had to be at a loss if she was asking *me* for help. Let me just make it clear that I've never bought a present for a girl in my life - at least not properly. If we're talking about trying to give a present and getting shut down, that's happened to me before.

"Well, much as I would absolutely love to help you out," I answered, "it's not like I can go insi-"

Yukinoshita let out a deep sigh, as if resigning herself to something. "In that case, it can't be helped. Keep a close distance, please."

"Huh? Distance?" I stared at her, puzzled.

Yukinoshita got a little huffy in response. “Must I spell it out? That if you’re only capable of inhaling air and spitting it back out, then that air con over there is superior to you?”

Indeed. Cleaning the air and conserving energy was super useful. I wish they’d hurry up and equip it with the ability to read the atmosphere too.

“In other words, I’m allowing you to pretend to be my boyfriend, just for today.”

“Talk about condescending.”

Wow, what a bitch.

My irritation must have shown on my face, because Yukinoshita glared at me venomously. “Are you unhappy with this arrangement?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“I-I see...” Yukinoshita looked frankly surprised, not to mention let down.

But it really wasn’t something to be so surprised over. The last thing I wanted to be was this chick’s boyfriend or whatever, but I didn’t particularly mind the pretending part. Yukinoshita doesn’t lie. So when she said “for today”, she didn’t mean for any minute longer, and when she said “pretend to be my boyfriend”, there was no misunderstanding going on there.

That was why I could get on board with this plan without reservations.

Yukinoshita fully trusted in my worthlessness, while I had absolute trust that she wouldn’t give me the time of day. Could you really call this trust, I wonder? I didn’t feel like we had each other’s backs at all. What the hell?

Realising that she had a very stupid look on her face, Yukinoshita attempted to hide it by swinging around. “I thought for certain you’d disapprove,” she said at length, talking to the wall.

“Nah, I don’t have any real reason to refuse. What about *you*? Don’t you disapprove yourself?” I retorted.

Yukinoshita turned back around, her expression unconcerned. “I don’t mind in particular. I won’t be seen by anyone who knows me by face, and given that I’m surrounded only by strangers, I have no need to worry about any misunderstandings or rumours that could result in financial loss.”

So she just nonchalantly treated even me as a stranger. Well, whatever.

“Well then, shall we go?” Yukinoshita said as she turned for the next store. I started walking beside her.

We didn’t have any expectations of each other, and in my opinion not having anything expected of you really takes a load off your mind. I mean, think of it this way. Wasn’t Pandora’s Box filled with all the evils along with hope? That’s what having expectations means. Hope and evil.

4-4

To my surprise, things picked up smoothly from the next clothing store we entered onwards. Somehow, the world was simpler than I thought - it was like taking candy from a baby. All it took for people to assume a young boy and girl were dating was for them to walk together. And yeah, it was true for me too, come to think of it. Considering how in my heart I always cursed high school-aged boys and girls when they were together, it might actually be a thing. When the shop assistants sized me up and found me lacking, all it took for their suspicion to clear was for me to be close to Yukinoshita.

Having declared that those around her were only strangers, Yukinoshita warded off the shop assistants who spoke to her with a terse "I'm fine, thanks" and made her selections with a serious eye. Something would catch her attention from time to time and she would squish it sideways and stretch it vertically. I thought her basis for evaluating things was rather weird.

"Shall we move on the next place?" She folded the clothes in her hand nimbly and returned them to the shelf, looking somewhat worried about their durability.

"You know, I've never picked out my clothes based on how sturdy the material is in my life. Somehow I don't think Yuigahama thinks about the protective powers of her clothing or whatever."

Clothes made out of cloth were fine, thank you very much. It wasn't like there were monsters around, after all.

Yukinoshita sighed. "Well, excuse me. I can only make judgments based on the quality of the material and the stitching." She fell silent for a moment. "You know, I never knew what Yuigahama-san liked or what she was interested in... nothing along those lines."

Her sigh then was a deeper, more wearied sigh than I had ever heard from her before. She was probably dwelling on all the things she never got to learn.

In that case, it was a pointless regret.

"Who cares if you don't know? I'd get more pissed at someone treating me like they know everything about me when they only know superficial stuff. It's kinda like sending peanuts from some other place to a Chiba resident."

"That example is so specific to Chiba nobody would understand it..." Yukinoshita said, somewhat taken aback.

Hmph, did that not get across? To put it simply, Chiba residents are fed up with peanuts. We don't boast the highest production output in the entire country for nothing. And seriously, it was kind of weird how 70 percent or so of peanuts come from Chiba. Incidentally, 20 percent comes from Ibaraki. People called it the peanut region.

"To put it in layman terms, it's like sending wine to a sommelier when you've only got a vague knowledge about wine yourself, I guess."

"That makes sense... it stands to reason..." Yukinoshita nodded in agreement as if she understood what I had just said.

You know, my dad did that so often when he got me a birthday present. He got Playstations and Sega Satrns mixed up and that kind of thing. The Super Famicom was sold out, but whatever, the Sega Genesis and the 3DO made the same beeping noise to him. Whenever you give a present with half-assed knowledge of the other person, the result was usually less than satisfactory.

"...your twisted sense of values comes in handy sometimes," Yukinoshita said, half-impressed, although I didn't feel like I was being praised at all. "Yet indeed, one's chances of winning are slim when you fight against the other person's strong suit. To win, you must pierce their weak point instead..."

If choosing a present was a battle for her, did her family consist of Amazons or something? "Well, you might pierce their weak point, but they could also have things compensating for their weak points. That satisfies the practical conditions you talk about."

“Indeed.” She appeared to think about something. “In that case...”

Yukinoshita cast her eyes at the next store in line.

We stopped in front of the lingerie shop diagonally facing the clothing store. Yukinoshita disappeared into a kitchen utensil store right next door, leaving me stranded on my own. I couldn’t be the only one who felt that, more than the fact it was a lingerie shop that emphasised cuteness and outright sexiness, the mere presence of an underwear store surrounded by the likes of Yokado made it feel way more perverted than it was supposed to¹. Also, they sold school swimsuits this time around June, which felt even more perverted, in my opinion.

But I digress.

Besides basic cookware like frying pans and pots, there were oven gloves that looked like the Muppets and tableware sets that resembled Matryoshka dolls lines up in the kitchen utensil store.

“I see...” I said. “That really is Yuigahama’s weak point.”

Yuigahama was bad at cooking. No, more like she was abysmal at it. I’d eaten that chick’s homemade cookies once, but they were so bad I wondered if I was eating the charcoal they sold at Keiyo Home Center. Or maybe Joyful Honda². In any case, what you saw was what you got - the strong flavour did not betray expectations. When I say flavour, I really mean burning sensation. And not only did I eat them, Yukinoshita did too. Yukinoshita’s steadfast guidance had brought them up to the level of mediocrity, but I doubted any cooking more complicated than that would get past the production phase.

That said, this was quite a fun room to be in.

Like whoa, what was with this saucepan lid? I was left spellbound over how it would put in the seasoning for you when you took away the handle part. Oh man, I was gawking like an idiot.

¹ The biggest general retailer in Japan.

² Keiyo Co, Ltd. and Joyful Honda are retail chain stores that sell household necessities.

Just when I thought there were only handy goods like that, I also noticed they even had traditional-style woks. Crap, this was making me want to swing around and laugh giddily or something.

On the subject of places like home centers, 100 yen stores were like this as well, what with how just looking at all the cool gadgets and tools would get your blood pumping.

“Hikigaya-kun, this way.” I heard my name being called.

When I came over, I was greeted with the sight of Yukinoshita Yukino in an apron.

The material was thin, contrary to its dark hue, and when Yukinoshita wore it, it gave off a cool and refined air. A cat’s paw print was stitched onto the chest. The cord around Yukinoshita’s waist was tied into a ribbon, emphasising her thin waistline.

As her head and hips were turned, Yukinoshita tested how easy it was to move by abruptly performing a twirl in front of me, much like a waltz. That caused the cord to come undone and swish like a tail. “How does it look?”

“You’re asking *me*, huh... looks pretty damn good on you, I have to say.”

There wasn’t much else to say. The neat and trim sort of item in Yukinoshita’s hand suited her way too much, perhaps because her hair was black too. I’d just complimented her straight, but Yukinoshita fiddled with her collar and cord and sleeves, focusing on her outfit without looking at me at all. At that moment, the only ones privy to Yukinoshita’s expression were the mirror and Yukinoshita herself.

“...why, thank you. However, I’m not asking about me. I meant how does it look on Yuigahama-san?”

“That wouldn’t suit Yuigahama. Some fluffy, colourful, dumb-looking thing would make her happier.”



"Harsh, but true. I'm at a loss to react..." Yukinoshita said as she took off the apron she had been wearing up till now and began folding it carefully. "In that case, I suppose we should choose something around here."

As she clutched the folded apron, her eyes fell on her next prey. This time, she checked the number of pockets and the material it was made out of. Yep, it was necessary to check the quality of the material. The way I saw it, asbestos or inflammable material or something would be preferable. Yuigahama would probably be in danger every time she used fire.

In the end, Yukinoshita picked out a petite, ornamental apron that was light pink all over. "I'll go with this."

There was one small pocket on both sides, plus a big square-shaped pocket in the middle. It seemed to suit Yuigahama, who was the type to shove as much candy as she liked in her pockets.

Yukinoshita folded up the pink apron and made her way to the counter. In her hand, she held the pink apron - and the black one too.

"You know, I was fine with that stuffed toy from before, but you're really sneaking in your own shopping here."

"...I'll have you know I had no plans to buy an apron."

"An impulse purchase, huh? Well, that often happens when you go out shopping."

Yukinoshita opened her mouth to say something in retort, but stopped halfway. She glanced at me sideways before whipping her gaze away and heading for the counter alone, not once looking behind her.

So it wasn't an impulse purchase? What an inscrutable woman. But if there was one thing I did know about her, it was that she had planned to buy that weird panda toy from the start.

4-5

I bought goods at the pet shop and settled the bill. Yukinoshita was no longer by my side.

It wasn't like she had left me and hurried back home or something. She wasn't *that* heartless. She'd just readily accepted my suggestion to do something else while I went shopping. Okay, so maybe she *was* heartless.

I considered calling Yukinoshita, but she could only go so far in a place like this. Leaving the pet goods corner behind me, I headed for the cages.

And what do you know? Yukinoshita was right there.

She sat hugging her knees right near the entrance, a gentle smile on her face as she drew out a kitten and petted it, occasionally ruffling its fur. She didn't seem to be meowing this time around, probably because there were people around, as you'd expect.

Since she was so utterly intent on petting the cat, it was hard to call out to her. Just as I was deliberating on what to do, the cat Yukinoshita was petting turned its attention my way, its twitching ears being its only discernible movement. That was enough to make Yukinoshita turn around.

"Oh my, that was quick."

(Translation: I wanted to play with the kitty some more...)

"My bad."

I had no way of knowing whether I was saying sorry for keeping her waiting or for not taking long enough, but whatever - a blanket apology should cover it.

When Yukinoshita was done stroking the kitten, her mouth soundlessly forming a meow as her reluctant parting exchange, she stood up. "So what did you buy? I can more or less imagine it, though."

"Well, it's just what you're thinking."

"I see," Yukinoshita answered indifferently, although her expression looked somewhat satisfied. She seemed happy over being right. "Still, I was surprised. To think you'd buy a present for Yuigahama-san."

"...not really," I answered a little stiffly to her remark. "It makes sense since we're having a 'contest'. I only decided to team up with you this time."

"Never say never, I suppose..." Yukinoshita's eyes widened with surprise. "Are you ill?"

Hey now, that was insulting.

But whatever, even if it was about raising Yuigahama's motivation, the idea of celebrating her birthday wasn't so bad. Only, in order to do that, I needed to clear the air between us. If things remained tentative as they were right now, the same thing would happen all over again.

"I've got stuff to finish off, so shall we go home?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

When I looked at the time, it was around 2 o'clock. Time had really flown, surprisingly. And here I had been planning to get the shopping over with and scuttle back home straight away.

I led the way until we reached the exit. I got the feeling this was the second time Yukinoshita, who was going home as well, couldn't get out after attempting to leave me behind. It was more than enough of the giant labyrinth of old - but only to her.

On the way, there was a game corner aimed at families and couples.

Medal games, crane games, co-op shooting games, racing games that took place inside vehicles that hid your face from the outside world - and not to mention the photo booths. It was the essential kit for anyone to have a giggle and a good time with. In other words, nothing to do with me.

Just as I was briskly wading my way through all of this, Yukinoshita stopped in her tracks.

“What’s up?” I asked. “So you want to play a game now?”

“I have no interest in games.”

Said the girl whose eyes were fixed on the crane game. Oh wait, now that I looked closely, that wasn’t what she was focusing on. When I followed Yukinoshita’s gaze, it seemed she was only staring at one particular crane game.

Inside that machine, there was a certain stuffed toy I recognised by sight.

Brooding eyes that seemed to peer into the darkness of this world, claws that could cut through beast and bamboo alike, sharp fangs that gleamed eerily in the dark.

Naturally, it was Pan-san the panda. If you saw how much of an impact he made, you’d understand why I attached ‘san’ to his name.

“...you wanna give it a shot?”

“Spare me. I don’t particularly want to play games.”

(Translation: I’m just here for the stuffed toy.)

I didn’t have to eat any weird jelly to translate what Yukinoshita had left unsaid and to resume the conversation¹.

“Well, you ought to play if you want it. Though I don’t reckon you’d get it.”

“My my, quite the confrontational statement, hm? Are you looking down on me by any chance?” I must have struck a nerve, because a chilly wave started to exude from Yukinoshita.

¹ A reference to *Doraemon’s Translation Jelly*, one of Doraemon’s more famous gadgets from the future.

"Nah, I wasn't saying this or that about your arms, just it's hard if you're not used to it - that kind of thing. I mean, Komachi did it over and over again and she didn't get the thing she wanted once."

The sight of someone persisting in pouring almost all the coins in their piggybank into a machine could only be described as pitiable.

But far from sinking Yukinoshita's competitive attitude, Komachi's example caused Yukinoshita to sink a thousand yen note into the money-exchanging machine.

"In that case, I only need to get used to it," she said as the hundred-yen coins piled up beside the insert slot, ready to be spent in one big go.

She inserted a hundred-yen coin. That caused the machine to make a really idiotic "fueee!" noise. As if trying to ascertain something, Yukinoshita stared fixatedly at the machine, unmoving.

No words were spoken.

Her expression was in deadly earnest, matched only by her force of will.

This chick... could it be...?

She had no idea how to operate the machine...?

"The right button moves it left and right, and the left button is forwards and back. It only moves while you're holding the button. As soon as you release your finger it stops."

"I-I see... thank you."

Blushing bright red, Yukinoshita started the game. First, she made the crane shift to the right... hm, well, not bad going. Then, she moved it inwards. Hmm, that was a quite a good position, in my opinion.

Then, with a "fueee!", the crane grabbed hold of the stuffed toy. W-what was with this crane? It made such a cute cry...

“...I got it.”

I heard an extremely soft voice. When I whipped my gaze over to Yukinoshita, her hands were clenched tightly and she was trembling weakly.

But Crane-chan let out another “fueee!” and let the stuffed toy slip and fall, before returning to its fixed position without uttering so much as a peep.

A failure.

“Hey, it was hard for us at first, you know?” I said, trying to comfort her.

Yukinoshita was glaring at Crane-chan with every fibre of her being.

“...excuse me, didn’t you pick it up perfectly just now? How can I get you to drop the toy over there?” Yukinoshita pressed Crane-chan for an answer the way she normally did with me. She was being so intense I just stood by the sidelines and watched. *Meep*.

“W-well, see here. You put it in the position where it’s a bit easier to get now. Seems the trick is to move it little by little.”

At least, that was the advice written on the display.

“I see... what you lack in brute force you make up for in numbers.” Her face dawning with comprehension, she inserted another hundred-yen coin.

Fueee...

“...bah, not again.”

Fueeeeeeee, fueeeeeeee.

“Oh, good grief...”

Fueee...

“Tch!”

It was Yukinoshita's reaction just from hearing the voice. All I could hear after that was the sound of Yukinoshita abusing the machine.

You could say Yukinoshita's *expression* was calm and collected, but her hand was punching coins into the machine furiously. So she was still at it, huh...

No matter how much she kept at it, her efforts seemed futile.

"...you really suck."

"Hmph... if you're criticising me, does that mean you have the skills?" Yukinoshita said as she scowled at me.

My answer was brimming with confidence. "Yep, Komachi used to pester me into doing it all the time. Thanks to her, I've gotten pretty damn good at it. Whenever Komachi begs me into doing stuff..."

"I see how it is..."

Really, just when did I start handling everything at Komachi's beck and call...? My pride and dignity as an older brother was reduced to zero.

"I'll give it a shot. I can obtain it for you no sweat," I said, to which Yukinoshita reluctantly cleared the way for me, her eyes brimming with deep suspicion. "Now then, I'll show you my dirty tricks."

Then, ever so slowly, I raised my hands as high as they could go. I held them straight like ninepins.

Yukinoshita looked at my hands, eyes full of expectation that something was going to start.

Not yet... not yet... the most important thing was the timing.

Then I caught sight of a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye.

Now!

4-6

“Er, uh, excuse me. I really want this...”

“Yes, this Pan-san the panda, you say? I’ll get to it right way.”

Fueee... Crane-chan cried, as something dropped with a plop.

“Okay, here you go,” said the arcade corner lady with a cordial smile as she handed me Pan-san.

It was the oft-used “get something in exchange” service of recent times.

“Oh, thanks,” I uttered my gratitude.

The lady returned the favour with a magnanimous smile that covered every inch of her face, before going back where she came from.

Meanwhile, Yukinoshita was right next to me, looking at me with a sourer expression than usual.

“W-what...?”

“Nothing... I was merely wondering if it was embarrassing for you to live.”

“Look here, Yukinoshita. Life is our greatest gift. Isn’t it more embarrassing to think that’s embarrassing? That’s why those assholes who look at me and laugh ‘Ewww! How embarrassing!’ are the ones who have no value in living.”

“You tainted your good lines with unnecessary hatred...” Yukinoshita sighed tersely as she flicked a loose strand of hair in disgust. “My goodness... just as I thought you were taking things seriously for once, you go and pull *that...*”

“I didn’t say I’d play it for you. I only said I’d obtainit for you. Here, take it.”

I shoved Pan-san into Yukinoshita’s hands. But Yukinoshita pushed it back at me.

“You’re the one who obtained it. Even if you did use means I refuse to acknowledge, I ought to acknowledge your achievement.”

Yukinoshita proceeded to go through all the formalities, even though the whole thing was so ultimately trivial. You could say she was serious, or maybe stubborn. Actually, no, she just had a stick up her arse.

But I wasn't the kind of person who would be defeated by someone's obstinacy. "Nah, I don't need it, you see. And plus, you used your own money. You're the one who paid compensation. Which means you've got the obligation to take it," I said.

At that, Yukinoshita's resistance weakened and the stuffed toy fell snugly into her arms.

"...I-I see." Yukinoshita's gaze fell to the stuffed toy she clutched in her own arms. Then, she peered at me sideways. Silence. "I won't give it back to you, you know."

"I said I don't need it."

Like anyone would want such an evil-looking toy. Besides, I wouldn't ask for it back when she was holding it like it was so important to her.

So she had her cute side too. And here I thought she was more cold-blooded.

At that point, I realised I was looking at her with a smile on my face. Slightly embarrassedly, Yukinoshita turned her face away, her cheeks somewhat red.

"...it doesn't suit you. That sort of thing fits Yuigahama-san or Totsuka-kun's image more."

"The former I can take it or leave it, but I can agree with you on the latter."

The best match for Totsuka with a stuffed toy would be bread rolls and milk.

"Anyway, I'm honestly surprised you're a fan of stuffed toys," I blurted out, but Yukinoshita wasn't particularly fussed. She just stroked Pan-san leisurely.

"...I have no real interest in other toys, but I do like this Pan-san the Panda."

Yukinoshita kept on fiddling with the toy's arms. Each time she did that, Pan-san's claws made a sinister scratching noise. If I paid no heed to the sound, it seemed exceedingly cute as a composition.

"Although I've been collecting soft toys and goods for a long time, I could only get them through prizes rather than through ordinary channels, so I've been at a loss. I considered net auctions, but I couldn't quite make up my mind since I worry about how the items being displayed at auctions are being preserved or whether the photos that are posted are manufactured..."

H-her reasons weren't cute at all...

Inadvertently, I sighed. "A-anyway, you really do like that Pan-san." Having been exposed to her pointless animal mania, my words shot out of my mouth unheeded.

Unbeknownst to herself, Yukinoshita had a faraway look in her eyes after hearing what I said.

"...indeed. I received one when I was young."

"A stuffed toy?"

"No, the original manuscript of the story."

"Huh? Um, what do you mean by story?" I asked, taken aback.

But this turned out to be a mistake.

The next moment, Yukinoshita started talking on and on, as if she had fallen into a trance. "Pan-san the Panda. The original title was *Hello, Mister Panda*. Before they changed the title it was *Panda's Garden*. It's said that the American biologist Rand McIntosh started writing it for his son, who wasn't quite able to adapt to his new environment when the whole family crossed China for McIntosh's research on pandas¹."

¹ As far as I can see, the names are made up, but it's similar to the story behind the creation of *Winnie the Pooh*.

“...there we go, it’s Yukipedia all over again.”

Although I was kind of half-making fun of her, Yukinoshita went on talking completely blithely.

“Although the chibi-fied Dizney edition emphasises the characters more, the original story was excellent. It excelled at combining western and eastern metaphor and telling a single focused narrative. One can feel the overriding message of love for his son at every level.”

“Huh, was it that kind of story? I thought for sure it was only a story about a panda that said, ‘I want to eat bamboo grass all day,’ and then when he did eat bamboo grass, he got drunk on it and did drunken boxing.”

“...indeed, that scene is emphasised in the Dizney version, so I cannot say anything to you there, but that part played a minor role in the original story. You’ll see if you read it for yourself. The translation is also quite superb, but I really do recommend you read the original manuscript,” Yukinoshita gushed openly.

Ahh, I could remember doing something like this. You get like that when you talk about something you like. Back when I was in middle school, I went on and on for thirty minutes about a manga I liked to these guys I thought I got along with. Around that time they said to me, “You don’t usually talk much, Hikigaya, but the only time you don’t shut up is when it’s about manga. That’s kinda... you know,” and I wanted to die on the inside.

Still, being able to talk about what you like as much as you like was a good thing, in my opinion. Even if, say, it wasn’t something mainstream or the general public wouldn’t accept it.

It was a good thing, not thinking about whether others would accept what you like or whether you could get along with people who didn’t really like you.

But, having said that, I was in a bind if she was asking me to read the original manuscript. I'd only skim through the Index².

"I just had a thought. You were able to read English since you were little, huh."

"Not in the least. But it was because I couldn't read English that I constantly referred to the dictionary as I read it. It was entertaining like solving a puzzle." Yukinoshita's eyes were gentle, as if she was reminiscing fondly over her distant past. Then after a moment she murmured, in a voice as low as a whisper, "It was a birthday present. I might have sentimental attachment to it because of that."

She hesitated.

"Th-that's why, um..." Yukinoshita buried her head against the toy embarrassedly, hiding her expression as her gaze turned on me. "That's why... when you gave this to me"

"Huuuuh? Yukino-chan? Oh, it really is you, Yukino-chan!" A blithely cheerful voice cut Yukinoshita off mid-sentence.

When I caught sight of the owner of that somehow familiar, recognisable voice, I was speechless.

Glossy black hair and smooth, translucent white skin - not to mention the composed and elegant facial features. With her rare, ravishing good looks that oozed with girlishness, her amiable smile was the icing on top of an already extravagant cake.

Right before my eyes stood a beauty of unbelievable proportions. She had probably been hanging out with her friends, because she clapped her hands in apology and said, "Sorry, I'll catch up to you guys," to the numerous men and women hustling and bustling behind her.

A sense of *déjà vu* assailed me. But more than that - more than anything - I was tormented by the feeling of distinct unease.

² A reference to the light novel *Toaru Majutsu no Index*.

4-7

“Nee-san...”

I swung around upon hearing Yukinoshita’s voice. Her defenseless expression from before was gone now, replaced by a look of horror. She squeezed her stuffed toy tightly against her chest, her shoulders stiffening.

“Huh? That’s your sister? What?” My eyes flitted between Yukinoshita and the woman in front of me, comparing the two.

If I could put a number on the woman’s age, I’d say she was around twenty. Her soft clothes, which had fluttering lace attached to the ends, were based around a white theme, and her arms and legs emphasised the beauty of her skin. She was blinding to look at, but weirdly, her entire body gave off a look of refinement.

She really did resemble Yukinoshita. If Yukinoshita was a solid beauty, the woman before me was a liquid one, overflowing with charm.

“What are *you* doing here? Oooooh! A date, right?! It has to be a date! Teehee!”

“...”

The older Yukinoshita teased the younger Yukinoshita, nudging her incessantly with her elbow. But Yukinoshita kept a stony face and merely seemed irritated.

I see now. They *looked* alike, but their personalities seemed worlds apart.

When I got my bearings and looked really closely, there were a number of differences between them.

Exhibit A) breasts. Unlike the modest Yukinoshita, the sister had a mighty fine pair. Her well-shaped breasts, matched with a slender body, were a sight for sore eyes.

How enlightening! When I was feeling out of place, the true cause of that was the size of her breasts! Er, no, that wasn’t the only thing.



"Hey hey, Yukino-chan, is that your boyfriend? Are you going out with him?"

"...absolutely not. We're schoolmates."

"Now now! No need to be shy!"

Yukinoshita said nothing.

Whoa, if looks could kill... even though anyone would piss their pants in fear if they were on the receiving end of Yukinoshita's glare, her sister grinned and took it in stride.

"I'm Yukino-chan's sister Haruno," she said to me. "Play nice with Yukino-chan, okay?"

"Uhh. I'm Hikigaya." She introduced herself by name so I introduced myself back.

So, somehow it looked like the sister's name was Yukinoshita Haruno. Right, got it.

"Hikigaya..." Haruno-san paused only a moment to think, quickly sizing me up from head to toe. "I see..."

In that instant, a chill went down my spine, enough to make me shiver. As if struck by temporary paralysis, I was rooted to the spot.

But then she sang, "I'll call you Hikigaya-kun, then. Great, nice to meet you."

Haruno-san defused the tension with a broad grin. What was that just now...? Was it, you know, because I was nervous being looked at by a beautiful woman?

Haruno-san was as bright and sunny as her name suggested¹. She might physically resemble Yukinoshita, but the impression she gave off was completely different. Unlike Yukinoshita and her overpowering cool-girl image, the sister's expressions were forever changing. Who knew that smiles had so many different variations?

¹ (1) The spelling for "Haruno" includes the character for "sun".

Although their parts were the same, I was struck by how differently they used them.

I understood now why they were so different, and yet still some kind of unsatisfied feeling of being out of place rolled down my spine once again. The true cause of my discomfort was probably not in their differences.

When I turned my suspicious gaze on Haruno-san, she met my eyes only fleetingly before instantly shifting her attention to Yukinoshita. “Oh, hey. Isn’t that Pan-san the panda?” she said in a sprightly tone as she reached out for stuffed toy. “I like this! How nice, it’s so soft. I’m jealous, Yukino-chan.”

“Don’t touch it.”

Yukinoshita’s voice was so strong it made your ears ring. It wasn’t like she raised her voice or anything. It was just that her refusal rang out so loud and clear it hurt to listen.

Haruno-san must have felt the same way, because her unchanging smile from before froze on her face. She said nothing for a moment.

“Wh-whoa, that gave me a fright,” she said finally. “S-sorry, Yukino-chan, I-I get it now. I was a bit thick not to realise it was a present from your boyfriend.”

“Um, I’m not her boyfriend,” I said.

“Teehee, you’re playing coy. Big sis won’t forgive you if you make Yukino-chan cry.”

With a “hmph!” Haruno-san lifted her index finger to rebuke me, before poking my cheek incessantly until it hurt. *Argh, ouch, watch it, don’t get so close!* (She smelled nice.)

With her communication powers, she could wield power over me even though we were strangers. Haruno-san, who was pressing against me from this close position, was the owner of a terrifying power.

"Nee-san, that's enough. If you have nothing to do here, then we'll just get going now," Yukinoshita said, but Haruno-san paid her no heed and went on pestering me.

"Go on, you can tell me! How long have you two been dating?"

"Wai! Seriously, please stop it!"

She went on with her finger poking attack stubbornly, and before I knew it, Haruno-san was pressed up against me. And wait, her knockers were hitting me! Oh, she let go! No wait, she hit me again! The boobs I'd been checking out before were coming at me with rapid jabs! Crap, these tits were Mohammed Ali...

"...Nee-san, cut that out this instant."

It was a low voice, one that threatened to shake the earth. As Yukinoshita flicked her hair, not bothering to conceal her fury, her eyes pierced Haruno-san with a disdainful glare.

"Oh... sorry, Yukino-chan. I might've gotten a bit carried away," Haruno-san said unapologetically, laughing weakly. It looked like a blockhead older sister and a highly strung younger sister sort of arrangement. Then Haruno-san started whispering in my ear. (Like I said, not so close!) "Sorry, ya know? Yukino-chan's a sensitive girl... so you'd better watch out for her, Hikigaya-kun."

This time, I was assailed by a definite feeling of unease. I started involuntarily. As if taken aback by my reaction, Haruno-san tilted her head to the right and closed her eyes with a whimper. In that instant, the only thing a guy standing nearby could think of was how cute her mannerisms were.

"Did I do something to make you hate me? If I did, sorry," Haruno-san apologised, poking out her pink tongue.

When I saw how guileless she was, the desire to protect her rose up in me and I was suddenly attacked with guilt. I had to come up with some kind of apology!

"Er, that's not really it. I mean, um, my ears are ticklish."

"Hikigaya-kun, stop exposing your fetishes to a woman you've just met. You can't complain if you get sued." Yukinoshita's hand was pressed gingerly against her forehead as if all this was giving her a headache.

As for Haruno-san, her patent grinning smile was returning to her face. "Aha," she sang. "You're *hilarious*, Hikigaya-kun!"

I had no idea what was so funny, but Haruno-san was laughing uproariously as she thumped my back. (Like I said, not so close!)

"Oh, that reminds me. Hikigaya-kun. Wanna go out for tea with me if you're free? I have to make sure you're good enough to be Yukino-chan's boyfriend." Haruno-san threw out her chest and winked lightly in my direction.

"...how presumptuous. I said he was merely my schoolmate." A harsh and severe voice like a North Pole blizzard cut in. It was the sound of a deeply felt reaction, one that was caused by Haruno-san's joking tone and everything else about her. Yukinoshita had unleashed the ultimate rejection.

But Haruno-san brushed it aside this time with a cheeky smile. "I mean, it's the first time I've seen you go out with someone, Yukino-chan. Isn't it natural I'd think he was your boyfriend? I was happy for you." Haruno-san let out a strange laugh that sounded like a snicker. "You're a teenager, so you may as well have fun! Oh, but you better not be screwing, y'know?"

Jokingly, Haruno-san put her left hand on her hip and leaned over, her right index finger held up in warning. As she held that posture, she put her head close to Yukinoshita's ears and whispered something softly.

"After all, Mother's still mad over you living alone."

The instant the word "Mother" came out, Yukinoshita's entire body stiffened.

A subdued silence descended over the area. As if by some illusion, the sound had grown quieter like an ebbing tide even in the game corner, a place that should have been full of ruckus.

In the span of that moment, Yukinoshita hugged her stuffed toy as if to make sure it was there.

“...it really has nothing to do with you, Nee-san,” Yukinoshita uttered as if she was talking to the ground, not looking her sister in the eyes.

This was the Yukinoshita Yukino who never wavered and stood tall - the Yukinoshita who was never cowed by anyone or looked at the ground.

It was a scene that shook me mildly. She was the kind of person who would allow herself to feel down when she was alone, but I’d never seen her knees shake when she talked to another person.

Haruno-san chuckled out of the corner of her mouth. “Yeah, you’re right. It has nothing to do with me,” she said, pulling back abruptly as if jumping away. “As long as you’ve put thought into it, it’s fine, Yukino-chan. I was trying to help, but I was butting in. Sorry about that.”

As a sheepish smile came over her face, Haruno-san laughed and turned to me.

“Hikigaya-kun. I’ll say this to you again: let’s go out for tea when you become Yukino-chan’s boyfriend. Okay, see you later!”

Eventually, a blindingly brilliant smile came over Haruno’s face and she did a little wave in front of her chest to say bye-bye. And with that, she skipped off into the distance.

Struck by how overwhelming her radiance was, I couldn’t turn my eyes away. In the end, I watched her until she was completely out of sight.

4-8

And then, out of lack of anything better to do, Yukinoshita and I started walking.

“Your sister’s really something...” I blurted out without thinking.

Yukinoshita nodded. “Everyone says that when they meet her.”

“Yeah, I could see that.”

“Mm. An attractive face and figure, a top student, accomplished in both literary and martial arts, a woman of many talents - not to mention a kind and gentle personality... I doubt any human being could match her perfection. Everyone showers her with praise...”

“Huh? That doesn’t lessen your own achievements,” I said. “What’s with the faux modesty?”

Yukinoshita looked up at me, stunned.

“...huh?”

“When I said she was something, I was talking about - how do you say it? That reinforced exoskeleton of a façade.”

A reinforced exoskeleton - no, you could call it a mobile suit. Anyway, the feeling of unease I sensed from Yukinoshita Haruno was that. Another fitting expression was that she was caked in her façade.

“From the way she acts, your sister’s like a nerd’s wet dream. She can brighten up the mood when she talks, she’s got good manners, she’s always got a big smile, she can even talk to *me* like a normal person, and also, um... you could say she’s way too touchy-feely, and that she’s kinda soft to touch.”

“I wonder if this young man is aware of how much of a lowlife he sounds...”

"D-don't be an idiot! It's her hand I'm talking about, you know. Her hand! The touch of her hand!"

My excuse did little to ease Yukinoshita's scornful gaze. In an attempt to divert her attention, I went on speaking in a louder and firmer tone.

"Ideals are ideals. They're not reality. That's why something about her seems phony."

After all, there was probably no such thing as lonely nerds who were realists.

A lonely nerd lived with three general principles: "(Have no) hope, (make no) love opportunities, (utter no) sweet nothings." These principles were carved into their hearts. These perfect soldiers, who continued to fight day and night against the ultimate enemy known as reality, were thus easily swindled.

Though there may be "good girls" in this world, "girls who live for you" are non-existent.

-Hikigaya Hachiman

I thought it sounded like a wise saying, so I carved those wise words into my heart.

Yukinoshita looked at me with a straight face. After a moment of thought, she said, "You have rotten eyes - no, it's *because* you have rotten eyes that there are some things you can see through..."

"Are you *praising* me?"

"I am. That was high praise."

Somehow, I didn't get that impression...

Yukinoshita seemed rather mysterious as she folded her arms, a somewhat faraway look in her eyes. "As you said, that is my sister's façade. Do you know about my family? As the eldest-born daughter, my sister was taken around to work-related New Years courtesy calls and parties. As a result of that, she has a mask... you're very observant."

"Ah, that's what my old man taught me. That I should watch out for people like the ladies who sell pictures at shady-looking art galleries. I'm on my guard against people who randomly invade your personal space the first time they're talking to you. A long time ago, that's how my dad got swindled and drove up a big loan."

Apparently, my mum got so mad at him after that he almost died.

In any case, as a result of the special education program for gifted students I received, I had never had any experience of being swindled in such a way until now. I doubted I would be deceived any time in the future, either.

When I told Yukinoshita all of that, she let out a short sigh and rubbed her temple with her hand. "Good grief... what an idiotic reason. My sister would seriously not believe she'd been caught out by such reasoning."

Yukinoshita might have been less than impressed, but it wasn't like that was the only reason I thought the way I did. "While we're at it, your faces might look similar, but when you smile you look completely different."

I knew what a real smile looked like. Not a flirtatious smile, nor a smile for tricking people or for diverting their attention - a real, honest-to-god smile.

When I said that, Yukinoshita picked up her walking pace, leaving me several steps behind. "Hmph... an idiotic reason."

Then she lacked back at me over her shoulder at me. I saw her usual cold, unchanging expression.

"...let's go home," she said softly.

I nodded.

After that, without exchanging so much as a single word, the two of us embarked on our journey home.

I had nothing to ask Yukinoshita, and Yukinoshita didn't act as if she had anything to say to me either. Perhaps it was a time when we should have asked questions and spoken to each other. But, instead of stepping on each other's toes, we chose to embrace the sense of distance that was all too familiar to us now. And because of that, we spent the time without any human warmth, as fellow people sitting next to each other on the train.

When she arrived at the station we were getting off at, Yukinoshita stood up from her seat ahead of me. I followed suit.

Once we got past the ticket barrier, Yukinoshita instantly stopped in her tracks. "I'm going this way," she said, pointing to the south exit.

"Oh. See you," I responded, facing the north exit.

As my back was turned to her, I heard a small voice.

"Today was fun. See you later."

My first impulse was to doubt my own ears. I spun around hastily, but Yukinoshita was already walking off. She showed no sign of looking back at me.

In the end, I watched Yukinoshita until she was completely out of sight.

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

One day, Hachiman and Komachi



THIS TIME I GOTTA CHECK UP ON HIM PROPERLY!

Sooo, what do you talk about with Yui-san?

Oh, the slut.

Our conversations, huh... but you know, she's always focusing on Yukinoshita. I just listen in on them most of the time.

Yeah, like, how do your conversations go?

Those two sure get along

Mmm. But I think she's a good person.

Ohh?

She's nice to everyone. On the other hand, that's one thing I can't believe in anymore.



...aww, that sucks.

You think girls can't be nice to everyone? You gotta believe in girls more! Girls are only nice to people when there's profit, you know!

Regarding

Yūgahama Yūi

That last line of yours is why I have zero belief in girls.

Chapter 5: Yet Alone in the Wilderness, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru Laments

Monday. In French, you'd call it Lundi. It's spelt L-U-N-D-I. That sounds weirdly perverted, so I wouldn't exactly call it a happy day of the week, more like it just makes you sigh and think, "Not another week of school..." I wanted to take a day off from school about as much as I wanted to take a day off from life itself, but it wasn't like there was anyone who would write notes for me or bring me the class handouts. That inevitably makes your attendance rate go up.

Considering that I even wanted to take a day off from school, which you have to pay out of our own pocket to attend, it stands to reason I'd take a bunch of days off from work without being paid. Actually, no, I didn't want to cause trouble for those around me by shirking, so I'd rather make the decision not to work from the beginning.

That said, how come those riajuu say stuff like "Oh man, school is soooo lame! Haha! I lost my textbook over summer vacation accidentally-on-purpose!" when they love school so much? They come every day. Perhaps staying stuff you didn't actually mean was part of what being a riajuu is all about. In other words, lying is the path to becoming a riajuu.

Plowing my way through all the din and chatter around me, I walked into the classroom, just in time for morning homeroom.

There are a number of colonies established inside the classroom. There's one camp made up of boy and girl riajuu and a second camp of riajuu girls who want to be friends with everyone. There are also the jocks who are in a club but don't actually play in any of the games, the otaku, the girls who think the world revolves around them, and the quiet girls who don't cause any fuss. Then there's the small pocket of loners. And among these loners there are a number of types, and... I'm getting carried away.

Even though I'd just entered the classroom, everyone was caught up in their chatter and no one particularly noticed me. Actually, to say they didn't notice me is kind of the wrong way of putting it. It would be more correct to say they just didn't bother.

Weaving my way around the number of islands situated in the classroom, I made my way to my seat. Right next door was the riajuu camp - and the otaku group.

Whenever they were in a group, those guys would blow up at each other, but whenever they came to class too early, they'd say, "My comrades aren't here yet..." as they fiddle with their phones restlessly and flick the hair out of their eyes, all the while casting sideway glances at the door in a way that was kind of cute to watch.

Since their awareness of their own friendships was about what you'd expect of otaku, they didn't really talk to people outside their own circle. They would never mingle with another group out of their own accord. When you think about it, it's quite exclusionary and discriminatory.

Basically, you might not think it, but loners are major philanthropists. Not loving anything means you love everything equally. Crap, it's only a matter of time before they start calling me Mother Hikigaya.

The first thing I did after I sat down at my seat was zone out. Gazing vaguely at my hand, there was no escaping pointless thoughts like "Oh yeah, my nails are getting longer" or "Hey, I'm one step closer to dying" from piling up one after another. I had utter confidence in the fact I was wasting my time.

What a pointless skill...

5-2

Class ended at some point while I was mobilising my innumerable pointless skills, and now school was over for the day. I bet I'd pushed myself to the limit and awakened my Stand ability¹.

I wasted no time preparing to go home and stood up from my seat. As usual, I didn't speak a word to the girl sitting next to me. The reason the English language curriculum in Japan isn't so good has to be because they make you talk in pairs in class.

When I went to the Service Club, Yuigahama was already there, having exited the classroom before me. Having said that, it wasn't like she was inside or anything - she was standing outside the door, breathing in and out heavily.

"...what are *you* doing here?" I asked.

"Yikes!" she started. "Oh, H-Hikki. I was, um, y'know? Smelling the roses or something..."

Yuigahama averted her eyes uncomfortably.

"..."

"..."

Silence reigned between us.

We ducked our heads, not meeting each other's eyes. Doing that made the slightly open clubroom door come into my line of sight. When I peered inside, Yukinoshita was in her usual spot reading a book like she always did.

Somehow or other, it seemed Yuigahama ended up hesitating about going inside.

And not without reason. She hadn't been there for a whole week.

¹ A Stand is a supernatural power unique to *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*.



Whether it was school or work, if you suddenly took a day off, you wouldn't know what expression to wear the next time you showed up. If I skipped work out of some bad impulse, I would feel so bad about it I wouldn't want to go again - that's happened to me three whole times. Wait, if we're including the times I didn't go even once, it would be five times, I guess.

That was why I understood Yuigahama's feelings all too well.

"C'mon, let's go."

So I half-dragged her inside. The door slid open with a loud, deliberate creak, attracting attention.

As if annoyed by the loud noise, Yukinoshita lifted her head sharply.

"Yuigahama-san..."

"H-hi there, Yukinon..." Yuigahama answered in an unnaturally cheery tone, raising her hand weakly.

In response, Yukinoshita's gaze went straight back to her book as if nothing was the matter at all. "Don't dawdle around forever - hurry up inside. Club activities are starting."

The girl in question was looking down, probably in an attempt to hide her face. But even from a distance, you could tell her cheeks were blushing bright red. Also, from the way she spoke, I had to wonder if she was a mother scolding her kids after they'd run away from home or something...

"O-okay..." Yuigahama replied as she pulled up her usual seat next to Yukinoshita's. But when she pulled out the seat, the distance between them grew, and there was now enough space to fit one more person between them.

As for me, I took up my usual position at the corner directly opposite from Yukinoshita.

Yuigahama, who would normally have been playing with her cell phone, took a seat somewhat hesitantly, both her hands balling into fists on top of her knees.

Yukinoshita attempted not to act conscious about Yuigahama's presence, but she went overboard and was instead so overly conscious that she made not the slightest move since Yuigahama sat down.

It was not the comfortable, leisurely sort of silence, but a silence racked with tension. The sound of it elicited such a horrible feeling it would make your skin crawl. Even a slight cough would reverberate around the room, and all the while the hands on the clock went on ticking away, etching out each second slowly and deliberately.

Nobody opened their mouth. But whenever there was some indication that someone was going to strike up a conversation, our ears strained to attention, unable to ignore the sign. Whenever somebody sighed, we'd immediately peer at them out of the corner of our eyes.

The silence is really dragging on, I thought... but when I looked at my wristwatch, three minutes hadn't even passed yet. What the hell? Was this the Hyperbolic Time Chamber? Even the gravity and air pressure seemed to have gotten heavier.

I gazed at the ticking hands on the clock, and just when I knew for certain that they had done a whole cycle, a feeble voice rang out.

"Yuigahama-san."

Yukinoshita closed the book she had been reading up until then with a snap and, once she had finished inhaling so deeply her shoulders shook, she exhaled slowly.

When she turned around shyly to face Yuigahama, her mouth opened as if she had something to say. But no sound came out. Yuigahama had turned her whole body to face Yukinoshita, but she looked down at the floor, their eyes failing to meet.

"Er, uh... Y-Yukinon, you had something to say about you... and Hikki, right?"

"Yes, I wanted to tell you about what we're doing after th-"

Yuigahama cut in, interrupting what Yukinoshita had been saying. "N-nah, if you're worried about me, don't be. I mean, sure, I was surprised and, well, kind of shocked and stuff... but you really don't have to fuss over me at all, you know? More like it's a good thing so I should be celebrating and wishing you all the best - something like that..."

"Y-you're very perceptive... I wanted to do a proper job of celebrating, you see. And also because, well, I'm grateful to you."

"N-no waaaay... I haven't done anything worth being grateful over... nothing at all."

"How like you not to be aware of your own kindness. Even so, I *am* grateful... and besides, you don't hold celebrations for a person because of what they've done. I'm doing it simply because I want to."

"...O-okay."

Something told me they weren't talking about the same thing...

They were only spouting choice phrases at each other and mentally filling in the blanks out of their own accord. Yui was dodging the issue with her vague words and mannerisms, while Yukinoshita spoke in a manner that strongly suggested she was hiding her embarrassment. The lines of their conversation hardly matched at all, and it was only through context that they were piecing it together.

Yukinoshita, who was now finally voicing the feelings of gratitude she was normally unable to express, seemed to blush out of awkwardness. Meanwhile, every time Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita's expression, her own face darkened more and more, and to hide that she occasionally formed a smile in vain. Her eyes had narrowed and were getting stormier by the second.

"Th-that's why... that is—" Yukinoshita fell somewhat silent after she had managed to say something.

A short span of time passed, during which we gazed at each other's faces mutely. A searching expression met anger met nervousness.

Ten seconds hadn't even passed if I counted the time, but it was more than long enough for a heavy silence to fall in before someone opened their mouth again. The three of us looked at three different places as a heavy atmosphere settled in.

"Um, you see..." Yuigahama opened her mouth as if she had made up her mind about something.

That was when it happened. *Bang bang!* An impatient knocking sound resounded across the room. Yukinoshita slipped her book away and called out towards the door.

"Come in."

But there was no response from the door's end. The only thing we could hear was this awful wheezing, mixed with heavy breathing.

Yukinoshita and I exchanged glances. Then Yukinoshita nodded curtly. Somehow, it looked like it was my job to see what was up. For a moment there I thought, *Do it yourself...* but I'd feel awkward making a girl look up the source of that ghastly breathing noise.

Every time I took a step towards the door, the mysterious breathing noise drew closer as well. In this silent room, sound was permitted from a mere two sources: my footsteps and that breathing.

Once I reached the door, I gulped. The thought of encountering an alien being once I separated the single bit of wood between us filled me with dread and nervousness.

I put my hand on the door and opened it, full of fear.

5-3

As soon as the door was open, a large black shadow fell over me, closing the gap between us.

“Oho! Hachiemoooon!”

“Zaimokuza, huh... oh, and quit calling me by that name.”

The owner of the shadow was Zaimokuza Yoshiteru. His body was swathed in a black coat even though it was halfway through June, and as he panted heavily from the heat, he grasped my shoulders firmly.

“Hachiemon, listen to me! They were so cruel to me!” Zaimokuza went on, paying no heed to my words whatsoever to quit calling me by that name.

Screw this guy.

He was pissing me off, so I decided to push him away firmly. “Sorry, Zaimokuza. This Service Club’s for the three of us. Right, Gian¹?”

“I’m not quite sure why you’re looking at me...” Yukinoshita glared at me with hostility, but I overlooked that for now.

“Hey, wait, Hachiman. This isn’t the time to screw around. If it doesn’t interest you, Hachiemon, I’ll take it to the ninja Hattori-kun, so hear me out².”

“I just got told I was screwing around by the guy who screws around the most...”

It came as kind of a shock to me.

“Now’s my chance!”

¹ A reference to Gian from *Doraemon*, who often excludes Nobita from his games by saying, “This game is for the three of us.”

² A reference to *Ninja Hattori-kun*, which, like *Doraemon*, is a kids’ anime.

Spotting an opening past me, Zaimokuza slipped into the room. He made a smooth entrance - he did the sliding part well. But his coat was dirty all over.

"Hmph, no sign of the enemy, huh... seems like my infiltration was a success," Zaimokuza said as he made a show of inspecting his surroundings. Then, as if he immediately forgot the covert secret agent setting, he pulled out a nearby chair and sat on it like normal. *If you're going to make up crap, don't half-ass it...* "Now then, ladies and gentlemen. I call upon you today with a problem at hand."

"I really don't want to hear it..."

The three of us pulled faces in unison. Yukinoshita went straight back to her reading as if she was *that* fed up with listening. She sure was quick to change suit.

But Zaimokuza grinned broadly and raised his hand, cutting off my words. Everything he did pissed me off. "Now now, listen to the whole thing. Remember how I said the other day I wanted to become a game scenario writer?"

Oh, now that he mentioned it, he did say something like that.

"Weren't you into light novels or something...?" Yuigahama cocked her head.

"Erk... well. It's a long story, but I quit being a light novel author because the income isn't steady. I thought I'd rather be a regular full-time employee after all."

"That wasn't a long story... you ended it in two sentences. I really don't give a crap, so quit looking at me while you're talking."

He seemed to be as incompetent at talking to girls as usual. Zaimokuza had only been looking in my direction as he talked for quite a while now.

The atmosphere inside the room had eased. Actually, you might say it was more like his presence had put a damper on everything. In the midst of the sudden wave of apathy that had come over the room, only Zaimokuza was energetic.

He coughed. "So about that game scenario writer thing I was talking about..."

"If you've only got a setting and a plot outline, I'm not looking at it."

“Ohohoho, not at all. Those who wish to quash my ambitions have appeared. I strongly suspect they are jealous of my talent...”

“What the...?”

I felt indignant. No, you could honestly say I was mad.

This guy was talking out of his arse, saying he had talent... I thought about punching his lights out.

“Hachiman, do you know of the UG club?”

“Huh? Yu-Gi? Is it Yu-Gi-Oh?” I repeated the acronym since it sounded so strange to my ears.

Yukinoshita, who had been reading her book, flipped a page as she answered the question. “It’s a new club that was established this year. It’s short for United Gamers, although I heard its objective is to research all forms of entertainment³. ”

“Oh, so in other words it’s a club for people who all like games and that sort of thing.”

“Indeed. In our school there is no club for people who share the same hobby, so it was all merged into one club. Calling it a hobbyist club is easier to understand for all intents and purposes.”

So they had something like that at our school, huh...

“So what did this *UG* club do?” Yuigahama asked dubiously, laying the stress on the *UG* part.

Once again, Zaimokuza saw his opening. “Oh... a-hem. Yesterday, we were playing at the arcade. And unlike at school, I thought I could talk reasonably openly at the arcade, so I told my fighting game comrades that writing a game scenario was my dream.”

³ The Japanese calls it the *Yuugi* Club, but in order to preserve the pun in English I turned the translation into an acronym. *Yuugi* refers to games of all descriptions, including card games and board games.

Saying it was a dream was a nice way of putting it, but it was really just a delusion... it had to be tough on those made to listen to it, too.

“Everyone who was there worshipped my great ambitions. Do your best-! We’re cheering for you-! Just what you’d expect from the master fencer-! He can calmly pull off everything we can’t do! I’m mesmerised! I admire you! and so on. It was a storm of praise.”

Look, you. Nobody was saying that with a straight face. You were being treated like a joke. Not like I could say any of that. As I remembered the situation at hand and looked at Zaimokuza’s rather glowing expression, I found myself hesitating.

“Howeverrrr! There was one guy among them who said it was i-i-i-impossible and that I was dre-dreaming! I am an adult, so in that situation I said, ‘Y-you’re right.’”

Not cool, mister Zaimokuza⁴. Not cool. Zaimokuza wheezed heavily, as if the memory of it had caused his anger to boil over. After pulling out a two-litre plastic bottle from his schoolbag and chugging it down to soothe his parched throat, he opened his mouth again.

“I am not an adult who would back down over hearing something like that!”

“Are you an adult or not? Pick one...” Yukinoshita muttered disgustedly.

It took a moment for the cringing Zaimokuza to fight down the look of fear that came across his face upon hearing that. Then he went on. “And so, after that guy left, I flamed him heavily on Chiba’s Arcanabro chatroom. Oho, I have no doubt he must be seeing red right now.”

“Wooooow...” I said. “You’re so horrible I can’t look away... I’m kind of impressed.”

⁴ Hachiman says ‘Zaimokuza-san’ here, but he’s clearly being sarcastic. I thought this would come across better in English, especially since he doesn’t normally refer to Zaimokuza with an honorific.

"Hmph, then somehow it turned out that guy went to the same school as me. This morning when I opened the chat, they had decided to settle the dispute with a game. Everyone was egging him on... hey, do you think maybe they hate me?"

"Like I know... well, if you're settling things with a game, isn't that a pretty safe way of going about it? Deciding things through action?"

"Hahahaha! That is meaningless advice." Zaimokuza paused. "The other guy is way stronger than me at fighting games."

"Huh? Aren't you insanely good at them?"

"That is, well, I would certainly not be bested by an ordinary mortal. But there are many above me. Hachiman, do you not know? Among the top-class fighting game players, there are people who are contracted as pros."

"Pros... that actually happens?"

"Indeed. The deeper you go, the more evil you find - that's fighting games for you. That guy's skill is not at the level of a pro, but he is certainly stronger than me," Zaimokuza said heavily.

Yukinoshita snapped her book shut. "I more or less get it now. Basically, you want to ask us to help you win at fighting games or some other thing like that."

"Nay!" Zaimokuza scoffed. "Hachiman, you fool! You insulting fighting games, punk?! You'll get what's comin' to ya. You don't know nothin' about fighting games."

His grammar was getting so mixed up I had no idea what he was saying anymore, but at least the fact that he was angry got across. I wish the fact that my anger was welling up even more than his could get across well too. *Don't say all that to me. Tell it to Yukinoshita, damn it.*

Yukinoshita was looking at Zaimokuza the same way one might look at trash. Yuigahama said, "Yikes," with no small amount of disgust.

“Verily, I wish to win so decisively when I play that I needn’t play at all. So bring out those secret tools, Hachiemon.”

“Sometimes, I seriously wonder if even I can put up with all your crap...”

When you talk crap, you never mind it yourself, but it totally gets on the nerves of those who have to listen to you...

Zaimokuza was laughing all “teeheehee” like a cutesy kid. Suppressing my urge to abuse him with a chair, I glanced sideways at Yukinoshita. Predictably enough, Yukinoshita shook her head fervently.

Well, no surprises there.

“Sorry, but no,” I said to Zaimokuza. “This time it was clearly your fault. As long as you’re not getting beaten up, you may as well suck it up and deal with it.”

It wasn’t like the Service Club could save every man and his dog. We weren’t in possession of an all-purpose wish-granting machine, nor were we robots programmed to assist people. We simply just helped people through our own efforts. That being the case, we had no intention to extend a helping hand to someone getting his just desserts.

Seems harsh, but I’m just saying it like it is.

Zaimokuza went silent for a moment. He might have even been reflecting on his own actions.

“Hachiman,” he called out my name in a voice that sounded as if he had been thinking hard.

What? I answered him with my eyes, to which Zaimokuza let out a heavy sigh. *Bofuu.* Huh, what was with that sigh just now? What a weird noise.

"Bofuu, you've changed, Hachiman. Your past self would have been more fired up." He paused. "From the side, your face always looked like the blade of a knife, quivering like a bow string's pulse⁵."

"Stop talking in a falsetto voice. My face didn't look like that... what are you trying to say?" I asked in return.

Zaimokuza shrugged and snorted. "Ohh, hmm, never mind. You'd best keep laughing and giggling with the girls. After all, it is a tale you cannot comprehend. I do everything so that you can slumber in the midst of your phony everyday life. I have no use for soldiers who have forgotten how to fight."

"Uh, wait. I don't remember laughing or giggling. It's not like I have a girlfriend. Oh, but Totsuka laughs and giggles—"

"Silence, boy!" My words were interrupted by a stern reprimand, issued from the mouth of a wolf god⁶.

Once the sound of it finished reverberating around the quiet room, a momentary silence fell. During that moment, I thought I heard someone quietly say, "...huh? You don't have a girlfriend? ...er, uhh. What?"

"Very well, Hachiman. I will concede to you here. It pains me to no longer be able to go to the arcade. In that case, when you and Sir Totsuka go to the arcade, you will be in strife for I will no longer show you around."

Oh! I-I see the light! I *would* be in strife! I have to make Zaimokuza win somehow!
...was what I was *not* thinking.

"Nah, I didn't really need you showing me around... it's hard to say this, but you were in the way."

⁵ A reference to the lyrics of the *Princess Mononoke* ending song.

⁶ Another reference to *Princess Mononoke*. It quotes the scene where Moro, the wolf god, tells Ashitaka to stay away from the forest.

"Dufuu." Zaimokuza let out a strange laughter. As soon as he did that, the two girls secretly edged even further away from him. Before they knew it, the distance between Yuigahama and Yukinoshita had closed.

...huh, I'd always thought of Zaimokuza as an existence good for ruining the mood and stirring up shit, but he really *was* like that in every sense of the phrase. He could break up good vibes, but he also thoroughly destroyed bad vibes.

It wasn't like he intended any of that, but it was something I ought to thank him for, considering the state of the Service Club right now.

At this point, it would be kind of rude to turn him down now...

As if sensing intuitively that my heart was wavering, Zaimokuza turned on me with a shit-eating grin on his face. "My word, the Service Club is absurd. What kind of service is it if they can't even help a single person in front of them? Can you even really save anyone? Don't just spout pretty words - show it through your actions!"

"Ugh, Zaimokuza, you idiot..."

The peak of summer was just around the corner, but a sudden chill ran down my spine.

"...is that what you say? Then I will show you proof of what we can do."

Yukinoshita shot Zaimokuza a frosty glare. I heard a feeble *meep*.

See, look. There's your laughing and giggling for you. It's quite terrifying in reality.

5-4

Like the Service Club, the clubroom of the UG Club was inside the special building - only it was on a different floor.

Our room was situated on the fourth floor, while theirs was on the second floor. Their clubroom was of the same type as one of the small rooms used as preparation rooms.

The clubroom was still brand new, as indicated by the paper magically pasted on the door with only "United Gamers Club" written on it.

"Well, shall we go...?"

As it turned out, we ended up coming all the way here. I looked back at Zaimokuza, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

The high and mighty Zaimokuza let out an arrogant snort. The expressionless Yukinoshita showed no reaction. And the slightly uncomfortable Yuigahama was standing some distance away.

"...what are you gonna do?" I asked Yuigahama, sensing that she was on our heels and wanting to make sure of it just in case.

As a club member, she hadn't turned up for some days now, and as things were, I had no way of knowing whether she would come this time either. If she was bent on fading away from the picture like this, then for her sake, we were better off not forcing her to come with us.

"I-I'll go..." Yuigahama said, gripping her own arms tightly. "I'll go, but... hey, Hikki, do you have a girlfriend?"

She had just asked me a question so illogical I thought I would die. You know, "but" was a paradoxical word. It cast the relationship between the first part and the second part of the sentence in an odd light.

"Nah, I don't."

"What a foolish question, Yuigahama-san," Yuigahama said as she knocked Yuigahama lightly on the head in admonishment. "It is impossible for this young man to even have normal relations with either gender."

"Leave me alone. I don't need a girlfriend. To me, there's nothing more agonising than having my time stolen from me. If she rang me crying or something in the middle of the night while I was sleeping, I'm confident I'd break up with her on the spot."

Why do all those riajuu have to complain so openly about their love troubles? It was like an elderly person boasting about health troubles or an office worker boasting about being busy. You could see so much masochism in their boasting you couldn't even get pissed off. Were they Misawa or something¹?

"Whoa, you're the worst..." Yuigahama said disgustedly. But weirdly enough, her eyes were smiling. "Ah. B-but you know. Weren't you going out with Yukinon and stuff? What was that about?"

"It was the Cats and Dogs Show, so we just happened to bump into each other at the time," said Yukinoshita. "Komachi-san invited me to come along, that's all. Did I not tell you, I wonder?"

"Oh, right," I said. "I don't really give a crap, but can we get going already? Zaimokuza's got nothing to do and just started looking out the window."

"W-wait just a minute," Yuigahama insisted. "So you two weren't dating or anything like that?"

"As if..."

This chick really did have a misunderstanding... that would be impossible if she had just looked at how we normally were. She ought to get a clue.

¹ A reference to Jigoku no Misawa, a mangaka who is very famous for drawing really bad comics.

Yukinoshita had an open look of revulsion on her face. “Yuigahama-san, you know there *are* things that even I get angered by?” The cold fury came out in her words.

“Oh, my bad! It was nothing. N-now let’s go, okay?” An impatient Yuigahama ran up to the door. As she knocked on it smartly, her glowing demeanour was the very antithesis of Yukinoshita’s sour expression.

As soon as she knocked, a slightly languid “yeaaah” sounded in response.

It was probably okay to enter.

When I opened the door, the interior was jam-packed with a bunch of boxes, books and packages, all piled up in a heap. They towered over the surroundings like a barrier, or maybe a partitioning screen, creating a labyrinth.

I was strongly reminded of a bibliomaniac’s private library, crossed with an old-time village toy store.

“Huh? Is this supposed to be the UG Club?” Yuigahama opened the lid of a nearby box and peered into it.

It was a slightly forlorn-looking package that made use of a rose and skull design. The writing on the cover was entirely in English, so there was no mistaking it from first glance: it came from overseas.

“Doesn’t seem very game-y...” Yuigahama said, and for good reason. Normally when it comes to games, you tend to think of console and computer games.

“You think so?” said Yukinoshita. “I, for one, think this fits to a T. Yuigahama-san, what you’re imagining is that beeping thing.”

“Beeping thing, you say?” I said. “You sound like a granny. Even my *mum* calls the NES by its name...”

“I mean, doesn’t it make that beeping noise...?” Yukinoshita said frumpily, although as far as I knew, games these days didn’t make beeping noises.

“Well, you don’t seem to play games, Yukinon,” said Yuigahama.

"You play them, Yuigahama-san?"

"Weeell, my dad likes games, so I quite like watching him as he plays them. I always end up playing them a bit. Like *Mario Kart* and *Puyo Puyo*. I also played little stuff like *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon*."

By little, she probably meant stuff like handhelds...

"You're surprisingly hardcore," I remarked.

Yuigahama shook her head fervently. "Oh, uh, not really... I mean, everyone else was doing it," she chirped.

Well, games these days *did* have a part that specialised as a communication tool. Looked like there were ways to enjoy games like Yuigahama did.

"Oh, and stuff like the new *Final Fantasy* too. The graphics were super pretty and it was really cool! Plus, I could totally cry at it like a movie. And the Chocobos were super cute too."

"Bah." The instant Zaimokuza heard Yuigahama's words, he pretended to spit. Since this was indoors and all, he didn't *actually* spit... or did he?

A guy who never talked at all suddenly blew up in Yuigahama's face, so you could say she marvelled at his existence - or, to put it more simply, she wrote him off as a shifty individual.

"W-what? I'm scared..."

A frightened Yuigahama cowered in my shadow. Zaimokuza metaphorically kicked her while she was down.

"...nooblord."

"H-huh?! I have no idea what you just said, but it really pisses me off..."

"Quit it, Zaimokuza. Your feelings don't make any sense. But look on the bright side: you're really asserting your sense of superiority here. 'I'm the only one who understands me, including my own insults.'"

"Oho, Hachiman. You're quite the positive thinker."

"I do believe that's the worst part of human nature, though..." Yukinoshita looked disgusted. "Games, huh," she went on, "they seem beyond my understanding as well."

"Beyond your understanding, you say," I said. "Yeah, that did show with stuff like the Pan-san game."

"Huh? Pan-san? Why are you suddenly talking about Pan-san?" Yuigahama asked, a blank look on her face.

What, so Yuigahama didn't know Yukinoshita liked Pan-san? Well, rather than saying she *liked* it, it would be better to call her a freak or a maniac or something, in my opinion. "See, the thing is—"

"Hikigaya-kun, what are you talking about?" Yukinoshita cut in, interrupting my sentence in quite an invasive way.

"Huh? What are you-?"

"I don't understand what you're saying, Hikigaya-kun... so fill me in on the details later."

Man, if looks could kill.

"Uh, okay..."

Somehow, it didn't look like Yukinoshita really wanted to make a show of how much she liked Pan-san.

What? Was she embarrassed? I thought she was fine with being open about it if that was the only thing she liked. And hang on, what was with her *fill me in on the details later* stuff? Did she want to pump me for information about Pan-san while keeping her love a secret?

I had no idea. What this chick got embarrassed over was completely beyond me.

Anyway, it wasn't like I was making a point of it when I mentioned it. I don't really care if someone gossips about me based on what I like or something. Why do elementary schoolkids have to jump straight to spreading rumours about whom so-and-so likes?

Yuigahama, who was muttering "Pan-san" under her breath with an unreadable look on her face, didn't seem to be in agreement.

"Putting that aside, where are the club members, I wonder?" Yukinoshita asked.

"Oh. Yeaaaah," I said. "I mean, they called out to us..."

Yuigahama shifted into people-searching mode like I did. I saw what you did there, Yukinoshita.

Since the size of the room was based on the dimensions of a preparation room, it wasn't all that large. It was just that you couldn't get a proper view thanks to the piled up boxes and the bookshelves strewn around carelessly.

Zaimokuza coughed. "They've stacked things so high they must have spent the most time turning this place into a stacking game. As such, if you aim for the highest spot, you'll naturally know where to go."

"Ohhh, Zaimokuza, how enlightening. But since you're taking the time to say all that, tell it to someone other than me already."

It was sad how I was the only one Zaimokuza talked to.

But for now, I followed Zaimokuza's advice and cast my eyes on the tallest stacked tower.

Once I did so, there were indeed voices, even if I couldn't see the owners because of the books and boxes that had become a partitioning screen, getting in the way.

When I tried walking around it, two guys were there.

"Sorry for interrupting. I just want to have a chat," I called out to them.

The two guys, whom I assumed to be UG Club members, looked at each other and nodded curtly. The two of them stared at my appearance. Well, it *was* the first time we had met, and if some guy randomly appeared I'd be staring at him too.

I decided to stare right back at them.

When I did that, I realised that the colour of their hallway slippers was yellow. Yellow was the colour for first year high school students. In other words, these guys were tenth graders.

“Hmph, so you two are first year brats.”

No sooner did Zaimokuza realise they were younger than him did his attitude suddenly turn cocky. I didn't disapprove of how quickly his body language changed. I really hated being stifled by age-based relationships where I had to defer to people older than me, but whenever I got a share of the benefits, the sky's the limit!

I acted all high and mighty right alongside Zaimokuza. I did it because, you see, it was part of the established tactic of asserting one's psychological dominance during negotiations, not because my personality sucked or anything - not in the slightest.

“Oi, you two. Heard you guys were talking shit about mister Zaimokuza,” I said, pausing dramatically. “I'm interested - tell me more.”

“H-huuuuh? H-Hachiemon?!” Zaimokuza looked at me as if he was entrusting his life to me, but it was so not cute. His social standing dropped sharply no matter how young the other person was, pretty much.

“...what are you clowns doing? Hurry up and say your piece.” Yukinoshita sent an icy glare my way.

As soon as she did that, the tenth graders noticed her appearance and started whispering things to each other secretly.

“H-hey, is that Yukinoshita-senpai from the year above us...?”

“C-could be...”

Wow, were these guys for real? Was Yukinoshita really such a celebrity? Well, it was nice they recognised her by sight. It wasn't unusual for someone to be wrapped in mystery and to be widely known outside their own year level. Back when I was in middle school, I also knew stuff like a cute senpai's name. That was all I knew about her, though.

“Ohhh. So you two have business with this guy?” I asked.

I didn't have to announce Zaimokuza's presence - he emerged himself from behind me.

“Mwahahahaha! At long last. You might have talked big yesterday, but it's too late to back out now! I chastise you now - as a senpai in life and a senpai in high school!”

Zaimokuza really laid it on thick with the ‘senpai’ part and threw his weight about, but the UG Club members had a somewhat nonplussed reaction.

“Hey, what's this guy talking about? Ohhh, burn.”

“I know, right? Nothing to see here.”

At their snickering - or more like sneering - Zaimokuza was trembling. “Um, H-Hachiman. I - did something just change?” He was more or less back to normal.

“Don't sweat it. This is an everyday occurrence,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Okay, so we're the Service Club. Basically, we solve problems and listen to your worries, and since Zaimokuza had a dispute with you guys, we came here to sort things out... so uh, which one of you two did it?” I asked casually.

One of them raised his hand nervously. “Uh, me. I'm Hatano. Tenth grade. And this guy is...”

“Sagami. Tenth grade...”

The one called Hatano had a slender figure that gave off the impression that he had a slightly hunched back. His glasses had no frames and the lens was shaped like a trapezium with a slightly acute angle - it had a sharp sort of look about it. From sharp minds come sharp ideas, it seemed².

The other guy, Sagami, had a pale-skinned appearance like a middle schooler's, and he too had a thin build. His slightly rounded glasses gave off an *Inspire the Next* sort of feel, breathing life into the next generation³.

Anyway, I couldn't be bothered remembering their names in particular, so I decided to distinguish them by their glasses.

"So," I said. "I heard something along the lines of you having a gaming showdown with this guy, but you are good at games, aren't you? That's obvious without even having to play a match against you, so can you do something else?"

It was a nonsense plan if you asked me. It was like turning to a soccer player and saying, "Screw that, let's play baseball!" The other guy wouldn't exactly want to lose his premature advantage.

Naturally, it goes without saying that their faces clouded with disapproval. Their unwillingness to nod was an implicit refusal.

"At least you can play other games or something? That's all I'm asking," I said as I pointed at the surrounding mountain of piled up games.

"In that case... well."

"I guess it's okay..."

Unassuming words, but their attitudes reeked with confidence. Their certain pride that they would never lose at games was plain to see. They didn't call themselves the United Gamers Club for nothing, it seemed.

² Sharp Corporation is an electronics company. The line "From sharp minds come sharp ideas" comes from their slogan.

³ Hitachi is a conglomerate that operates a number of business sectors in Japan. The line "Inspire the Next" comes from their slogan.

"But before we change the game, we need some kind of collateral..." Hatano said somewhat diffidently.

Well, the other side had to give up something as well. It was natural that they would invoke conditions to level out the score. I nodded and waited for them to continue.

"Then Zaimokuza can grovel at your feet, okay? If I lose, I'll take responsibility and make him apologise: 'I got carried away so please forgive me.'"

This was already getting annoying, so let's go with this. Zaimokuza had returned to his senses and was saying, "Huh? Me?" Not that he had any say in the matter.

"Well, sure..." The two UG Club members gave the okay in their unassuming way.

"Then I'll leave the game we'll play to you. Don't make it too hard. A first-timer can't jump into a game with a high entry level straight off the bat, so don't make it a fighting game."

Actually, I thought it was because games were easier to handle now than in the old days that newcomers found it harder to get into. Even if you did find a title you wanted to play for a bit at the arcade, pretty much all the *Guilty Cog* crowd - plus the veterans who were around since the old titles - were camped there, so you couldn't get inside. Even if you could, they picked on you casually so it really made you not want to play. They ought to establish a corner for casuals from now on.

"In that case... I can arrange a game everyone knows something about."

"Hmph, do it then. What's the name of the game?" Zaimokuza asked.

In response, the two guys pushed up their glasses. "I think we'll play a game of Double Daifugo."

They might have said it normally, but their eyes gleamed with a sinister light.

5-5

Riffle riffle. The sound of shuffling cards filled the room.

Daifugo, also known as Daihinmin, was a card game played with a regular pack of playing cards.

“Um, are you up to scratch with the rules of Daifugo?” Hatano said diffidently.

We all nodded. Only Yukinoshita cocked her head in puzzlement. “I’ve never played it... if this were poker I’d have knowledge of it.”

“Oh, then I’ll explain the rules briefly.” Sagami launched into a simple synopsis.

“One: you deal all the cards to all the players equally.”

In real life, they don’t deal out the cards equally, though.

“Two: you start a new game. The first dealer plays the first card in their hand and the players take it in turns to play cards into a pile.”

In real life, they’d always forget my turn, and there were people who’d nonchalantly cut into line.

“Three: cards have strength. From weakest to strongest: Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Jack, Queen, King, Ace, Two - that sort of thing. The Joker is treated as a wildcard.”

In real life, strength wasn’t based on just simple ability but also on stuff like connections and money.

“Four: players can only play a card that is stronger than the card before it. If someone played two cards, you have to match that with two cards.”

In real life, you’d play weak cards even when you knew they wouldn’t win. Like a sacrificial pawn or to show someone a lesson or something.

“Five: when you can’t play a card, you’re allowed to pass.”

In real life, they don't let you pass.

"Six: when all of the other players pass and the turn comes around again to the last person who played a card in the pile, that player becomes the dealer. The cards in the pile are discarded."

In real life, the past is never discarded.

"Seven: you repeat the above steps, and the first one to get rid of the cards in their hand becomes the Daifugo (Grand Millionaire), and after that the ranks are Fugo (Millionaire), Heimin (Commoner), Hinmin (Needy) and Daihinmin (Extreme Needy)."

That was the only part that matched real life. How did that even work? It was depressing.

"Also, at the start of the game the Daifugo can take two good cards from the Daihinmin and exchange two cards of their own choosing."

In other words, it was the kind of game that was a microcosm of modern Japan, where those who won obtained the advantage and were allowed to continue exploiting everyone else forevermore.

...man, what a crappy game.

"I see. I more or less get it now." Yukinoshita nodded in affirmation as if the explanation she had just heard was enough. As usual, she was quick on the uptake.

"Wait, what about house rules?" Zaimokuza demanded.

Oh right, Hatano responded with a light shrug. He was really making fun of Zaimokuza.

"There's a first timer here, so just the accepted rules are fine," I said. "How about the Chiba house rules?"

"Um... what are the Chiba house rules like?" Sagami asked somewhat worriedly.

Huh? Do they not tell it to Chiba locals? Well, whatever. I did a brief explanation.

With Daifugo, you could say it was that it was the house rules more than anything that gave the matches variety. There were a myriad house rules attached to the basic rules, and when you put it all together, the strategic value shot right up.

“Let’s see. There’s Revolution, Eight Enders, Ten Trashers, Spade Threes and Jack Back. We won’t have Despotism, Tights, Kaidan or Jokers as Twos. That’s about it.”

“O-our school might’ve had something like that too,” Yuigahama said.

Zaimokuza snorted. “So no Five Skips or Seven Straits¹. ”

If the regional variations sucked, there were always the schoolyard variations. Once you become an adult and play Daifugo, there were lots of disagreements about which house rules to use, so you were better off deciding on them clearly from the start. There were disputes right from the very moment you called it Daifugo or Daihinmin. It was like the difference between “chase” and “tag”.

“Hikigaya-kun, explain.”

Oh, right. I’d assumed everyone knew what I was talking about, but Yukinoshita had yet to experience Daifugo. And so I added a note on each term.

¹ As far as I can see, there are no accepted translations for Daifugo terms, so I just went with what was on the English Wikipedia page. “Ten Trashers”, “Spade Three”, “Five Skips” and “Seven Straits” were my own translations. To those of you who play Daifugo, they’re probably not entirely fitting translations, but they’re the best I could come up with. The meaning is clarified in the novel itself, so the actual English titles are probably not too important.

A “Revolution” is when you play four cards of the same suit, which reverses the strength of the cards. An “Eight Ender” is when you play an Eight, which ends the current round and allows the player who played the card to start the next round, while a “Ten Trasher” is when you play a Ten, which allows you to remove as many cards as you like from your hand according to the number of tens you play. A “Spade Three” is how the Three of Spades beats Jokers, and a “Jack Back” occurs when you play a Jack, which reverses the strength of the cards for just that round.

As Yukinoshita listened to my explanation, she nodded stiffly from time to time. I guess you wouldn’t get it if you didn’t try it for yourself. The fastest way of picking it up was to give it a shot.

“We’ll accept those house rules.”

“Then we’ll have the Double Daihinmin rule as well.”

The two boys’ glasses glinted once again.

Sensing a weird vibe, I gulped secretly. But the next moment, the two of them smiled cheerfully.

“We might call it that, but the rules themselves are the same as regular Daifugo.”

“What’s different is that you play in pairs.”

“Pairs? You mean that you discuss your moves with each other?” I asked.

The UG Club pair shook their heads in perfect unison.

“No. You alternate hands each move.”

“You’re not allowed to discuss your moves.”

...which meant that that not only did you have to read your opponent’s thoughts, you had to read the thoughts of your own partner as you played. There was an unexpected layer of strategy to that... with that being the case, the problem was picking the pairs.

I glanced to the side.

“Heheheh, don’t think you can beat our deck...”

I really didn’t want to team up with Zaimokuza...

“The strongest card is the Joker, you say. I see... can you play a Joker after an Eight?” Yukinoshita was reciting the rules as if searching for confirmation.

Yukinoshita was quick on the uptake, but she was a Daifugo newbie. Not being able to read this chick’s thoughts in the first place made things difficult. She’d probably have some harsh words for me if she lost.

So that left Yuigahama... she’d played Daifugo before and plus her house rules matched the regional variation. Most importantly, she was relatively simple-minded, so it would be easy to read her thoughts.

I looked at Yuigahama, hoping to pair up with her, and my puppy eyes met hers.

“Y-Yukinon, let’s play together!” Yuigahama hastily broke eye contact with me and clasped her hand on Yukinoshita’s shoulder.

“Oh, okay. Sure.”

And that’s the way the cookie crumbles.

I was wrong about being able to choose someone in the first place. It’s laughable that a person whom nobody would ever choose would pick someone for themselves.

Now that the Yukinoshita/Yuigahama pair was decided, my pair was decided too, naturally. It was the usual suspect. As if Zaimokuza was aware of that too, he stood in front of me and pressed his back against me.

“Hachiman,” he called out to me. “Wilst thou come with me?”

...can we just get this over with already?

5-6

Hatano removed the stuff on the table with a swipe. Then Sagami brought over three chairs.

This was to be the stage of our battle.

For the first round, Sagami and I - along with Yuigahama - took our seats. Since the rule was that we had to switch places after each move, our partners were standing behind each of our chairs so that we could make the change immediately. I had no idea what the UG Club's strategy was, but it was probably to beat Yuigahama to the punch and prevent Yukinoshita from getting used to the rules.

Sagami dealt out the cards he had finished shuffling one by one. The fifty-four cards were split into eighteen cards for each of us.

"We will now commence the UG Club versus Service Club Double Daihinmin match. The match will take place over five rounds. Your rank after the final round will decide the outcome of the game," Hatano announced.

We picked up the cards in front of us and fanned them out.

"Since this is essentially a two versus one team match, we'll take the first move..." Sagami might have spoken with a tremulous voice, but he picked up his hand with consummate ease and placed a card in the middle.

Well, in the end there was the Me/Zaimokuza pair and the Yukinoshita/Yuigahama pair. We'd be in the clear if either of us won. In fact, cooperating was our best strategy. In that case, it was only fair to concede the first move.

And so the first turn ended uneventfully.

We got rid of the cards we were supposed to, perhaps because the first round was a wait-and-see round for all of us.

“Hahahahaha! At last it has reached my turn! I draw a Monster Card!”

Only Zaimokuza made a noise.

“I summon the Ten of Clubs! According to the Card Effect, when you successfully summon the Ten of Clubs, I can choose one card from my hand and send it to the Graveyard! I place fifteen cards face down and I end my turn...”

Each one of his familiar phrases stirred up memories of long ago.

“That really takes me back... I did automated *Yu-Gi-Oh!* duels a lot too.”

“Automated *Yu-Gi-Oh!* duels?” Yukinoshita asked with a confused expression.

“I’ve never heard that phrase before.”

“It’s like doing chess problems. It’s because I had no friends.”

“But chess problems aren’t for people who have no friends...”

Oh, it wasn’t? I thought for sure it was chess you played by yourself.

“I, too, prepared two decks very frequently. I got a heap of *Miracle of the Zone* cards and *Magic: The Gathering* cards, but I had no one to play with...” Now that he’d suddenly killed the tension in the air just like I had, Zaimokuza passed me his hand.

Since Trading Card Games (TCGs) are based around matches between people, it’s not fun at all when you don’t have friends to play with. After the Gameboy software came out, I got a wealth of experience playing against the computer, though.

Zaimokuza, who had been making a noise up until now, quietened down, and a silence descended over the gathering. There was only the slight *shfff* sound of someone removing a card from their hand and placing it down with a pat on the table.

And in that way, a number of rounds passed, and the game progressed without much event. Perhaps thanks to the Ten Trasher and the three cards we had played, we were in a good position with fewer cards.

Also, speaking of how many cards each team had, our team had two cards left and Yuigahama and co. had two, while surprisingly, the UG Club members still had five cards left. Compared to the Double Daihinmin they had proposed themselves, I didn't feel any particular strength from their play. Theirs was a wholly unremarkable strategy of getting rid of weak cards first. At this rate, we might even win without breaking much of a sweat.

Yuigahama played the Six of Spades. I played the Eight of Hearts, which I had saved for the end. Now for the last card.

“Zaimokuza.”

“Hmph.”

Placing my last hand face down on the table, I gave up my seat. Zaimokuza flopped down on the chair and yelled out, “Our turn!” at the top of his lungs. As if that wasn’t obvious just by looking. “I’ll end this now! I activate my Trap Card! ...checkmate.”

Triumphantly, he put the last card in play.

On top of that, the card Yukinoshita chose to save for the end was the Two of Clubs. Right after the UG Club passed, she handed the two remaining cards to Yuigahama, who promptly played the two cards to finish.

And with that, we had zero cards in our hand. The Service Club members finished in first and second place.

“Mwahahaha! It’s like you wusses are no big deal! How does it feel to behold our power?!” Zaimokuza hollered as if he had achieved everything by himself.

I figured it had to be excruciating to get talked down to by this buffoon, but when I looked in the UG Club’s direction, they had nonchalant looks on their faces.

“Oh noooo, Hatano-kun, we lost! Oh dear!”

“Indeed we did, Sagami-kun. We totally let our guard down!”

Relative to what they were saying, I couldn’t detect any sense of impending crisis from their appearances. It looked more like they were having fun. Seriously, what were they thinking...?

Sensing something fishy was going on, I looked at the UG Club pair, and the two of them broke out into a grin.

“We’re screwed, eh?”

“Screwed indeed.”

“I mean, if we lose we have to take off our clothes,” they said in unison.

No sooner did they say that did they fling off their outer clothes with a flourish as if they were transforming, of all things. The way they did it was cool, but the act itself was something a deviant did.

“Huh?! What kind of rule is that?!” Yuigahama banged her fist on the table in protest.

But the UG Club members only grinned.

“Huh? Isn’t it normal to strip after you lose a game?”

“Yeah, yeah. You strip if you lose at mahjong and rock-paper-scissors as well.”

Um no, there’s no rule for stripping if you lose at rock-paper-scissors, not unless it’s a forfeit game¹. You do strip if you lose at mahjong.

“Now then,” said Hatano, nimbly rounding up the cards and starting to shuffle them. “Let’s start with round two...”

¹ When it comes to rock-paper-scissors, there’s “janken”, the regular game, and “yakyuken”, the forfeit game. Yakyuken is specifically a strip version of rock-paper-scissors.

“H-hang on just a second here! Wait, listen!” Yuigahama failed miserably at getting him to pay attention. He wasted no time in commencing the deal.

“Yukinon, let’s go already. This looks stupid to play along with...”

“You think so? I don’t mind myself. We’re fine if we win, after all. And it’s natural for there to be risks in playing.”

“H-huh?! I-I don’t wanna!”

“It’s not a problem. The sheer number of house rules in this game may be bewildering, but not only is the relationship between the strength of the cards and their numbers fixed, the basic course of strategy doesn’t change. I believe that if you remember the cards in play and imagine what remains in your opponent’s hand, the game is yours for the taking. Moreover, since there seems to be a number of winning patterns in the endgame, it’s not hard to guess from the number of cards left in the opponent’s hand either.”

“M-maybe so, but... waaaah,” Yuigahama moaned, her eyes watering.

But in this situation, the only person asking anything of her was Yukinoshita. In the face of Yukinoshita’s enthusiasm, there was nothing Yuigahama could do.

...I wondered if I should stop. Only, I didn’t think Yukinoshita would hear me out straight.

“Now then! Hurry! Let’s hurry and begin, shall we?!”

As I was deliberating, Zaimokuza took his seat and received his cards from Hatano.

“Then let’s start.” Yukinoshita also picked up the hand that had spread out across the table and fanned them nimbly. Behind her, Yuigahama was making a long face.

"Now, first up: the card exchange." Hatano took two cards from his hand and handed them to Zaimokuza. In Daifugo from the second match on, the Daifugo and the Daihinmin must exchange cards. The Daihinmin hands over his two strongest cards, while the Daifugo hands over two cards of his choosing.

What came to us from the other side were the Joker and the Two of Hearts. Nice cards.

"Oho..." Like me, Zaimokuza was greatly delighted as he draw out two cards and passed them over.

The King of Spades and the Queen of Clubs.

"Huh?! Hang on a sec, what are you doing?! Why aren't you giving them the weak cards?!" I pressed Zaimokuza.

Zaimokuza closed his eyes silently. Then, he responded in a solemn tone.

"...it is a knight's compassion."

This guy... did he by some chance really only want to see women naked...?

The two UG Club members grinned as they took the cards Zaimokuza handed over to them.

...I-I see. I got it now...

Since their opponents were both male and female, creating a stripping rule was the UG Club's advanced psychological tactic of stirring up discord!

...what numbskulls these guys were.

5-7

I'd thought these UG Club members were just idiots, but from the second round onwards they started taking up a skillful strategy beyond all recognition.

Without fearing any risks, Hatano played three cards at a time and other flashy hands.

Sagami made use of the card effects and cut down his number of cards solidly.

The multitude of strategies they unleashed within a turn made it impossible to read their next move. Certain victory loomed as the number of cards in their hand went down more and more. Before I knew it, they had two cards left.

Our team and Yukinoshita's team used up our cards one by one, as if hanging on for dear life, and somehow Yukinoshita's team had two cards left, while our team had gotten around to four.

Yuigahama moved her right hand uncertainly. It was getting close to the stage where the match would be decided, and she was probably keenly aware of the winning pattern.

“I-I’ll use this.”

The card she played after some thought was the card she had saved as a finishing move - the Two of Clubs.

Luckily for her, we had the two Jokers in our hand. So if we just let this go through, Yukinoshita could go out next turn and that’d be good.

All right, at this rate there’d be no problem. Or so I thought. An unexpected ambush lay in wait.

“Dear me, my foot slipped!”

Zaimokuza bumped into me with brute force and a card flew out of my hand. It was the Joker.

Yuigahama shot out of her chair like a rocket. “Huh?! Hold on, Chuuni! Are you out to kill us?!” she threatened him.

But Zaimokuza whistled innocently. So now he was out to pull the wool over our eyes, huh...

Triumphantly and in great spirits, Zaimokuza played the Three of Spades. Hatano quickly followed that up with an Eight, and then Sagami, taking over, played the remaining Ace of Spades to be the first out of the round.

All that was left was to decide which pair between us and Yukinoshita/Yuigahama that had to strip.

The card in the middle was an Ace. To her chagrin, Yukinoshita passed.

The turn came around to me.

“Hachiman... I entrust my - no, *our* dream in your hands.”

I could feel the intensity through his vice-like grip on my shoulder. When I looked at Zaimokuza’s face, a calm smile played upon his lips, like that of a dying warrior.

Come to think of it, had this guy forgotten that if we lost he would have to grovel on his feet?

As I carried Zaimokuza’s frenzied expectations on my shoulders, I spread my cards. I had the Four of Spades and the Joker.

Hatano was pumping his clenched fist in the air. Without any words, that gesture of his was screaming, “We are comrades!”

Sagami had lowered his eyes surreptitiously and was clasping his hands silently in prayer. I could hear a small whisper of “Please God...” out of the corner of his mouth.

I wondered if I had ever experienced the weight of so many expectations before now. No, I hadn’t. In that moment, I could indeed feel the strength of our bond.

My finger touched the Joker. In that instant, Zaimokuza, who had been watching in anticipation, let out a “Yessss!” in open delight.

In reaction, Hatano and Sagami sprang up from their chairs and leaned forward so far they almost toppled over themselves, and their eyes were alight for the moment of truth.

Someone called out to me softly.

“HA-CHI-MAN... HA-CHI-MAN...”

It was a small, very soft whisper, but before I knew it, it had changed into an uproarious cheer. It was like one of those passionate moving scenes when an Olympic marathon runner returns to the top of the stadium.

Only, in that scene, Yukinoshita was glaring at me with eyes so cold they threatened to turn me to ice, and a teary-eyed Yuigahama was moaning with her mouth drawn in a rigid, straight line. Both of them were scowling in my general direction.

But the two UG Club boys and Zaimokuza paid no heed to any of that whatsoever and continued to roar in delight.

Wild enthusiasm. Chaos. Mayhem. Unrestrained zeal. ...wait a minute?

An uncontrollable impulse was spilling forth from my own body. I was overcome with laughter.

“Heh... eheheheheheh!”

Everyone gulped in the face of my bellowing laughter.

The next instant, I uttered the word *pass* in a quiet whisper, but each and every person in the room heard it.

There was a moment of silence.

“IF THERE’S ONE THING THAT I HATE THE MOST, IT’S THOSE DUMBASS COLLEGE DRINKING PARTY GIMMICKS, LIKE PENALTY GAMES AND MAKING GUYS AND

GIRLS STRIP AND ALL THAT CRAP. NO, YOU COULD EVEN SAY IT GIVES ME THE SHITS!"

My voice crackled through the air like an electric shock. After that, silence reigned once again - or so I thought, until I heard Yukinoshita let out a deep and weary sigh.

"What an utter buffoon..." she muttered idly with faint disgust.

This was immediately followed by a furious roar.

"Hachiman! You bastard, what are you pulling?! This is no game!" Zaimokuza grabbed me by the front of my shirt.

"Calm down, Zaimokuza. It's just like you said - this is no game."

"Hm? Trying to sound a bit cool, are you?"

Ignoring Zaimokuza's question, my eyes slid to the side.

"Heeeeey, what are we gonna do? That senpai's so disagreeable."

"Ahhh, that guy seriously can't read the atmosphere..."

There were two shadows whispering to each other - Hatano and Sagami.

"Tough luck," I said. "I'm disagreeable and I can't read the atmosphere and your little tricks won't get past me."

"H-Hachiman," said Zaimokuza. "What do you mean by tricks?!"

"They don't just want to make us strip with that stripping rule. They're making use of the fact that we've got both guys and girls in our group, and it's a psychological tactic of breaking up our camaraderie!"

Right, the shackles known as stripping would cast seeds of doubt between the Me/Zaimokuza pair and Yukinoshita/Yuigahama pair. They'd benefit if we boys double-crossed the girls. And even if we didn't double-cross them, they'd benefit from shaking up the trust relationship between our teams and that would invite us to make mistakes - it was a two-pronged plan.

"I-I see..." said Zaimokuza. "Oh, ha! Now that you mention it, I have heard of this before! The siren's secret ritual is one of casting witchcraft magic, skilfully baiting the man with 3D girls to fan the flames of civil war. Its name: the 'Honey Trap'! Heh, that was a close one. 3D really is a piece of crap."

"Uhhh, okay. Well, that's the basic concept, so whatever."

Actually, there totally were adults who were caught in the honey trap.

Anyway, if things went on like this according to their plan, the Yukinoshita/Yuigahama pair would start second-guessing us and it would be difficult to find a common ground.

Then, if Yuigahama and Yukinoshita were to give up, it would be our loss, no questions asked.

To think that they not only intended to stir up discord between teams but also between pairs... the UG Club was a fearsome foe.

But their conniving plot would end here. I narrowed my eyes and glared at Hatano. "What's more, you even planned to stir *me* up by using the group mentality."

"W-we got busted!"

"And here I thought you'd be easy to take for a ride since you looked like such a bland person!" Sagami said something kind of mean.

I whipped out my finger and pointed it straight at the UG Club members. "The group mentality doesn't work on me... you see, because I am always excluded from every group!" I told them loudly.

Silence.

Hatano and Sagami furtively averted their eyes, an ambiguous smile on their lips. It was made up of half-pity and half-sympathy. In other words, they were treating me as if I was totally pathetic.

"Ahem, anyway," I said, coughing as I changed the subject. "Your tricks won't work on me."

The two UG Club members exchanged glances.

"I see... looks like we have to put in some serious effort now too."

"Prepare yourselves... playtime ends here."

As their low chuckles reached my ears, their words made me shudder.

...for a club about games, they really didn't play around, did they?

5-8

The UG Club wasn't lying about getting serious. They fired hands in rapid succession that were even sharper and dirtier than the ones from the second round, and thus we were pulled into a relentless war. They made use of the advantage they had obtained from becoming the Daifugo, and strong cards like the Joker and Twos poured out of their hands at each crucial juncture.

I'd already been stripped of my socks and shirt after losing the third round. Now, after the end of the fourth round, I put my hand on my trousers reluctantly. All that remained was my favourite underwear, my last line of defence...

"Harrumph, the time has now come for me to shed this coat, huh..." Zaimokuza started taking off his coat, scowling heavily beside me.

Zaimokuza had already taken off his socks, fingerless gloves and armlets. His trousers and shirt were still intact.

...what was this injustice? Why was I the only one in underwear?

"Shit..."

I was half in tears as I tried to slip off my trousers as smoothly and inconspicuously as I could. Sensing that someone was staring pointedly at me, I stared back and my eyes met with Yuigahama's, who seemed rather apologetic and despondent.

"...what are *you* looking at? Quit checking me out."

"H-huh?! I-I wasn't checking you out one bit! No way am I interested in *that!* Are you stupid?!" she yelled at me at the top of her lungs as she banged me against the table.

Uh, no need to blush bright red and get pissed at me. That was a joke, I swear.

Yuigahama puffed out her cheeks and acted all intimidating, but soon enough her fury subsided and her gaze dropped to the floor.

“...um, sorry. And thanks.”

“It’s no big deal... no need to thank me. I only do what I want to do.”

“Hmph, not that I really care, but saying that in your state of undress only makes me think of you as a pervert without inhibitions,” Zaimokuza said, snickering.

Don’t you say that, you bastard...

Oh, come to think of it. Once I started stripping, Yukinoshita began treating me as if I didn’t exist. She did not look in my direction once, choosing to ignore me completely. How very like her.

5-9

The cards for the fifth round had now been dealt.

I only had one life left in this game: my underwear. In other words, this was a battle I definitely could not lose. It was nothing like the battles on television where they say “I definitely can’t lose”, but which, for some reason, they almost always lost.

“All right... I’ve gotta win this...”

Naturally, I tensed up. I could feel the determination coursing through my body.

“Bwahahaha! This guy’s trying to act cool in his underwear!” Zaimokuza laughed uproariously at me.

When I surveyed the room, the UG Club members and Yuigahama were also desperately restraining their laughter. Upon close inspection, even Yukinoshita’s shoulders were shaking slightly.

Meanies, all of them.

Anger swelled up in me, as you’d expect. “Oi, Zaimokuza...” I called out his name, the edge of my mouth twitching.

As soon as I did that, Zaimokuza let out an unnatural cough as if he too had realised how pissed off I was. “Calm down, Hachiman, my friend. Games are meant to be enjoyed. Don’t be so uptight.”

“Look you...”

Don’t you try that self-righteous bullshit on me, you bastard... I was about to give him a piece - no, five pieces - of my mind when a sigh interrupted me.

“I see. So that’s how you feel about it.”

It took me a little while before I realised that was Hatano's voice. It was clearly different from the nervous and not to mention weak-sounding voice he had been using up until now - you could see the aggressive tone coming through.

"That's just, like, your opinion, man¹," Sagami interjected. "Well, not like that's a bad thing, but if you're going to stick with that to the end, you're kind of screwed."

It was the kind of arrogant, dismissive voice that made you think the owner liked the sound of it a bit too much.

"Urk..." Zaimokuza was about to say something to them, but as soon as he caught a glimpse of their faces he stopped. Their expressions were mixed with obvious scorn.

Hatano snorted. "Well, whatever. Anywho, this is the end of the line."

"Let us commence," said Sagami. "This is the final showdown."

"Oh, okay."

Each of us stood in the battlefield in deference to what Sagami said.

Zaimokuza had the first move. First, he had to exchange cards with the UG Club.

It seemed Hatano was searching for words to throw around at the same time he was picking his cards. His hands fell on two cards and he threw them over. Just as Zaimokuza stretched his palm out to add those cards to his hand, Hatano's voice assailed him.

"...Sir Master Fencer, why do you want to make a game?"

It seemed Sir Master Fencer was the name Zaimokuza went by at the arcade. No two ways about it - he actually called himself Sir Master Fencer (lol).

¹ Literally: "So that is - what do you call it? - the user's perspective."

Zaimokuza forgot to pick up the two cards that had been thrown at him, and the two cards fell from his hand and slipped onto the table.

"Hmph. Because I love games. I do believe making a career out of something you enjoy is an obvious line of thinking. And if I were a full-time employee at a game company, I'd have a stable income," Zaimokuza answered in a seemingly calm manner, although his true feelings were transparent at the end there.

"Oh, so because you love games, huh? Those types have sure been cropping up a lot lately - the ones who only love games and can't do squat. Are you one of those types too, Sir Master Fencer?"

"What are you trying to say?"

They must have struck a nerve, because in his irritation Zaimokuza slammed the two cards he was playing on the table. And then, as the table and chairs trembled with a rough-sounding noise, he passed me his hand.

Yukinoshita, whose turn it was next, played a pair to follow that up. "You're only using your dream as an excuse to escape from reality..."

"W-what are you basing that o-?" That was all Zaimokuza mustered before he came to a stop.

Sagami fired some cards in order to fill the silence that followed.

I fanned out the cards in my hand. If I continued with pairs, it would be my chance to reduce my cards from the opening of the round. With that in mind, I looked over the fourteen cards in my hand.

...fourteen?

Realising that wasn't enough cards, I peered under the table to see if anything had fallen. And sure enough, two cards were down there. Though Zaimokuza might have forgotten to add them to his hand, it seemed they had fallen just now when he caused the table to shake from standing up. I picked them up and added them to my hand. And thus I obtained the Four of Diamonds.

The other card was the fourth Six... I could make a Revolution with this.

Yet I had no choice but to hold onto it for later. If I were to play it, it could only be after I'd become the dealer in the midgame.

As I was making vague calculations in my head, I put two cards with a higher number in play. When I did, Yuigahama and Hatano both played follow-up cards. Two aces, huh... seemed no one was willing to top that. I passed, and after the player swap Sagami put down a card.

“Sir Master Fencer, you are so very shallow. This isn’t quite what you were talking about before, but it’s about how your opinion only means something to you and all that. I can only laugh at hacks and wannabes.”

Wow, that was some sharp insight. Keep it coming.

Half of me felt like cheering Sagami on. Not to mention Yukinoshita was nodding emphatically in silent agreement.

“Uuuuuurk.” Zaimokuza passed me his hand, as if physically trying to contain himself.

Having taken the cards from him, I played the next card in sequence without any flourishes whatsoever. Zaimokuza had toned down the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* sound effects he had been doing up until now, perhaps because his spirit was flagging quite a bit.

Yukinoshita went next. Hatano looked sideways at the card she put down and a scornful smile played on his lips. “You have to laugh at someone who wants to make a game when he doesn’t know the first thing about it. You know, there are plenty of crappy game creators these days. Guys who make games when they’ve only ever played console games at home. They’re one-track minded and can’t do anything innovative. They take away from the soil that gives birth to new ideas. There’s no way you can make something just because you say you like it.”

He played a card, as if slamming it against the table, with an intensity that bordered on the overpowering.

“Uuuuuurk.”

Zaimokuza’s moaning echoed against the ceiling.

A number of turns passed while the UG Club had the advantageous position. When it was Zaimokuza’s turn, Sagami called out to Zaimokuza as he was struggling to pick a card.

“Sir Master Fencer, you don’t have any skills or achievements you’re proud of, do you? That’s why you’re only clinging to games and stuff like that.”

Faced with that voice mixed with sneering laughter, Zaimokuza was unable to formulate a response and passed me his cards with heavy reluctance. It was pretty much saying pass without the words.

After taking the cards from him, I took my seat.

Sagami’s words were still ringing in my ears.

By that, I mean that seeing someone take such open delight in picking on chuunibyou was terribly disheartening - there was no other way of putting it. Telling a wide-eyed boy about the harshness of reality made you look like a tired adult getting worked up over his own life’s disappointments - that kind of pain was very much present here.

Since everyone passed, the UG Club became the dealer.

Hatano played three cards at a truly lazy pace: one, two, three kings. Naturally, there was no way our team, which had just passed, could play anything. Yukinoshita passed too.

“By the way, Sir Master Fencer, what’s your favourite movie?”

“...hmph, let’s see. *Mahou-*”

“Besides anime, I mean.”

“Say what?!”

The moment anime was taken out of the equation, Zaimokuza floundered in silence. Oho, what do we have here? He really got told... but it wasn't like I had any particular favourite movie either once you took away anime. If pressed, I would say *Léon: The Professional*. I want to take in young girls as my protégées as well.

Ridiculing the silent Zaimokuza, Sagami brushed the kings to the side and opened with a new card.

"See, he really can't say anything. So what's your favourite novel?"

"...hmpf, recently I have been getting into *Ore no Kano-*"

"Besides light novels."

"Urk!" Zaimokuza stumbled over his words big time thanks to being stopped so suddenly. He threw his head back exaggeratedly until he was staring at the ceiling, unable to recover. It was like he had just been on the receiving end of a solid uppercut.

Zaimokuza was shaking so violently he was barely standing, an expression of deep misery etched across his face. Was he one of *those* types - one of those crybabies from the young generation that just can't take a hit?

That was the Zaimokuza the two UG Club members were looking at with their scornful eyes. "So in the end, you're just a phony," Hatano said. "You don't even understand the reality of entertainment. We've done our homework on the gaming and entertainment industries. When a blockhead like you comes out and says he'll make a game or something, it's embarrassing to watch."

Just as he said, this room really was overflowing with games. When I saw how all the board games were packed into boxes and stacked in piles, as well as how the dice (probably used for tabletop RPGs) were scattered around, I could easily imagine how thoroughly immersed the two UG Club members were in games.

Zaimokuza, on the other hand, wasn't like that at all - he just went gaga over cute characters...

The way he was right now, there was no way Zaimokuza had any chance of winning. It was obvious that he would lose, and naturally he would suffer the humiliation that followed.

But that kind of pissed me off a bit.

I didn't particularly mind if someone made a fool of Zaimokuza - and I felt no differently about whether he got shot down. Still, what these guys were saying was definitely coming from the wrong place.

I just couldn't put my finger on why I was so irritated.

5-10

The game was approaching its final phase. The UG Club had five cards left in their hand, while Yukinoshita's team had six cards and our team had eight. From the number of cards it was close, but in truth, that wasn't the case from the contents of the cards we were holding. The UG Club had the Joker we had given over to them. The more it approached the endgame, the more greatly the differences in our initial parameters would be reflected in our tactics.

Yuigahama must have judged this as the opportune moment to launch her attack, because for a moment she exchanged eye signals with Yukinoshita before playing three cards. As you'd expect from their timing, nobody could counter it.

Yukinoshita took up the cards and sat down at her seat. "I heard out both sides of the discussion and it seems the UG Club possesses the sounder logic. Hikigaya-kun, if you're thinking about, erm, Zai... Zai... *him*, you ought to be showing him the correct path."

As Yukinoshita brought out another card, there was a smile playing on her lips, like she was testing me. The UG Club followed a card in suit.

Well, Yukinoshita did have a point. If Zaimokuza really was aiming to become a game writer or a light novel author, he needed to put some real effort into that goal. He could make it if he didn't just scribble down outlines for his self-indulgent "masterpiece novel" and instead learned from Hollywood script-writing techniques and studied acclaimed works as his bible.

I did think that Hatano and Sagami ought to be praised for their hard work, and that Zaimokuza should be criticised and scolded for his half-assed way of doing things.

...but just sticking to that was not the right thing to do.

The right way of doing things was the high-handed way of doing things, and that was what made it self-indulgent, I thought.

Following the textbook, adhering to the curriculum, finishing the assignments...

Was that not merely the traditional means of success until now? Relying on past fortunes and leaning on authority, do not countless people today coat themselves with that attitude until it solidifies and sticks to their very souls?

To be right, one has to entrust himself to his own vision of what is right.

"It's not like it's guaranteed the UG Club's way of doing things is right... oh, and it's wrong to say I'm saying that out of concern for Zaimokuza."

"Well then," said Yukinoshita. "That certainly shows how much you care about your friend."

"Um, he's not my friend."

If he *was* my friend, I'd probably stick up for him at a time like this, though. Still, I didn't know how this idiot here could manage to dig his own grave so deep. It didn't matter what I said to him. You could even find people in his class who had given up on him because he was so incompetent. You could even say they had thoroughly given up on the idea of even beating him up.

Yuigahama opened her mouth tentatively. "You know..." she said slightly uncertainly. "I don't really get games and stuff, not in detail, but..."

Besides Yuigahama, nobody raised their voice to interject. It was simply that her serious, deliberate expression drew everyone's gazes towards her.

I waited for Yuigahama to continue speaking. Yuigahama, who had been concentrating her gaze on her cards, raised her head abruptly.

Then she looked me squarely in the eyes.

"Even if it's not the right way to start doing things, even if you can't follow through - as long as it's not a lie or fake, it's not wrong to be moved by feelings of love... I think, yeah."

I wondered whom those words were directed at.

Just as that thought went through my mind, there was a *thump* sound of someone stepping on the floor.

“...yes. It’s just like you said... you’re right that I have nothing to be proud of.”

Gone was the affected way of speaking. The voice trembled so much it was pathetic, and though the words came out stumblingly, they continued without stopping for breath.

“So I’ll bet on this: that it’s weird that I’m worthless! That you guys are wrong!” Zaimokuza wailed, the snot streaming down his face and his shoulders trembling violently.

No matter how you looked at his teary-eyed appearance as he glared at us all and wheezed heavily, it was that of a loser.

Hatano and Sagami looked at Zaimokuza anguished demeanour with eyes full of repugnance. No, they might not have been looking at Zaimokuza, but rather through him they saw the pain of their own past selves.

...I’m sure even they loved games once. And that they had been wrapped up in their dreams, once upon a time.

But the dream was too heavy for a person to continue carrying alone.

As you become an adult, you start looking towards a realistic future, and it’s only the pipe dreams that you stop being able to chase.

Salaries that couldn’t get any higher than the bare minimum of 200,000 yen, the pathetic employment rate of graduates from famous universities, the suicide rate, the rising taxes, and then the miserable pension to top it off.

You only come to know about those sorts of things. If you were a high school student, already half-way towards becoming an adult, you could understand that much.

Everyone jokingly declares that to work is to lose to the system, but that's not necessarily wrong. In a world like this, a life where you only chase after your dream is bitter and painful, and just thinking about it makes me sigh.

It was wrong to submit yourself to that just because you loved something.

That was why they compensated for it. They built up their knowledge and inspired themselves by watching those who were only dreaming.

...because by no means did they want to quit. No matter how much they denied it.

“...you don't know a thing about how the world works. Ideals and reality are different,” they declared.

“I've known that for ages! When they became writers, my comrades from the arcade continued to submit manuscripts as they worked jobs! The ones boasting about skipping their second choices are NEETs!¹ I know that - all too well...” Zaimokuza's fist clenched the air. He did it with all of his strength - so strongly that his nails almost pierced his skin. “I know that when I say I'll be a light novel author, ninety-nine per cent of people would crack up laughing and think, ‘What an idiotic dream!’ or ‘Don't be such a kid! Face reality!’ Even so...”

...he was right. We knew how reality worked.

We knew that terrorists wouldn't suddenly attack us in the classroom and that the town wouldn't get infested with zombies, forcing us to hide away in the home center.

If a normal person heard you say that you wanted to be a game writer or a light novel author, they would think of it as a preposterous dream on par with those other inane delusions. No one would seriously support them or seriously stop them. Even if you seriously declared it was your dream, no one would take you seriously.

¹ Stands for “Not in Education, Employment or Training”.

And so before you know it, you end up quitting, and then you, who had once been a dreamer, now wanted to laugh at other dreamers. You wanted to laugh and lie to yourself.

In the face of all of that, I wondered just how this guy could announce his dreams - even as he broke down crying, even as the snot ran down his face, even as his voice quivered.

“Right now, I believe with all my heart. Even if I can never become an author or a writer, I can still continue to write. I don’t love writing because I want to be a writer! ...I write because I love it.”

Honestly, I felt envious of him.

With that single phrase “because I love it”, he decided his fate with guileless honesty, without any doubts or cynicism creeping in. His stupidity was blinding in more ways than one.

The strength it took to honestly say “because I love it” made my eyes wince. Perhaps it was because I had locked away the innocence to state something from the heart without bravado or irony.

That’s why I got to thinking. Maybe, just maybe this match could decide it. If Zaimokuza - no, we - won, maybe then I could allow myself to believe. (Not if I lost, though.)

“...Zaimokuza. It’s your turn.”

I pushed my cards against Zaimokuza’s fist, which was clenched against his chest.

Zaimokuza pressed a hand against his chest, as if to check his heartbeat, before accepting the cards from me and taking a step to sit down on his chair.

“...nothing anyone could say to me now will make me quit,” he whispered as he passed me. His voice had dropped somewhat and it sounded kind of cool. *Stop it with the cool voice - it’ll stick in my head.*

Zaimokuza took a long and deep breath, regaining control over his shaking, crying voice.

“...oho, sorry to have kept you waiting. Shall we not end this duel now...?”

We had eight cards left in our hand. The Jack of Spades, the Eight of Clubs, the Three of Hearts and the Four of Diamonds.

And then the set of four sixes.

“Eat this! Infinity Clincher!”

With a *shffff* sound, Zaimokuza pulled out a card and then - WHAM! He made his own sound effect as he slammed the card into play. Okay, so I could see that infinity was the number 8 turned on its side, and since the rule was called the Eight Ender, I supposed the clincher part a reference to that, I guess?

“Hachiman.” In full control of himself now, Zaimokuza cast out my name like he cast out his hand.

Don’t say that to *everyone*. I hear you loud and clear.

I took my seat and fanned out my hand.

If I was going to use it, now was the time. It was *because* we had kept on losing all of this time - because we had always been weak and yet failed to relent - that we could use it now.

Was it willpower? Perseverance? Fortitude? Slow and steady wins the race?

No, I had been aiming for this from the start.

Thus, the defeats up until now were not defeats. I had lost the battles but I was winning the war.

A defeat is not a defeat until you acknowledge it as one. I’m sure the man standing behind me would not acknowledge his defeat even to his dying breath, no matter how often he lost or how wrong he was. In that case, he was the man closest to victory.

Even after being totally shut down and having your hopes and dreams amount to nothing - even then, to be able to continue roaring with all your might. Relying on nothing but one's simple strength of will, standing up for one's cause.

When you put it like that, you could do it and call it a dream.

No matter who you were, it was an illusion difficult to bear, as much as it was a precious one. And so only a handful of people could do it - seldom did dreams become reality in this world.

Before I knew it, the time had come. What was this feeling of climax?
Inadvertently, the words I so admired came spilling out.

"I won't..."

"No, I won't."

The two of us stood with our backs pressed against each other as we uttered the answering lines.

"We won't lose!"



5-11

The four cards were clasped in my hand. I slammed them on the table.

“The End of Genesis T.M.Revolution Type D¹!”

Shut up, Zaimokuza. Revolution was fine on its own - he didn’t have to make it sound all cool. I could sense his latent talent for that sort of thing, though.

Yuigahama was smiling wryly, while Yukinoshita sighed in a way that suspiciously resembled a snort. “Pass,” she announced, shrugging.

Hatano and Sagami looked at Zaimokuza resentfully, as if there was something caught in their throats.

No surprises there.

I mean, I had no doubt these guys had played games like this a long time ago. At some point, they must have seen various things and come to the conclusion that simply liking something was no longer enough, and so they sought excuses.

Was their brief moment of hesitation caused by trying to pick a card - or was it because they were looking back on the path they had walked?

“Pass...”

“Well done, Hachiman. Now leave the rest to me.” Not bothering to hide the excitement on his face, Zaimokuza snatched the cards from me, laughing as he did so. “Sword of Jack! ...the Reverse.”

He said it so flamboyantly, but as you might guess, it was just a Jack of Spades.

“Oi, hang on, you idiot!” I said. “You just made the revolution pointless with your Jack Back!”

¹ This is a reference to the name of T.M. Revolution’s short-lived duo with fellow J-pop artist Asakura Daisuke.

When a revolution was activated, the effect of playing the Jack Back is to suddenly reverse the revolution. In other words, seeing as two negatives make a plus and this case was no different, the number hierarchy would go back to normal. The state of the game here was such that you needed to whittle down your weak cards by putting them in play.

"Huh?" Zaimokuza blinked with surprise, before realising his blunder. "Oh!"

God damn it, calling out the names of special techniques was higher on this guy's list of priorities...

This guy was a hopeless case after all. I'd said we wouldn't lose, but that was all rendered moot. Zaimokuza had no Zetsuei and I had no Shell Bullet either².

Slightly perturbed, Yuigahama chose to pass, and Sagami spared no moment in playing the Two of Spades.

Not only did the UG Club have the Joker, there was nothing we could play that could top this card.

Hatano and Sagami exchanged glances and let out a long sigh of relief.

The deal shifted to the UG Club while the revolution still continued.

The UG Club had three cards left in their hand. We had two cards in our hand, but once you were the dealer, there was no doubt the formula to victory was set in stone.

"Well, I do admire your enthusiasm, Sir Master Fencer," Hatano said as he held two cards between his fingers. "These guys are reality."

They put down the two cards like they were swinging the Grim Reaper's scythe.

No counter, huh... if it hadn't been for that tiny miss, we would have been winning. But no use crying over spilt milk.

² This is a reference to the special powers of the two main characters in the anime series *s-CRY-ed*.

There was nothing for it... I wondered whether I would have to strip.

It was then that it happened. "We're beat... no matter how I count the cards, there's no hope of winning," Yukinoshita, who had been silent up until now, moaned as she pressed a hand against her forehead. Hatano was startled to a halt because someone he hadn't expected to speak up had opened her mouth.

"Huh... Yukinon, how do you know?" asked Yuigahama.

"You'll see when you count up all the cards in play. Then, once you take out our cards, you can read what the other players have. On top of that, the Daifugo and the Daihinmin performed an exchange. Since the strong cards were given to the UG Club, it's not difficult to narrow it down."

"Are you Computer Obaachan or something³?"

How nice - she remembered all the cards in play. Yes, it was something a grade schooler would think of, there weren't many who'd actually go ahead and do that. You'd have a hard time just memorising the cards, let alone thinking of a strategy on top of that. Moreover, when you took the game seriously, that kind of thing really stopped mattering. You'd realise they could only have the Two and the Joker.

...was this chick so smart she was stupid?

"The UG Club will pair the Joker and Eight together and play an Eight Ender, and then they will follow that up with a Seven. Hikigaya-kun's team has the Three of Hearts and the Four of Diamonds left, so our loss is certain," Yukinoshita said irritably as she put her cards down and stood up from her seat.

Whoa, how did she know what cards I was holding? Was she an Alter User or something⁴?

³ Computer Obaachan is a popular children's song. The song is about a grandma who can do anything.

⁴ Alter Users are the overpowered characters from *s-CRY-ed*.

Yukinoshita bit her lip in vexation and her cheeks blushed red in embarrassment as she put her hand on the sleeve of her summer vest. Her fingers, trembling with the humiliation, grasped her sleeve, and for those of us watching, it was a disorienting experience.

Breathing a heavy sigh and gritting her teeth, Yukinoshita summoned her strength into her long, thin fingers and pinched the sleeves.

Slowly, she lifted the vest, and her previously concealed blouse began to come clearly into view. If I secretly peered into the space between her buttons, I could catch a glimpse of her white skin, as smooth as porcelain.

My eyes were glued to her in spite of myself. Well, it wasn't like I completely hated that, though.

At the same time I gulped, I heard a slight sound.

Damn noise, zip it already, you'll make my eyes stray, I thought, glaring at the source of the noise. Hatano had dropped the Joker.

But it seemed right now that was the least of his concerns. "Sorry," he apologised without picking up the card. He just looked up once again.

...geez.

You really have to watch out. *Right then...* I thought, trying to turn away, when suddenly my field of vision was totally obstructed.

"Stop. Right, that's enough."

The uniquely soft hands of a girl covered my eyelids.

When I gently brushed away the hand covering my eyes, Yuigahama was looking at me with the same eyes one might look at trash.

"What was that for...?" I asked.

A sullen-faced Yuigahama gave no answer. She whipped her head to the side, her dumpling hair shaking with her dissatisfaction.



“Yukinon, you don’t have to strip, you know?”

Yuigahama gripped both of Yukinoshita’s hands to stop her. As soon as she did so, the tension in Yukinoshita’s body slowly dissipated. Yukinoshita squeezed Yuigahama’s hand back without any strength.

“...but this *is* a contest. Though I am sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Ohh, that’s not it... we can win with this,” Yuigahama said as she picked up her hand from the table. “Here, the Spade Three.”

It countered the card Hatano had dropped earlier. The one that had fallen face up in the playing area.

“Urk!” Hatano let out a surprised yell like a character from Yokoyama Mitsuteru’s *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*⁵.

This was followed by an “Urk!” from his partner. Sagami had a flabbergasted expression that resembled Kinnikuman⁶.

The Three of Spades. Originally the weakest card, there was no card the “Three” could beat. But under special rules, it became the only means of countering the Joker - the wildcard. Moreover, under the circumstances dictated by the Revolution rule, the Three was now permitted to sit as the strongest-ranked card.

Within Daihinmin, the game that modelled modern society, there existed a brilliant and fleeting hope.

“Here you go, Yukinon.” Yuigahama cheerfully handed the last card to the dumbfounded Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita blushingly accepted Yuigahama’s card, along with her smile.

And so the goddess of victory smiled like a queen. As the evening sun set in the clubroom, someone made a small victory pose in the fading light.

⁵ I assume the surprised reactions are very distinctive in this retro manga.

⁶ Another retro manga.

The moment of victory passed all too soon. In the midst of that lingering aftertaste (which I wouldn't even call an aftertaste), I spoke up to the UG Club.

"Whether you love it or hate it, you don't know what's gonna happen... life is a game of luck."

Whether your dream came true or not depended on chance. Whether you won or lost also depended on chance. Source: *Tottemo! Luckyman*⁷. There was no rhyme or reason to the game. What was up with that? And that was why, well, whether or not Zaimokuza's dream came true also depended on chance.

I let out a short sigh. "It's still too soon to give up on your dream or deny it," I insisted as I smiled at Zaimokuza and the Service Club.

"Hikigaya-kun," said Yukinoshita. "That's all well and good. Now could you please put on some clothes already?"

⁷ A shonen gag manga.

5-12

When we left the UG Club, a lazy breeze was blowing from the open hallway. My shoulders were ridiculously stiff, no doubt from staying tense for so long.

Putting my hand on my shoulder and twisting my neck made a satisfying sound for sure. Beside me, Yuigahama let out a satisfied sigh as she performed a big stretch. Yukinoshita stifled a small yawn.

“Um, sorry.”

“Go on, laugh at us.”

Hatano and Sagami lowered their heads tentatively with a sense of humility. The fact that they could apologise straight out was proof that their feelings came from the heart.

So when they heard Zaimokuza’s delusions, there was no doubt that they could not help but say something. That might have only applied for them, but they did seriously hear out what Zaimokuza had to say about his dream. Otherwise, they would never have shut him down.

Oh, but that wasn’t the case for me. I thought Zaimokuza was a complete tool from the bottom of my heart and that was why I shut him down.

“Oh?” Zaimokuza was confused for a moment and then burst out into hamfisted laughter. “As long as you get it! Now, now, just wait a few years. I, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru, will unleash a wonderful game into the world as a present.”

Zaimokuza’s inflated ego sure was annoying, but the two UG Club boys accepted even that with a laugh.

“Yep, we’re looking forward to your game, Sir Master Fencer.”

“Well, the copyright belongs to the company, so it’s not like it’ll just be your game, Sir Master Fencer.”

At that, Zaimokuza's laughter suddenly died away. "Er, what? What do you mean?" he demanded.

Hatano and Sagami exchanged glances. Then politely, they explained it for him in excruciating detail.

"What you write for a company becomes the basic property of the company."

"As such, you have joint Copyright and the company obtains the rights."

"You sign a contract, but I suppose many writers are freelance."

"When you sell out your own work, you cannot receive more than the initial amount of money regardless of who buys it."

"A-are you for real?!" Zaimokuza dropped his schoolbag with a thud. "Th-then I guess I'll quit... yeah, I'm done."

This guy... he just turned around and went back to square one... I-I really wanted to beat him up.

Right now, I was desperately fighting to keep my fist from slamming into his temple. The UG Club were also grimacing as they smiled with half-baked sympathy, looking faintly amazed and disgusted.

"Hmph, there's no point if my share is small even if I launch a big hit. Light novel authors are the best after all! If I decide my course on a whim, I could set myself up for ruin. I must hurry and start on the plot..." Zaimokuza said as he picked up his bag.

His arms folded, he started marching off rapidly with long strides.

"Fare thee well, Hachiman!"

Without bothering to respond to that verbally, I lifted one hand and made an impatient signal for him to get going already. He waved back at me, a happy ray of sunshine.

...wow, that was only the most pointless thing the Service Club has done since its inception.

"Wow, these people are weird," Hatano said, letting a sigh slip.

"I know, right?" I said. "I wouldn't want to be seen with that guy."

"Er, all of you senpai are quite weird, though..." Sagami said with a slightly cold expression.

"Oi, you," I said. "Whatchu you lookin' at the guy who's got the most common sense here, huh?"

"In what cultural sphere would your ideas be considered common sense, I wonder...? Being with a weird person like you is exhausting," Yukinoshita declared coolly.

"Er, Yukinon, you're quite quirky yourself..." Yuigahama laughed somewhat sheepishly as she looked at Yukinoshita.

Far from getting mad in response, a soft, gentle smile came over Yukinoshita's lips. "Indeed. Neither Hikigaya-kun nor I are particularly normal and upfront people, so... so if an honest person like you were with us, Yuigahama-san, that would be a great help - I think."

Yukinoshita's cheeks, illuminated by the afterglow, were slightly red. Yuigahama, who was staring slack-jawed at Yukinoshita's cheeks, slowly but surely began to blubber with joy. Her eyes watered slightly as she latched herself to Yukinoshita's right arm.

"...o-okay!"

Yukinoshita let out a soft, "Not so close..." but she made no move to shake Yuigahama off her arm, and so they remained like that.

"Anyway, let's get back to the clubroom," I called out to them as I walked ahead of them. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama followed me a few steps behind.

Anyway, it was a good thing Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had gone back to how they used to be, I guess...

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

One day, Hachiman and Komachi

MAN, THIS BROTHER OF MINE IS A LOSER...

I talk most to Hiratsuka-sensei...
But I wouldn't call her a girl from her age.

Who's the girl you talk to most?

Regarding
Totsuka Saika

She'd punch you if you said that to her face...
Who do you talk to besides her?

Totsuka, I guess... yeah,
Totsuka. Totsuka for sure.
There's no one for me but
Totsuka. Today, we
discussed how to eat
choco cornet. He was in
the "break it in pieces"
group. Reason being that
he can't seem to open his
mouth too wide, but when
I looked closely his mouth
was just so small and
cute. Then he bit it to
show how it's done, but
when I saw him licking the
chocolate on his lips...
well, that was the best, I
tell you! I'm talking about
his expression as he
looked away shyly from
being watched!

Uh-huh...
O-oniisan, is pork
shabu okay for dinner?

Oi, hang on, I'm not done talking yet. So then-

Hold on just a sec, hear me out! So then Totsuka got
this melon bread and he-!

'kay, I'm going shopping
now! ♪



Chapter 6: His and Her Beginning Finally Comes to an End

When I returned to the clubroom and looked out the window, the evening sun was slowly descending into the Tokyo Bay. A dark curtain was being pulled towards the east, as if washing away the faint indigo blue.

“But now what to do, I wonder...? I even baked a cake and everything,” Yukinoshita said with a sigh as she looked up at the sky just as I was doing.

She was right - it was just about time for school to end for the day. The bell would probably ring at the exact moment we cut the cake.

In response to Yukinoshita, Yuigahama cocked her head to the side with a look of bafflement on her face. “Cake? Why a cake?”

“Why, you ask...? Oh, I still haven’t told you yet. I called you here today to celebrate your birthday, Yuigahama-san.”

“Huh?”

“Yuigahama-san, you haven’t been coming to club activities lately... so er, I wanted to tell you to keep making a square effort - that sort of thing,” a blushing Yukinoshita said with a small cough. *Ahem.* “And also, well... I suppose you could also call it a token of my gratitude.”

As Yukinoshita trailed off, Yuigahama jump tackled her.

“...Yukinon, you remembered my birthday.”

Er, rather than saying she remembered it, it was more like she just guessed it from her phone address.

But Yuigahama was gradually falling into a blissful daze, not caring too much about the particulars.

“But it seems as if today will not do,” Yukinoshita said as she tore Yuigahama off her with her characteristic awkwardness.

Yuigahama resisted somewhat, but then she hit her hand against her palm as if realising something. Spotting her chance, Yukinoshita hastily slipped away from Yuigahama's grasp.

"Then let's go somewhere else," Yuigahama said. "Outside of school."

"Eh? When you say outside, do you mean...?" Yukinoshita floundered a little at the sudden proposal.

But Yuigahama reassured her with a *now, now* and winked in a way that all but said *leave it to me*. "I booked a time somewhere beforehand and stuff, so no worries, no worries. I'm just more than happy you got a cake for me."

"It's not just a cake..."

"D-don't tell me I got a present too!?" Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita with sparkling eyes. Yukinoshita had only just shut down Yuigahama's hugs, but Yuigahama had already closed the distance once again.

Wary of being jump tackled again, Yukinoshita answered Yuigahama's question. "Well, yes... it's not as if I was the only one who prepared something," she said as she sent me a sideway glance.

"So... that means..."

She had probably guessed the meaning behind Yukinoshita's words. Yuigahama mustered a vague, troubled smile.

"Oh,ahaha. I totally never thought Hikki would get me a present too. It's just, you know, it's been kinda awkward... since that day."

Our eyes met. But the two of us both averted our gazes.

When Yukinoshita was with us, she could pretend not to notice the awkwardness and just let things hang.

But now that she was peering at me inquisitively, having noticed that something had definitely happened, I wondered how to hurry up and get the problem over with. Normally, she was completely detached, but weirdly enough, she chose to butt in now.

Pulling out a small package from my schoolbag, I casually flung it over to Yuigahama.

“...nah, it’s not like it’s just for your birthday or anything,” I mentioned.

“Huh?”

Even as I stayed in this strangely stifling atmosphere, just stuttering out something was enough to make things move in a definite direction.

“I did a bit of thinking. How do I put it? We’ll call it even with this, okay? Me saving your dog, you expending effort over me - that’s all water under the bridge,” I told Yuigahama, and then without looking at her reaction I went on without stopping for breath. “I mean, there was really no reason for you to look out for me. I got compensated by the insurance company the person who hit me was in, plus the lawyer and the driver apparently came over to apologise. So you weren’t even in the picture to begin with. Same with your feelings of sympathy or concern.”

Every time I forced a word out if my mouth, an unbearable pressure came over me, as if an unseen hand had seized its grip on my heart. But if I didn’t say my piece, this would never be allowed to end.

“Besides, Yuigahama, it wasn’t like I saved the dog because of you.”

For a moment, Yuigahama looked at me with deep sadness in her eyes, but then she immediately cast her gaze to the floor.

"It's not like I give out special favours, so there's no need for you to give me one in return. But, well, how do I put it...? I want to pay you back for the worrying you *have* done over me. With this we're back to zero and we're even. You don't have to care about me anymore. So we'll end this here," I finished, letting out a heavy sigh.

My chest felt tight.

If everything came out in the open, then we could put an end to everything - including the painful misunderstandings and the misdirected self-defence mechanisms. Perhaps even this was a painful misunderstanding and a misdirected self-defence mechanism too, though.

Unable to peer at Yuigahama's expression, I could only see her tightly clenched mouth.

"...why do you have to think like that? I never once thought that I... that I felt sorry for you or that I was going out of my way for you or anything. I just, I..."

Her quiet whispering voice was trembling. Yukinoshita and I simply listened to her in silence. For the two of us, who possessed no ability to respond, that was all we could manage.

A faint darkness loomed in the corner of the room. It wouldn't be long before the sun was set.

"Wow, this has gotten hard and I don't really get it anymore... I thought it'd be simpler than this..."

Yuigahama's voice was a shade more cheerful than it was before. But because she had forced the words out of her mouth, they floated in the air, a silent plea for help.

"It's not as hard as you may think."

Yukinoshita stood with her back to the setting sun. The sea breeze blew in through the open window, causing her hair to sway.

"Hikigaya-kun has no recollection of helping you out, and you have no recollection of pitying him, Yuigahama-san... it was all wrong from the very beginning."

"Well, yeah," I answered, and Yukinoshita nodded.

"Indeed. So I believe Hikigaya-kun's choice to 'end this here' was correct."

Since the beginning was all wrong, it stood to reason that the results would be all wrong too. No matter what feelings came over me, the answer would certainly not change.

Fake. It would be the same as those feelings being fake. Even if those feelings were something special.

Feelings that sprouted from a random accident, becoming the object of sympathy thanks to self-sacrifice, love that could possibly have been born no matter who saved her - I could not acknowledge any of this as the real thing.

If I had saved her without knowing her for who she was, then she had been saved by me, not knowing me for who I was. In that case, her feelings and gentleness were not directed towards *me*. They were directed at someone who had saved her.

That was why the last thing I wanted was a misunderstanding.

I was done with being selfishly entitled and being selfishly disappointed.

I wouldn't expect anything from the start, nor would I expect anything afterwards. I would not expect anything, even to the day I die.

Throughout it all, Yuigahama kept silent, but after a while she mumbled something forlornly.

"But to end things here... I don't want it."

"...you fool. If it ends, why not start over again? Neither of you are in the wrong."

"Huh?" I asked inadvertently in response to those unexpected words.

To that, Yukinoshita flicked her hair behind her shoulder, a cool expression on her face.

“Regardless of who saved whom, you’re equally victims, are you not? In that case, you ought to pin it all on the instigator. And so...”

Yukinoshita cut off her words momentarily. In that brief moment, Yuigahama and I gazed at each other.

“You can make a proper, fresh start... it is not beyond the two of you,” Yukinoshita said with a gentle - but also a somewhat lonely smile on her lips.

In the midst of the sunset glow, I had no way of knowing what was reflected in her half-closed eyes.

“I must report to Hiratsuka-sensei that we have filled the member vacancy,” Yukinoshita said as if remembering something suddenly, swinging around curtly.

Yukinoshita’s footsteps were a little more rapid than usual. Just like that, she walked out the room without looking once behind her.

Now only Yuigahama and I were left. I suppose it was a good thing Yukinoshita managed to say what she wanted to say, but she really didn’t have to leave us with this awkward atmosphere.

Yuigahama peered at me sideways, looking for the right timing on her own, and then she spoke to me, as if gently prodding to confirm something.

“Er, um, I-I hope I have a good time here.”

With those generic lines out of the way, she lowered her head with a bob.

“Oh, okay...” I had no idea what kind of *good time* she was talking about.

Something still nagged at me somehow. It was like that feeling of being needled by Yukinoshita. Arguing for arguing’s sake was my specialty, but to think my talent was stolen from me...

As she laughed in a strained way, Yuigahama poked my back incessantly.

“...hey, can I open this?”

“Do what you want.”

Now that I'd already handed it over to her, Yuigahama had the right to do whatever she wanted with it. Still, she insisted on asking for my permission and everything. After she opened the wrapping paper carefully, her eyes widened and a sigh slipped out of her.

“Whoa...”

It was stitched together with multiple strands of black leather and there was a silver tag in the middle. It was supposed to look good on brown hair. It was quite a good choice if I do say so myself. I hadn't been forced to buy presents for Komachi's birthday for all these long years for nothing. I have quite a reputation for being my little sister's lapdog.

As if the mere knowledge of my expert choice was satisfying to her in itself, Yuigahama gazed at her present with eyes of fondness.

“W-wait just a sec,” Yuigahama said as she spun around and turned her back to me. Three seconds didn't even pass as she touched the back of her hair and lifted her head. “Th-think it looks good on me?”

As she stood before me, averting her eyes a little embarrassedly, I could see the black leather adorning the white skin on Yuigahama's neck. Her brown hair as it reflected the evening sun contrasted against the black in a way that was rather pretty - and yes, it did look very good on her.

Still, this was kind of hard to say, but...

Oh well, I was better off telling her straight out when it came to something like this.

“Er... um, that's a dog collar, you know...”

Still, I had to wonder why it looked so good on her...

"Huh?"

Yuigahama turned bright red before my eyes.

She scowled. "Y-you should've said so before! You moron!" Yuigahama yelled as she flung the wrapping paper at me.

Er, could she not tell by looking at it? Well, whatever, she *was* able to adjust the size...

"Ugh, whatever... I'm gonna ring up the place we're going to!"

As she huffed with anger, Yuigahama flung off the collar and stormed out of the classroom. But when she opened the door, she stopped in her tracks.

"...thanks, doofus." Yuigahama shot her parting words at me without looking in my direction, before slamming the door shut. I couldn't get a word in sideways.

"...geez."

As I let out a deep and heavy sigh, I looked around the window of the now deserted classroom. Yukinoshita had been standing there just a while ago.

It wasn't even two metres between where Yukinoshita had been and the seats Yuigahama and I had been sitting on. Yet for some reason, it was hard to cross that looming distance, and I could sense an unseen line drawn there.

It would not be long before the two of us discovered what exactly stood between us - or rather, you could say, the truth.



Bonus Track! “Birthday Song for You”

(This bonus track is a novelisation of the *Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come wa Machigatteiru* vol. 3 limited edition drama CD script. The CD script covers an episode after the events of volume 3. We recommend you read and listen to the CD after you finish reading this volume. We apologise in advance for any parts that sound different from the voices in this edited manuscript.)

Birthdays.

Along with signifying the day of your birth, it is a day that gives birth to new trauma.

For example, birthday parties where you’re the only one not invited, or birthday songs that touch you because you think it’s sung for you, only for you to find out it was for a classmate who happened to be born on the same day as you, or birthday cakes where your name is spelt wrong on it... hang on, what was my mother doing with that last one? How could she get her own son’s name wrong?

That being said, perhaps the reason a baby cries when it is born is not because it is deeply moved from being born into the world, but because it is the first time it experiences the loneliness of this world after being separated from its mother.

Thus, one’s birthday is the start of loneliness.

According to the ancients, a leopard never changes its spots.

As such, spending one’s birthday alone is the correct path and hanging out with friends at birthday parties and so forth is the wrong path... although the urge to celebrate for another person is not so bad, I guess.

Track 2

This happened when I, Hiratsuka Shizuka, was walking down the hallway of the special building. Just ahead, several meters away, I spotted a high school girl humming cheerfully as she walked along. Her name was Yuigahama Yui. She was normally a peppy girl, but today her manner seemed even more cheerful than usual.

“Mhmmm mhmmm mhmmm.”

“Hey there, Yuigahama,” I called out to her. “You seem to be in high spirits. Something good must have happened for you to be humming in the hallway, hm?”

She stopped. “Ah, Hiratsuka-sensei,” she answered with a warm smile on her face. “Y’see, it’s my birthday today... you know Yukinon? She’s holding a birthday party for me!”

A birthday... right, that was still something to look forward to around her age, but not so much when you’re my age. At any rate, she was having a good time. I ought to congratulate her properly.

Still, there’s no way of knowing for sure whether she could expect that kind of sincere congratulations when she got around to my age.

“Ohhh, so it’s your birthday, huh? Congrats. The most important thing is you’re getting along with those others. You can see some definite growth in Yukinoshita, but on the other hand...” I sighed.

A single male high school student came to mind. Yuigahama pursed her lips and smiled uncertainly, as if she thought of the same thing.

“...ohhh. Er, uh, Hikki might be a bad egg, but he can be nice from time to time - I mean, he got me a present and stuff.”

I was slack-jawed at her reaction. “Ohh? I don’t recall saying Hikigaya’s name once.”

“Huh?! Don’t tell me that was a trick question just now!” Yuigahama was flustered and taken aback. It wasn’t a trick question, though.

“You could say it was a leading question. But whatever. Speaking of those two, they rely on you. They’re not the easiest to get along with, but I hope you treat them well.”

Heh. I sounded a bit like a teacher right then, didn’t I? I thought as I looked at Yuigahama.

“Oh, okay...” She looked confused for a moment, and then she let slip a careless thought. “Sensei, you’re kinda like a mum.”

“Urk! I’m not that old, you know...”

For a moment there, a shock came over me like my heart was being assaulted with a blunt weapon. As I fought valiantly to keep myself from staggering, I clenched my teeth and smiled.

Yuigahama backpedalled hastily. “Er, uh, that’s not what I meant - you’re, uh, *like* a mum? That kind of thing. Er, right, you’re the motherly type! You’ll make a good mum, sensei! As long as you get married!”

“Oof! Damn! The damage is high when they mean well...”

When drawing a blade for a quick strike, the moment you unsheath the sword is when the opponent is most vulnerable. If I had not devised a backup plan through reading *Rurouni Kenshin*, I would have fallen from that blow just now, unable to withstand it...

It’s okay. She was trying to praise me. Not yet - it was still not yet time to give up!

Be brave, Shizuka!

As I was bracing myself, Yuigahama opened her mouth as if she had just thought of something. “Oh, right! Will you come to the party too, sensei?”

“Hmph. I appreciate the invitation, but I’ll have to pass. I have another party today.”

“You have someone else’s birthday party, sensei?”

“N-not exactly... I can’t blab to her that it’s a marriage hunting party,” I muttered that second part to myself.

And before she could ask me what kind of party it was, I changed the subject.

“Aaanyway, what is the guest of honour doing out here? Aren’t they all waiting for you?”

“Oh, right! See you later, sensei!”

“Mmm, go and have fun.”

Once I finished watching Yuigahama dash off, I looked out the window at the darkening sky.

I sighed. “Won’t someone marry me?”

Track 3

In the quiet classroom, Yukinoshita and I both had our noses stuck in a book. If that was all we were doing, it would have been the usual scene. What made it unusual and different from normal was that we had plans after this.

“Hey, Yukinoshita. Club activities are cancelled for today, right? Meh, even if they weren’t, I reckon I’d just be reading a book anyway...”

Yukinoshita flipped a page lightly in her paperback novel and answered without looking in my direction. “Indeed. We’re celebrating Yuigahama-san’s birthday after this, so we can’t hold Service Club activities today. Any complaints?”

“Nah, not really - I actually feel lucky to have a break. I am truly glad Yuigahama was born into this world! Thanks to her, I don’t have to do club activities.”

“I can’t tell if the scale of this conversation is large or small...” She sighed. “As usual, you are the shallowest human being in existence.”

Yukinoshita closed her book in disgust. But if she was disgusted, so was I. You fail to understand, Yukinoshita, my dear. You fail to understand.

“Fool, you should be saying I’m deep.”

“You’d rather I say you were deep?” Yukinoshita asked dubiously, just as I expected she would.

“A deep river has fast currents and you can’t see the bottom, so you can’t put your foot in. Ironically, this means that I, who am shallow, am a gentle and open-hearted person with my feet squarely on the ground,” I said, chuckling with a bit of pride.

Yukinoshita looked bewildered. “I wonder why... it’s almost as if you’re an upstanding individual.”

“I wonder why... it’s almost as if you’re *not* saying I’m an upstanding individual...”

Was that not strange? I think I'm quite put together, thank you very much. But Yukinoshita cocked her head slightly.

"Hm? There's not one thing that's upstanding about you, is there?"

"Why are you tilting your head cutely? There's such a gap between that and your nasty words I'm getting cognitive dissonance," I said.

"Sorry," Yukinoshita answered unconcernedly. "Lying is not part of my personality."

"You're apologising for the wrong thing... now you listen up! Besides the fact I have no friends or girlfriend, my basic specs are high," I declared once again.

Yukinoshita pressed her hand against her forehead as if she had a headache.
"That's a fatal flaw for most people... well, whatever. I also object to the prevailing wisdom."

"As you should. Saying that lots of friends and a girlfriend are necessary is a denial of the self. There *are* geniuses with zero friends that society deems upstanding and influential. I mean, even *you* don't have friends, and you're the number one ranked genius girl who can do everything."

"I-I do have one friend..." Yukinoshita argued blushingly.

That one friend she referred to was a girl I knew of as well.

"Ah, Yuigahama. But y'know, 'friends' is a plural term, so that means having one cannot suffice. THEREFORE YOU DON'T HAVE FRIENDS!"

"Splitting straws again, I see..."

Just as Yukinoshita was about to make fun of me, the door of the clubroom opened.

"Yahallo! Sooo, whatchu talkin' about?"

The person who had just appeared with a dumbass greeting was Yuigahama Yui.

“Why hello, Yuigahama-san. And oh, Hikigaya-kun is irredeemable trash who just said he’s an upstanding individual.”

Upon hearing that, Yuigahama clapped and burst into uproarious laughter.

“Ahahaha! Noooo way!”

“Don’t just shut me down... calm down for a sec. Allow me to explain point-by-point why I am upstanding. First, I have a nice face. Plus one point.”

“Your eyes are rotten. Minus one point.”

“And wow, what a thing to say about yourself...”

“Damn! Okay, so... I’m in a good school. Plus one point.”

“You might be held back a year. Minus one point,” Yukinoshita said coolly.

“...aahaha,” Yuigahama laughed anxiously. “I might not be one to talk. I’m on probation.”

W-well, up until now my arguments were a bit, *you know*. You could say it was relatively abstract or that a lot of it was my personal opinion. This time I would exert my persuasive powers by pointing only to the facts and to the absolutes.

“Then how about this? In the humanities course, I’m ranked third in Japanese. Plus one point!”

“However, with nine points, you’re last in maths. Minus one point.”

“Ohhhhhh. I got twelve points... I’m on probation.” Yuigahama was half in tears.

What else, what else...?

“Nrrrghhh... a-also... I have deep love for my sister.”

“But that’s just being a siscon.”

The two of them looked at me with eyes that screamed: *perverts should die*.

“Minus two points,” said Yukinoshita.

“Is your grading system rigged?! Shit! What else... I-I give up. Nothing comes to mind...”

I thought hard, but I drew a complete blank. As I labored over my indecision, Yukinoshita turned to me with a benign smile.

“You’re done, I take it? I could think of more things.”

“Wha...chu say?”

So she had more bad things to say about me... what, did she have a Heaven’s Memo Pad or something?¹ Yukinoshita secretly averted her eyes and murmured something softly.

“For instance... you celebrated Yuigahama-san’s birthday properly. Plus one point... just kidding.”

“Huh? You said something?”

“Not really,” Yukinoshita deflected my question coolly as she stood up from her seat. “Now then, we ought to get going. I used fruits on this cake. We’d best eat it while it’s fresh.”

“Oh, okay...”

Yuigahama and I stood up from our seats after her.

“Yay! Cake! Yukinon, what sorta fruits did you use?! Watermelon?!”

“If *watermelon* is the first thing you say, as usual you have no clue about cooking...” Yukinoshita muttered.

¹ A reference to the light novel series *Kamisama no Memochou* (lit. ‘Heaven’s Memo Pad’). In this story, amateur detectives solve crimes with limited resource and genius intellect.

Track 4

We left the classroom and trudged down the hallway. When I reached the first floor, I remembered I'd received a text from Komachi.

"So where are we going from here? Komachi wants to come so I wanna call her."

"I'm fine with that." Yukinoshita nodded.

"The karaoke bar in front of the station," Yuigahama answered. "There's free time after five o'clock - I recommend it."

"Okay, got it. I'll send her a text. But... free time, huh? I hate that word." Some deeply unpleasant memories came to mind.

"Huh? Why?" Yuigahama asked confusedly. "It's free, ya know? You can do what you want - that's a good thing."

"Freedom is not necessarily a wonderful thing in all circumstances. When you're free, you receive no care or protection," Yukinoshita said in her characteristic way.

I nodded along to what she said. "She's right. School trips, excursions, swimming class... my old self would worry about what to do whenever they said it was free time. I had nothing to do at swimming time so I swam two whole kilometres."

"That's basically a marathon," said Yukinoshita.

I know, right? I clearly surpassed the limits of the classroom. It sure was tough...

I laughed bitterly. "During the school trip, all I had to do was shut up meekly and walk three steps behind the others, so that was lucky."

"You taint the image of the ideal woman," Yukinoshita remarked.

As we went all the way up to the entrance, talking crap no one cared about, I got the vague feeling there was some loud laughter ringing out somewhere.

“Mwahahahahahaha! Hachiman!”

...oh, was it my imagination?

“But why are we doing karaoke again?” I asked.

“Eh? Heh heh heh heh, Hachiman...”

“Huh? They don’t really get mad if you’re noisy, plus you can have as many drinks as you want,” said Yuigahama.

“Ahem ahem... H-Hachiman? Hellooooo?”

“Furthermore, I hear you can bring in cakes on birthday occasions,” said Yukinoshita.

“That’s only if you ask the bar owner, though,” said Yuigahama.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and I continued our conversation as if that loud laughter from before really was just our imagination.

“I see... hey, Yuigahama, did you do the booking even though you’re the one having a birthday?”

Yukinoshita winced. “I-it couldn’t be helped. I didn’t know what to do with this sort of thing, you see.”

“Ahhh, no need to worry one bit, y’know? I mean, y’see, I’m really just glad you’re celebrating for me, and to think that Yukinon would rely on me... that made me even happier.”

“Yuigahama-san...”

“Teeheehee.”

The two of them smiled at each other, their cheeks flushed with slight embarrassment.

Just then, something cut through the air and violently shook up the ground! A black shadow!

“JUST A MOOOOOOMENT! DON’T LEAVE ME HERE!”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both cowered away from the violent roar. So did I, while we’re at it.

“Eeek!”

“Ahhh!”

“Whoa! You scared me! ...oh, it’s you, Zaimokuza. What, you were here?”

He was here? Seriously?

“Gorum! Gorum!” He coughed unnaturally. “Before you ask me whether I was here, I must act in such a way that proves my existence, hm?”

The overly affected expressions spewed out of his mouth. Man, was he annoying.

“Oh, quit it with the annoying crap. What’s up? You want something?” I demanded.

Zaimokuza folded his arms pompously. “Ahem. I just came up with a new light novel setting, which means... I’ll be nice and let you have a peep.”

“Why are you kinda looking down on me...? Don’t just show me the setting or the plot - bring me the whole manuscript.”

“Bwahahahaha! Nonsense, the setting this time is enough for a three-course meal! Now then, feast your eyes!”

“Right now? Sorry, but I have stuff to do. How about next time?”

When I offhandedly refused the sheaf of paper Zaimokuza handed over to me, he started mouthing off with a faraway look in his eyes. “Harumph, don’t you know the saying? Take time by the forelock. It means don’t run away...”

Pause.

“...hm? Hey, Hachiman, if it only says forelock, do you suppose you’re meant to grasp the hand or foot?”

“I dunno, don’t quote sayings you don’t understand... meh, if you *are* in a hurry, get an online bulletin board to critique it.”

“That advice I cannot follow. ‘Roflmao this guy’s writing sucks balls trololololol he ain’t got no writing talent lol.’ If the other wannabes wrote that about me, I would choose death.”

“Before working on your literary skills and ideas, get a thick skin, okay?” I said in gentle remonstration, prompted instinctively by just how much of a loser Zaimokuza was.

Right then, Yukinoshita looked up at my face. “Hey, Hikigaya-kun, what is a wannabe?”

“Ah, I don’t know the specifics, but I hear that’s what they call aspiring light novel authors.”

There were many theories floating around, but I did hear it came from the English “I want to be”, which was then shortened to “wannabe”. But I didn’t know the particulars. What I really didn’t know was why Yuigahama, who looked as if she didn’t get it either, let out a sigh of admiration.

“Ehhh, I thought they were animals at the Chiba Zoo.”

“...but there *aren’t* any wallabies in the Chiba Zoo,” I said.

“Yuigahama-san, you’re talking about the giant kangaroos,” Yukinoshita answered seriously.

“I-I already know about the kangaroos!” Yuigahama argued with a red face. “I mean, like, the smaller ones are there! I’m confusing it with those!”

“...you mean the meerkats, don’t you?”

“That’s it! Shoot, I was close! ...okay, next question.”

“Nah, you weren’t close, and we’re not doing the Trans Chiba Ultra Quiz either.”

Also, these two spent way too damn time at Chiba Zoo. Wooooow.

“Eh! Who gives a damn about marsupials?!” Zaimokuza started beating his hand against his manuscript insistently. “I have faith in my work this time! I may have been called a filthy wannabe up till now, but it’s a matter of time till I drop the useless part...”

In response, Yukinoshita put a hand on her chin and nodded in admiration. “I see. Then from now on you shall be called filth.”

“So that’s what you choose...” I muttered.

The correct answer was to take out the filthy from filthy wannabe to make it just wannabe, I bet. Anyway, even if you get rid of the useless part, you’re still stuck with wannabe...

But Zaimokuza laughed fearlessly and with total confidence. “Heh, you’ll see as soon as you read it... hmm? By the way, Hachiman, just what business do you have today?”

“Hm? Ah, it’s Yuigahama’s birthday, so there’s a light celebration.”

“What?! Her day of birth?! Could that perhaps be that thing they call BIRTHDAY in English?”

“Yeah, I guess. Not that there was *any* need to say that in English.”

In response, Zaimokuza opened his mouth, trembling all over with emotion. “Ohh, so the old legend was true, huh... the day a person turns seventeen, the Master Fencer General will also come running with well wishes...”

“What a creepy reaction, though...”

Yuigahama pulled on me forcefully and cowered behind me as her shield.

“The old ladies go crazy when they hear about birthdays. Well, that’s ‘cos Chiba citizens are conscious about birthdays.”

“Really now? I’ve never paid much attention.” Yukinoshita tilted her head in puzzlement.

“Uh, in Chiba middle schools, the seat numbers are ordered by birthdays,” I answered.

“Ahhh! Yeah, they were!” Yuigahama interjected in agreement. “I was surprised in high school when they switched to alphabetical order.”

“You’re right. It seems rare for a date of birth order to be used nationwide.”

“Indeed, indeed. And so it is possible for tragedies to occur...”

“What’s this all of a sudden, Zaimokuza?”

Zaimokuza’s know-it-all expression suddenly turned dark.

“...the day before they all celebrated the guy in front of me, and three days later they did the guy behind me...”

“Ahhhh, I get it now,” I said.

“They ignored you spectacularly, I see,” Yukinoshita said.

Yeah, that kind of thing *did* happen when people had their birthdays during school time. Seeing as my birthday was during summer vacation, I never had that kind of experience. So I acknowledged it openly. “When I think about it, Chiba sure is a harsh prefecture for loners.”

“Oho, what’s with that ‘not my problem’ look, Hachiman?”

“Hikigaya-kun is surrounded solely by strangers, so nothing is ever his problem,” said Yukinoshita.

“Why are you saying that with a kinda nice smile? I don’t want to hear it from you. You’re the one who regards everyone as a stranger,” I retorted to the grinning Yukinoshita.

This prompted her to flick her hair and assume a self-assured expression. “Indeed. I am surrounded only by strang—”

“Huuuuuh...?!” A crestfallen Yuigahama prodded Yukinoshita’s back incessantly.

“Yuigahama-san, could you please stop prodding my back?”

That didn’t stop Yuigahama. “Nrrgghhh...” She went on with the prodding with a sullen face.

Yukinoshita let out a short cough, as if unable to stand it any longer. “Hrmm, I’ll correct myself. There may be the odd exception, but most are strangers.”

“Yukinon!” Yuigahama flew at Yukinoshita with a tackle.

“You’re stifling me...” Yukino gasped, her voice a complicated mix of half-gloomy and half-delighted.

As all of this was going on, I uttered farewell greetings to Zaimokuza. “Zaimokuza, that’s how it is, so today’s a no-go. Next time, okay?”

The three of us started walking again, leaving Zaimokuza behind.

But a set of footsteps sounded right behind us.

“Hmm, a chance meeting. Today it just so happens that I, too, have no plans whatsoever...”

“I see. It’s nice to have free time... hey, why are you following us?” I said, knowing full well the meaning behind his acting, but Zaimokuza pretended not to hear it.

“Free tiiiiiiime, ah, free tiiiiiiime. Since I have free time, I can take a detour or something. Dear me, that reminds me, wh-where are you going, you guys?”

“Front of the station.”

“Oh my! ...what a coincidence. I was just passing through the station on the way home today. Perhaps this is fate... I see, so that is the choice of this world¹...”

“Hmph...”

His little play act was annoying, so I ignored him.

As he was in deep thought, Zaimokuza kept throwing side glances in my direction. Then, looking ever so slightly disgusted, Yuigahama whispered something stealthily into my ear.

“Hey, Hikki, about Chuuni.”

“Chuuni, you say... that’s your nickname for Zaimokuza?”

Bit mean, wasn’t it? But Yuigahama went on talking, not looking overly concerned.

“Um, yeah? Hey, about Chuuni, does he want us to invite him?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that,” I answered, “but...”

“You’re doing it in full awareness, I see...” Yukinoshita shrugged and sighed. “Yuigahama-san, you *are* allowed to invite him as long as you’re okay with it yourself, you know? He’ll be inclined to give up rather than follow us around forever.”

“Hmm, what to do...?” I mused.

“But if you do invite him, you’ll have to put up with him all day.”

“Are you my mother?” After that, I turned to Yuigahama. “Hey, Yuigahama, can we invite him?” I asked.

Yuigahama gave that some thought. “Umm, well it’s not like I don’t know him, and he’s Hikki’s friend... okay, sure.”

¹ This is a Japanese internet meme, often used as a hammy reaction to depressing news stories. It is used most prevalently by chuunis.

"Thanks. Meh, not that he's my friend, though."

"Right, he's not your friend..." Yuigahama smiled awkwardly, her expression neither surprised nor baffled.

Turning my back on Yuigahama, I spoke to Zaimokuza. "Zaimokuza, you coming too? To Yuigahama's birthday party."

"Hmmm? No, but I am also being chased... my mental deadlines chase me into a scene of carnage, and yet... it would be rude to decline your invitation, however. Now then, shall we walk together?"

"Shit... I wanna punch him..."

I had no idea just why he was so stuck up. As usual, he only talked big. Characteristically enough, Yukinoshita's eyes were also seething with a casual desire for his blood. "This is far more irritating than I imagined..."

"W-well, I'm happy how lots of people are celebrating for me," Yuigahama said.

"You don't have to strain yourself," I said.

Yuigahama laughed, trying to fool us with all her might. "Ah, ahahahahaha... oh, there's Sai-chan."

"W-what, Totsuka, you say?! O-oi, Yuigahama. You're happy how lots of people are celebrating for you, right?! Right?!"

"Eh? Well, yeah, but... hey, where are you going?!"

I almost couldn't hear Yuigahama's suspicious question at all; I was sprinting at super speed like a combat butler, so fast I broke my personal record².

"He took off so fast..." Yukinoshita said.

"Totsukaaaaaa! I-it's Yuigahama's birthday today and w-we're having a bit of a celebration, so... you w-wanna c-c-come with us?"

² "Like a combat butler" is a reference to *Hayate no Gotoku*.

As my voice rang out, I could have sworn I heard Zaimokuza's voice behind me.

"Uh. Whaaaat? Isn't your reaction totally different from how it was with meeeee?
Hey, hey, what about meeeeeeee?"

Track 5

During the evening, cars and people came and went from the station, and the din was reaching its peak. The five of us walked through all of this hustle and bustle.

“My bad, Totsuka. Looks like I pushed you into coming.”

“Oh no, not at all. I was thinking of getting a present for Yuigahama-san too. Plus, I was really happy that you invited me, Hachiman.”

I was totally in tears from his excessive cuteness.

“Boo hoo hoo... I’m really happy that you came t- huh! No no no, Totsuka might be this cute, but he’s a guy. Stay cool, don’t get distracted, Hikigaya Hachiman. Calm down and embrace the feelings of a monk. Don’t lose to temptation.” I breathed in and out slowly. “Keep your spirit under control. No need for women on the path to Buddha, no need for women on the path to Buddha... wait, Totsuka’s a guy, so there’s no point! I can’t be a monk!”

“What idiotic things are you mumbling about...? We’ve reached the karaoke bar.”

As Yukinoshita’s cold voice dragged me back to reality, we arrived at the destination.

Karaoke is one of the major aspects of a high school student’s leisure time. Students cannot be separated from their singing in the first place.

For instance, chorus contests. And wait, why do riajuu fight over practicing for chorus contests?

“Boys never sing properly!” a girl will cry one hundred per cent of the time. Then the whole class will chase after him. It’s a template event for young people, one that’s not hard to understand.

But behind the scenes-

“My gosh, why’s A-ko suddenly crying¹? Rofl.”

“Nah, I’m less rofling and more like kinda pissed I came.”

“I know, right! ‘cos that girl wanted to hog the mic.”

“...ya knooooow, isn’t she taking a while to come back? Should we go see her?”

“Ahhhh, you mean that person. The one who said we’d all go together? Whoa, aren’t we totally living out our youth right now?”

That kind of conversation went on. Maaan, they really talked a lot about how much they celebrated their youths! Wonderful!

The automated door opened, and I was greeted with the talkative atmosphere inside the bar.

“Ah, onii-chan.”

Komachi, who was sitting on the sofa and who had probably arrived ahead of us, spotted us and dashed over to where we were.

“Ohhh, Komachi,” I said. “You got here earlier?”

“Yahoo, Komachi-chan,” said Yuigahama.

“Hi there, thank you ever so much for inviting me.”

“No, thank you. Thanks so much for coming.”

“No no, Yui-san. When I heard you were having a party I just had to come.”

As the two of them exchanged greetings, Yuigahama let out a deep sigh of admiration. “Komachi-chan, you’re so nice... I bet it’d be fun to have a little sis like you... Komachi-chan, won’t you be my little sister...? Er, n-not like *that* of course.”

“F-fool! W-what are you saying, hmm?!?” I exclaimed. “Komachi is *my* sister only. No one’s having her.”

¹ “ko” is often part of girls’ names, so A-ko means something like “Girl A”.

The last thing I would do is hand her over to anyone.

“His siscon is showing...” This time, Yuigahama sighed in a very different manner from before.

“I sincerely apologise for my brother...”

“Don’t worry, it’s not really your fault, Komachi-chan...”

Hmph, I got the feeling I was the villain here. Time to withdraw for now.

“Anyway, we still haven’t gone to the front desk. I’ll go there for a bit.”

As I started walking, I could hear some kind of voice behind me, but it was mixed with the BGM.

“I-I’ll come too!” Yuigahama said.

“Hmph, then I shall go as well,” said Zaimokuza. “Reason being that I have no place I belong right now!”

“...wow, what a sad reason to interrupt the two of us,” Yuigahama muttered.

Track 6

Aww yessssss. Some weirdo might've followed them, but for now I breathed a sigh of relief at seeing Yui-san try so hard.

When onii-chan and the others went to the front desk, Yukino-san came up to me and started talking. "Komachi-san, you helped us out the other day. Thank you."

"No, no. It's because you asked, Yukino-san. My brother's always causing you trouble, so I'll help out whenever if you're okay with me."

Weeeell, I might have said I'd help her out, but as far as I'm concerned, it's another kind of helping, eheheh.

"What are you talking about?" Totsuka-san was as hopelessly cute as ever... he looked super interested, too... but oh, I mustn't I mustn't.

"Oh, the other day Yukino-san, onii-chan and I went shopping for a present for Yuigahama-san."

"Ahh, I see. That sounds fun. I really want to go out with everyone too..."

"That's right! ...but I get the feeling onii-chan would be the happier one going out with you... ahhh! Onii-chan's going in a strange direction - I'm worried!"

Like, what was seriously worrying was that whenever onii-chan talked about school at home, he'd talk a heap about Totsuka-san, to the extent he'd made a "Today's Totsuka" corner.

"I don't understand very well, but you have it tough too," Yukinoshita said. "My sympathies..."

"Now that we've come this far, I'm struggling between Yukino-san and Yui-san..."

Yukino-san treated him as a total stranger, but she seemed to have expectations of me?

“Yuigahama-san and I? ...what do you mean? I don’t put much stock into corporal punishment.”

“I’m very sorry. I’ll pick the route without violence.”

“Right. Crushing his spirit is more my forte.”

“E-even though you say that with such a wonderful smile, I’m conflicted...”

Track 7

At the front desk, the owner operated the till for us.

“Yuigahama-san’s reservation, was it? Your room is number 208. The mic and remote control are in your room. When your time is running out, I will phone you to let you know.”

“All right, thank you so much.”

As Yuigahama took the basket with the sales slip inside, Zaimokuza started talking to me.

“Hey, Hachiman.”

“Huh? What?”

“That was your sister before, was it not?”

“Yeah, it was...”

Somehow, I had a bad feeling about where this was going...

“...I see. By the way, Brother, what may your little sister’s name be? Also, her age and hobbies in detail.”

“I’m not breathing a word. Also, next time you call me Brother I’ll punch you.”

“Hmph. How cold, bro.”

“Bro is forbidden too!”

Track 8

After reserving beverages at the drink corner, we finally entered the karaoke room, each holding our glasses.

As if rather worried that we wouldn't get started, Totsuka raised his glass high in the air.

"Um... o-okay. Yuigahama-san. Happy birthday!"

To match that, we all performed a toast and raised our glasses in suit.

"Happy birthday!"

"Happy birthday to you!"

"Hmph, happy new year."

"Um, that might be a greeting, but not a birthday greeting..."

Yukinoshita, Komachi and Zaimokuza uttered congratulatory messages to follow, to which today's leading actor, Yuigahama Yui, raised her arm and responded.

"Thank you, guys! Now I'll blow out the candles. Whooo."

"Yay!" When Yuigahama blew out the candles, we raised our glasses in toast again. Then we ended up clapping. Very fitting for a birthday.

Then, there was silence for a while...

"..."

"Huh?! Wh-what's with this atmosphere?!" Yuigahama looked around her surroundings with surprise.

Komachi was also making a sour face. "It's like we just spent a whole night watching over a dead body..."

But Yukinoshita and I dealt with the silence calmly.

“Ah, I’m not used to this sort of thing,” she said.

“I have no idea what to do at birthday parties and gatherings, so I’m not good at handling it,” I said.

“I fervently agree,” said Zaimokuza. “By some mystery, I have never been invited to a gathering.”

“Besides that one time, I can’t say I’ve ever been,” I said normally in an unconcerned tone.

For some reason, Zaimokuza confirmed his victory with a loud laugh.

“Mwahahahaha! You’re so weak! Be happy you even got invited once! That’s hardly very loner-ish!”

“Whatchu say...?! Since you don’t seem to understand, I’ll fill you in. I was invited because the whole class was obligated to go. Plus, since I was never invited a second time, I must have made some fatal mistake, right? You’ve never been once, so the possibility of having fun still remains for you. I’m one step ahead of you!”

“Wh-what?! Urk, can’t beat a professional loner...”

“What an unsightly squabble... I have been invited every time, but not once have I ever gone. I suppose this is my victory, then?”

“Urk... this girl’s competitive!”

I had no idea where the basis for competition was in this conversation, but Yukinoshita appeared to have the victory.

Perceiving the strange atmosphere, Totsuka cut in. “W-well, since we’re at a birthday party and everything, let’s talk about something fun, okay? Right, Yuigahama-san?”

“Eh? Ah, I’m having quite a bit of fun here. Since no one’s ever done so much for my birthday parties till now, I’m really happy...”

Yuigahama was actually happy. The happiness slowly spread across her face and a serene smile played on her lips.

“What a surprise,” I said. “I thought you were a Juicy! Party! Yeah!-type all year round.”

“What’s with the incomprehensible English...? Wait, is that even English?” Yuigahama wondered aloud.

“Uh, I dunno if it’s English... aren’t you missing Miura and the others girls like her?” I asked.

Yuigahama stroked her chin in thought. “Hmm, it’s not like I didn’t have the opportunity, but they only came to congratulate me and there were lots of people slipping out the back door and when they realised the food was gone the party would just end...”

“I see how it is... ah, um, sorry.”

It was a sad story. When I apologised reflexively, Yuigahama also lowered her eyes in discomfort.

“Ah, mmm. I don’t really mind.”

“...”

As the two of us fell into silence, Komachi opened her mouth with a strained smile on her face.

“...and it’s like we just spent another night watching over a dead body... I can’t stand it anymore! Yui-san, let’s just drink cola for now!”

“Ah, r-right!”

“Yeah!”

Komachi and Yuigahama held a toast - just the two of them - bringing out a light atmosphere.

I let out an inadvertent sigh in the midst of that.

To be perfectly honest, these types of gatherings are not my forte.

You could say I'm not used to it since I'm not invited to gatherings and class meetings, but I simply can't help but feel suspicious. Looks to me that everyone does the act of raising their voices in unison and lifting each other's spirits with all their might. I bet male and female riajuu wouldn't help becoming anxious if they didn't make a noise. If they were quiet, they'd be recognised for the boring people they were.

That's why they forced themselves to talk, broadened the topic and roused each other up exaggeratedly. If they puffed themselves up any more, they'd be like menaces.

I sighed.

"Hachiman? What's wrong? You're sighing so much." Totsuka peered at my face.

"Oh, uhhh. Nah, I mean, what's with this party? In the end, I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Er, ummm... you eat food, have a toast, party tricks? ...and then cut the cake¹?"

"That's a wedding ceremony..."

"Ahahaha, so it is. But the celebrating part is the same." He paused. "So then... shall we cut the cake?"

"...my first time teaming up with Saika."

I put on a determined face without thinking.

"H-Hachiman... i-it's mean to say my first name so suddenly..."

"Stoop, okaaay, stop. I will be the one to cut the cake," Yuigahama cut in between us suddenly. Thanks to that, I regained my senses.

¹ The Japanese word 入刀 explicitly refers to cutting the wedding cake.

“...huh! How close! The image of Totsuka in a wedding dress was flickering in the back of my mind just now... how weird. Totsuka’s a boy, after all.”

“...uh, that *is* really weird - and also gross.”

I smiled lightly at Yuigahama’s utter dismissal. “It is strange, I know. It isn’t gross, though. Totsuka’s a boy so he should be in a tuxedo!”

“You’re dead set on marrying him?!”

And at that moment, a violent banging sound rang out against the ceiling.

“Whoa, that was a shock! See, Yuigahama, if you raise your voice, the people next door will get mad.”

“Ah, sorry... how weird, this room is soundproof... well, whatever,” Yuigahama grumbled as she brandished the knife she had borrowed from the kitchen. “O-kay I’ll... cut the cake. H-Hikki, could you hold the plate still? Th-there’s no real meaning about us being together or anything.”

She mumbled the second half so I couldn’t hear it at all. Are you like me when I go to the hair salon and get asked what hairstyle I want? Spit it out, woman.

“Nah, it’s your birthday today so you ought to take it easy. Totsuka and I’ll cut it for you.”

“Eh. Eh. Th-that would be bad for Sai-chan...”

“You don’t think it would be bad for me...? All right... Komachi.”

“Ehhhhh? Making me cut after saying all that kinda lowers my Komachi points. It’s okay if it’s just the two of us at home, but I’m shy. Ah, my Komachi points went up this time.”

“...shut up. Okay, Zaimokuza.”

And thus it was time for me to rely on Zaimokuza.

“...ugh.” Yuigahama pulled a really sour face.

“Uh, that reaction kind of makes me feel sorry for him.”

As I resisted the mild urge for sympathy, Zaimokuza clutched his chest and grimaced in pain next to me.

“...ooof. My sealed door has been opened! Indeed, I went through military training when I was still in a normal elementary school. By strange chance, when I volunteered as a rations boy, the lone Valkyrie tearfully refused the curry I served up...”

“Look see, thanks to you stimulating his trauma, his character started blurring...”

“Ah, I-I’m not really that repulsed, it’s just, you know. I want you to go to the toilet or something.”

“Gaaaaah!”

As Yuigahama pierced Zaimokuza and brought him to a standstill, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh and picked up the kitchen knife, all the while looking at Zaimokuza’s mannerisms with a disgusted manner of her own.

“I’ll cut it. I’m good at cutting.”

“Ah, you do seem good at cutting - cutting off people with your impatience.”

“Isn’t that your forte? Getting cut, I mean.”

“Why are you saying it as a passive verb on me? And anyway, I’m a Buddhist. I’m aiming to cut off my earthly existence and become Buddha. From a Buddhist perspective, my standing is very high.”

“Again with the half-baked Buddhist knowledge... At its heart, Buddhism is not a religion that is concerned with lines. Buddha preaches the concept of direct cause.”

“...Yukipedia-san has come out.”

“What’s with that fishy nickname...? Well, whatever. More importantly, we’re cutting the cake into pieces, so hold onto the plate.”

“Yes’m,” I said, as I held onto the plate gingerly.

At which point Yuigahama stopped us, her manner disconcerted. “H-hold on a sec! I’ll do this part after all! P-plus, Hikki and Yukinon doing the work together is...”

I could barely hear the second part of what she said. Are you like me when I’m stopped by the police after riding my bicycle to get my lack of criminal record checked out? Spit it out, woman.

Be that as it may, Yukinoshita looked perplexed, as if she had heard what Yuigahama had said. “Hm? Really?” she went on speaking. “Then by all means please.”

“Oh, yay! Yep, yep, I’ll do it.”

“Right then, Yuigahama-san, please hold this plate still for me.”

“Yukinon and I are working together?! Ohhhhhh... I’ve got mixed feelings.”

Track 9

Yukinoshita sunk the kitchen knife into the cake.

“Those six slices of yours are neat...” I said.

“Not really. It’s nothing too special.” Yukinoshita placed the carefully cut cake in front of us calmly.

“Whoa, it really is. Yukinon, are you a Type A?” Yuigahama asked with light surprise, her eyes on Yukinoshita.

“Where did that come from...?”

“Ah, I mean you’re so methodical.”

“I wouldn’t say Yukinoshita’s methodical,” I said. “She’s fastidious and a perfectionist - that kind of thing.”

“How ridiculous... what is the causal link between blood type and personality?”

Looking less than enthused with blood type horoscopes, Yukinoshita exuded her particular icy aura. That was counteracted by Totsuka’s warm voice.

“Ah, but I’m a Type A, you know. I’m kinda fixated by small details, I guess...”

“I see. Totsuka, you will make a fine bride one day.”

“Q-quit teasing me, Hachiman...” Totsuka blushed bright red.

Yukinoshita, who was right next to Totsuka, turned her cold gaze on me. “Not that it matters, but I think you treat me quite differently...”

Man, the difference in temperature was extreme. Was this room a self-contained desert climate?

The one who broke the mood was our resident mood-breaker Zaimokuza-san.

"Harumph, it is not necessarily untrue. It is said that Type ABs have two different personalities, but it is strange to say it aloud. As I speak, my other self may awaken at any moment... kuuuh! Not now! Stay down, my right hand!"

"Could you please take your silly diversions outside...?" Yukinoshita said.
"Yuigahama-san, what type were you again?"

"Me? I'm a Type O," Yuigahama answered.

Komachi hit her hand against her palm as if she were agreeing with something.
"You're a wishy-washy Oh Type!"

"What's with the pun? Then what about an Eh Type?"

"Oh dear... if Yuigahama-san is a Type O, then the blood type horoscope is showing its credibility."

"Hey, wai-! Am I that wishy-washy?!"

"Yui-san, it's okay," said Komachi. "I'm a Type O too."

"What are you going by when you say it's okay...?"

"Eh? ...I could give her a blood transfusion or something."

Yukinoshita shuddered at the wave of wishy-washiness. "It fits... the credibility is getting higher..."

"So what's your blood type, Yukino-san? So you *are* a Type A?" Komachi asked.

"I'm a Type B," Yukinoshita answered readily.

"Ah. Now I believe in blood type horoscopes," I said.

"What are you implying...?"

"Ah, it's just that you want to do everything your way and you're egoistical and you're sooo overbearing. I agreed with it."

"By that logic, you must be a Type B as well."

"My bro is a Type A, you know?" Komachi said.

The air in the room instantly froze over.

"Huh?"

"Whaaaaaa-?!"

"Oi, I get the feeling your surprise doesn't bode well for me."

"WHOOOOOOOA! H-Hachiman is a Type EHHHHHHHHHH?! No way, it cannot be! To think this irresponsible slacker and uncooperative loner is a Type A! No matter how you look at it, you have none of the qualities of a humble farmer, thank you very much."

"Shit... I wanna punch him..."

As I restrained my right fist from connecting with Zaimokuza's chin, a dismayed Totsuka opened his mouth. "S-sorry. Hachiman... I'm a bit surprised too, I guess."

"T-Totsuka..." I half-sobbed without thinking.

"Ah, b-but if something bad does happen, I can give you my blood!"

"T-Totsukaaaa!" I cried out in joy without thinking.

Right then, I wasn't the only one who was pleased - Yukinoshita was also smiling with a modest amount of joy. "What a relief. Thanks to Hikigaya-kun, I can completely deny blood type horoscopes."

"Like I said, stop saying that with a kinda nice smile. You wound me!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry... there is perhaps a possibility that you have a complicated family situation and that you are lying about your blood type. I might have been imprudent. I apologise." Yukinoshita laid the belligerence on thick with her apology.

"Don't say that stuff in front of my blood-related sister. If I didn't know she was blood-related, I don't know what would happen, okay."

The fact that she was my blood-related sister was a safeguard, but if she wasn't, the love might come pouring out of me, seriously. As if those feelings had gotten across to her, Yuigahama reacted as if she had been singed.

"That's not just a siscon, that's a sexual deviant!" she wailed.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, that's part of the deal," said Komachi. "Ah, that might've made my Komachi points go up?"

"Your society points go way down! This girl's also kinda loony! They really are siblings!"

"See, our blood types are different but our personalities are relatively close. So it's got to do with our upbringing, don'cha think?"

"Right, right, we both like celery and end up hogging it."

Also, we both disliked summer and we both tried to compromise.

"What kind of upbringing would turn out like this...? I'd like to meet your parents just once..."

"Please do! If I introduce you, Yukino-san our parents will cry tears of joy," Komachi chirped, her cheerfulness completely overblown.

Yukinoshita tilted her head in confusion. "Hm? Why would that be?"

"Huh, why you ask? Because you're onii-chan's..."

"What about Hikigaya-kun?"

"...hrm, it's nothing... how weird, that didn't trigger a flag!" Komachi said something under her breath.

But in response, Yuigahama coughed as if trying to steer the conversation. "Aheeeeem, ah, I kinda want to meet them too. I-I guess."

At that instant, Komachi's eyes came alight with a *ping*. "Yui-san, by all means come over to hang out sometime! It's happening, it's happening!" she sang under her breath.

"O-okay!"

Komachi and Yuigahama seemed to be getting along well. But they were forgetting something important.

"Stop that, we have a cat. You're no good with cats."

"Oh, crap! Y-you're riiiiight!" Yuigahama's face fell exaggeratedly.

Totsuka's reaction to the word cat was the complete opposite of that. "Ah, Hachiman's cat is super cute!"

"You think so? He's shameless, he hits the floor with his tail when you call out his name, and when he guzzles water during the night, he totally looks like a demon. Oh, and when you get home he sniffs around your smelly legs and breathes in and out."

Er, actually, a person who isn't attached to those felines would get that sort of impression. But that part of them could also be seen as cute.

Totsuka seemed to be a cat lover, so he reacted huffily to the bad parts about cats I just said. "Huuuuh? But it's cute! Yeah. I wanna pet him again... can I come to your house sometime?"

"Y-yeah... w-when my parents aren't around."

"Ohh, why the imposition?"

Zaimokuza, that really goes without saying.

As Totsuka and I were flirting, I could see Yukinoshita squirming bashfully out of the corner of my eye. "H-Hikigaya-kun... I, that is, I'd also-"

"Huh?" I asked her back, not really hearing what she had said.

But Yukinoshita shrugged off the question. "I-it's nothing at all. More importantly, the cake has been cut, so let's eat."

"Ah. You're right. Komachi, pass me a fork."

"kaaaay."

As I took a fork from Komachi, I could've sworn I heard a quiet, muttering voice.

"...cat."

Track 10

Yuigahama crammed the cake in her mouth and let out a deep sigh of appreciation.

“Mmm, Yukinon’s homemade cake is delicious!”

“Really? I’m glad you’re happy with it.”

“It really is delicious!” Komachi insisted. “Yukino-san, you can afford to get married! Right, onii-cha-” Right then, a loud sound roared next door. “Yikes!”

“Not again...” A bit fed up now, I gazed sharply up at the ceiling. “They’re kind of loud next door.”

But Totsuka shrugged with a strained smile. “Yeah, they are. But karaoke is noisy no matter what you do... ah, does this have peach in it?”

“Yes. The good ones have started appearing on the market,” Yukinoshita replied.

Actually, the fresh peaches were a top class flavouring used lavishly in Yukinoshita’s cake. As Zaimokuza gobbled down that delicious cake with relish, he launched into a slow rant.

“Hachiman, the peach was once treasured in Ancient China as a secret medicine for perpetual youth. It is a truly auspicious food, you know?”

“Ohhh, cool story, but why are you only saying that to me? Ah, but I totally understand your feelings.”

“Anyway, Yukino-san’s cooking is amazing,” Komachi said, visibly impressed.

Yukinoshita responded with neither self-importance nor modesty, but with total coolness. “Not to that extent. After all, Komachi-san, you do the cooking at your house, I believe?”

"Yeppppp, both our parents work so I do the cooking. Ah, but when we were little my brother did it."

At that, Yuigahama jumped in exaggerated surprise. "Huuuh?! Hikki did?!"

"Yeah," I said. "It was too dangerous for her to use sharp tools and the fire until the end of elementary school. That's why I can boast the most distinguished cooking skills among sixth graders in the country."

"What a questionable thing to be proud over..." Yukinoshita said uneasily in reaction.

It wasn't questionable - it was a reputable achievement.

"Come to think of it, if I'm at a sixth grader's level I can do pretty much all the housework. I'm ready to become a house husband any time! I will *not* work! To work is to lose!" I declared loudly.

Yukinoshita pressed her hand against her forehead gingerly as if all this was giving her a headache. "Yet again you mouth off with your rotten eyes..."

"I see, Hikki can cook as well. I've gotta learn how to do it too..." Then she started muttering something. "I still haven't given him the cookies..."

"Ah, the subject of cooking reminded me." Yukinoshita pulled something out of her schoolbag with a rustling sound and handed it over to Yuigahama. "Here, Yuigahama-san."

"Eh? W-what's this?"

"It's your birthday present. I don't know if it matches your interests, but..."

"Ah," I said, "that thing you searched relentlessly for by reading the type of dumbass magazine you don't understand and would normally never touch," I said.

Yukinoshita glared at me sharply. Scary. "Spare me the unnecessary words."

"Yukinon... you got this for me... thank you. Can I open it?"

“Oh, yes... go ahead at your leisure.”

Flashing the slightly embarrassed Yukinoshita an overtly brightly smile, Yuigahama undid the wrapping.

“An apron... uh, um, thank you! I appreciate it so much!”

Gazing at Yuigahama’s sincerely happy expression, Yukinoshita’s face cleared with relief. “I’d be happier if you used it rather than hung it up somewhere to show your appreciation.”

“Okay! I’ll appreciate it by using it.”

“Okay, my turn.” As he watched the exchange between the two girls, Totsuka searched his schoolbag. “Here. Yuigahama-san, you always tie up your hair, right? So here’s a hair clip.”

“Sai-chan, thank you! And whoa, this is really cute. You’re more into girly stuff than me...”

“Now then, here’s mine.” Komachi, who seemed to have waited precisely for this moment, took out a neatly wrapped present from her schoolbag. “Here, it’s a photo stand.”

“Thank you too, Komachi-chan!”

“Honestly, I wanted to put a photo inside it too, but all the photos we’ve got have a guy with rotten eyes... maybe he’s not very photogenic?”

“Ahh, so his eyes are rotten even in the photos... wait, I really don’t want his photo!”

So Yuigahama said, but she really did look happy.

As the chain went around, Zaimokuza, who had been watching in silence, suddenly scratched his head. “Hmph. This won’t do. Since this was sudden for me, I have not made any preparations.”

Well, it was out of the blue. In fact, it would be creepy if he had prepared something. As if she thought the same way, Yuigahama smiled lightly and offered him warm words.

“You really don’t have to worry about it?”

“And thus! You may sign my freshly written manuscript.”

“You really don’t have to worry about it...”

She uttered the exact same words, but the chilliness was at absolute zero.

“Oof, what is this rejection, urrk. In that case, I’ll give you *My Choice: 100 Anime Songs CD-R*.”

As soon as I heard that, I grasped Zaimokuza’s shoulders without thinking and drew him to a halt. “Stop it, Zaimokuza. Just stop it.”

“Ohh, w-why? It is not like you to stop me with such a tearful expression.”

Zaimokuza looked over his shoulders at me with utter non-comprehension drawn across his face.

“It can’t be helped. I’ll tell you... this story comes from a friend of a friend...”

“S-somehow, I feel like I’ve heard this before...” Yuigahama looked disturbed.

In spite of that, I began the tale.

“Back in middle school, there was a girl he liked. She was a cute, music-loving girl who belonged to the wind instrument club. On that girl’s birthday, my friend summoned his courage and gave her a present. For that music-loving girl, he stayed up all night compiling a bunch of anime songs to recommend. He paid careful attention to the song selection. They were not too otaku-ish, and he even had the foresight to slip in love songs from the ranking chart at the time.”

“Hmm, he had an admirable spirit.”

“I can see a twist coming, though...”

Zaimokuza and Yukinoshita both said something, but the real heart of the story was yet to come.

“His present was accepted, and my friend almost cried with joy. But tragedy occurred the next day. At lunch time, there issued from the school’s PA system the stylish song intro the broadcast committee chose: ‘Aaaand the next song was requested by Class 2C’s Otagaya Hachiman-kun (snicker), a love song (snicker) for Yamashita-san!’”

“That’s enough! Stop it now, Hachimaaaaan!”

“Waaah!”

Zaimokuza caught me swiftly in his arms. As I stayed in his embrace, the tears flowed out of me. Yuigahama averted her eyes to avoid getting a square look at that scene.

“So it *was* Hikki’s story after all...”

“You fool! It’s not my story at all! It’s Otagaya-kun’s story!”

Not a single person believed my objection against Yuigahama, and even Yukinoshita’s expression had gone well past sympathy and become something very much like dismay.

“I overestimated you, Hikigaya-kun... you’re even more pitiful than I imagined...”

“The Otagaya-kun name was passed down after my brother graduated,” Komachi said. “It was tough on me pretending he was someone else...”

“Hachiman, you became a legend...” Totsuka said.

Mixed with my quiet sobbing, the sound of everyone’s gentle voices was too excruciating for words.

Track 11

“Aaaaanyway, thank you so much, everyone! This might be the happiest birthday of my life so far,” Yuigahama said as she looked at her mountain of presents.

Yukinoshita shrugged. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Not at all! I really am happy. Up till now I was happy that my mum and dad would hold my birthday for me, but... this year really is special... Yukinon, thank you.”

“...I-I only did what anyone would do.” Yukinoshita looked the other way.

As usual, Yuigahama beamed at her. Indeed, it might be a good birthday.

“But you know, Yuigahama, you sure get along with your folks. Last year, I got handed a thousand yen for my birthday and that was it. And that included the cake.”

“Hmph, mine was around the same. Instead of cash, they bought me KFC.”

“Huh... r-really? My family would prepare a cake and there’d be a present under my pillow the next morning...”

“Somehow, that’s mixing it up with another event.”

But I understood all too well the feeling of wanting to prepare the best birthday for Totsuka’s sake. Good job, Totsuka’s mother and father.

Our family, on the other hand... just as I was thinking about that, Komachi spoke up.

“Come to think of it, onii-chan, aren’t you the only one who’s treated like that? For my birthday, we go out to buy presents together, eat out and buy a cake on the way home.”

“Perhaps Hikigaya-kun is merely unloved...” said Yukinoshita.

"Hey, you! Don't talk crap! I'm totally loved! If they don't, I plan to have them take care of me for twenty more years, so they'll be in trouble!"

"What a bad son..." Yuigahama said with real distaste. It kind of hurt.

Following that, Komachi grimaced. "Well, our parents *are* generally half-assed..."

"My parents are so half-assed I admire them somewhat."

"As one should..." Yukinoshita insisted quite seriously, but she really didn't get it.

"Why, I was born on the eighth of August, so they called me Hachiman¹."

"They really are half-assed!"

I know, right? I thought the same way. But as far as Yukinoshita was concerned, that did not appear to be the case. "But isn't that how naming works? That was how mine was. It was only because snow was falling when I was born²."

Oh hey, there *were* other people like me. That was what I thought, but since it felt like the name Yukino went with Yukinoshita very well, I shut up and said nothing. While I stayed silent, Komachi seemed to be getting the same impression I was.

"But Yukino's a pretty name, you know?"

"Thank you. I also do not dislike it. In fact, I'm fond of it. I also think Komachi is a splendid name that suits you very much."

"Y-Yukino-san..."

"Oi, cut it out, Yukinoshita, don't seduce people's sisters. Maria-sama is watching.³"

¹ Hachiman's name has the character for eight in it.

² Yukino's name has the character for snow in it.

³ A reference to *Maria-sama ga Miteru* (lit. *The Virgin Mary Watches Over You*), a light-hearted yuri series about Catholic schoolgirls who refer to each other as sisters.

It was the kind of atmosphere where white lilies were blooming in the background, but only behind them. The one who ruined the mood was, of course, His Lordship Zaimokuza.

“Ahem. So your parents decided your names, everyone.”

“What, you were different?” I asked.

Zaimokuza pitched over suddenly, almost toppling over. “My name was passed down from the distant past. To think it could be given to my parents who named me, I see, it must be fate...”

“Riiight.”

Like anyone gave a shit.

“Hmph. Incidentally, ‘fate’ ought to be read as ‘grandpa’.”

“Then you should’ve said so from the start...”

Just as I was thinking it was all so pointless I could die, Totsuka chimed in with information that was not pointless in the least. You could say it was the one top secret.

“Ahahaha, then my name might be the most normal. They just named me that so my life could add colour to others⁴.

“Ah, your name expresses your character. Totsuka, you’ve really brought colour to *my* high school life.”

“Geez, don’t be such a tease! I’ll get mad, y’know?”

I wanted him to get mad at me...

As I went from a determined face to a totally blissful smile, Totsuka seemed to think of something. “Ah. Hey hey, Yuigahama-san,” he spoke up. “Why’s your name Yui?”

⁴ Saika’s name has the character for colour in it.

“Huh? Me?” She thought about it. “Errrrr, I never really asked...”

“It’s your birthday and all, so why not ask when you get home?” suggested Yukinoshita. “Since your parents appear to love you very much, I’m sure you’ll hear a wonderful story. If you’d like, you may tell it to me as well.”

“Yukinon...”

“Oooooi, Yukinoshita. This time Buddha’s watching too!”

This time I could see a halo of enlightenment behind her. That was really not very romantic.

“Hey, Hikki and Yukinon and Sai-chan and Chunni all have meanings to their names... ah.” Yuigahama seemed to think of something.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Yuigahama lowered her head, looking ever so slightly depressed. “N-nothing... I just realised that I-I’m the only one without a nickname and stuff.”

“Nah, you only just made up that nickname, you know? I am not happy with that nickname *at all*.”

“I also rejected it in the beginning but gave up eventually when nothing improved...” Yukinoshita said.

Zaimokuza let out a snort. “Being called Chuuni hurts just a tad...”

The rejections came one after another. But Yuigahama looked unconvinced.

“Huh? Why? I thought they were good nicknames...”

“Ah, I-I don’t really mind?” Totsuka interjected. “Plus, I think Hikki is a cute name as well.”

“I know, right?” Yuigahama cheered up.

“Well, compared to what came before, it’s not so bad, I guess...”

“So by ‘what came before’, you mean to say you’ve had nicknames until now?” Yukinoshita asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. ‘Introducing the Best Three Annoying Nicknames My Classmates Gave Me Corner.’”

“Wow, a really depressing corner just started...” Yuigahama displayed slight bafflement.

But Komachi came in with high spirits. “This is the assistant, Komachi. Now to present the three selections!”

Riding Komachi’s announcement, I presented the order.

“Number three.”

“Dudum!” After Zaimokuza produced a drumroll effect, I let the moment hang.

Then I said, “The brother of that seventh grader Hikigaya-san.”

At that moment, Yukinoshita made a slightly sad face. “It’s fitting to be called that by your classmates... they completely denied your existence...”

“It’s not my brother’s fault!” Komachi insisted. “I kind of stand out, so it was a tragedy of circumstance!”

As I fought to control my tears, I presented the next item. “Number two.”

“Dudum!”

After Zaimokuza’s drumroll effect rang out, everything went quiet.

“That guy.”

“Hmph, I have memories of this too. They wanted to say ‘this guy’ or ‘that guy’ or whatever. Well, it would be awe-inspiring to call out a great name like my own directly, so it can’t be helped!” Zaimokuza launched into his commentary without any provocation.

Of course, Komachi went on with the actual presentation.

“Now then, for the shocking number one place!”

“N-number one...” I announced the number.

“Dudum!” Then came the drumroll.

“Guh...”

Everyone held their breath and waited for me to continue.

“I-I don’t wanna say it...”

I really didn’t want to say it anymore. My eyes started watering inadvertently.

When that happened, Totsuka started patting my back gently.

“So it was that mean... H-Hachiman, no need to force yourself, okay?”

“Thank you, Totsuka...”

As I was choked with tears, Yuigahama pummeled me mercilessly with words.

“You didn’t have to do it to begin with if you’re gonna bring out your own trauma...”

“Shuddup! Since you have such a weird appreciation for nicknames, I decided to burst your bubble!”

“Hikigaya-kun, I do believe you are a special case...”

So Yukinoshita said, but I do think everyone experiences this kind of thing to a degree. Those damned nicknames are honestly good for nothing. Whether or not she knew my feelings, Komachi laid out a new suggestion.

“Ah, then let’s try this. Let’s all give Yui-san a wonderful name.”

“Komachi-chan, you’re such a nice girl! Great, so from now on, Komachi-chan is Macchi.”

“Yeek, Yui-san, your naming sense sucks!”

“Huh, no way... I thought I was good at it.” Yuigahama recoiled in mild shock.

Right next to her, Totsuka began to think hard. “Hmmm, a nickname, huh... how about Yuitch?”

“The ‘tch’ in Yuitch is the ‘tch’ in bitch, right? Good call, Totsuka. Then I may as well call her bitch.”

“I told you not to call me a bitch! Rejected!”

“Hmmm, I wonder if my Komachi points would go up if I called you Yui onee-chan?”

“That! That’s overstepping it! It’s embarrassing so - rejected!”

“Oho... ‘The Black White Tiger of Chiba’.”

“Uh, the two names in that nickname don’t match... and hey, pick clearly between black or white.”

“Needless to say, rejected!”

Totsuka’s (er, my) suggestion was rejected, followed by Komachi’s and Zaimokuza’s in turn. Then, having waited for the opportune moment, Yukinoshita made her entrance.

“Then... how about Yuinon?”

“Huh? It doesn’t sound right...”

Having been summarily rejected, Yukinoshita’s shoulders sagged.

“You’re one to talk, considering how blind you are to your poor naming sense... if you’re going to mouth off so much, you may as well pick it yourself,” she told Yuigahama.

Yuigahama thought about it for a moment. “It’s painful to think of your own nickname...”

“You might not realise this, but you’re in plenty of pain already...” Yukinoshita said.

"Shuddup! And hey, I'm not in pain at all - I'm totally normal," Yuigahama insisted.

In response, Yukinoshita nodded eagerly. "Indeed, you're very normal - commonplace, even."

"Did you just say something kind of hurtful?!"

"Yukinoshita's praising you for once," I said.

"That's Yukinon's way of praising people?!"

"Not calling you trash or dirt is high praise by Yukinoshita's standards," I said.

"Now hurry up and think of a nickname already."

"Hmmm, it's hard when I've been put on the spot... ah." Yuigahama looked as if she had just hit upon a good idea.

Totsuka turned an expectant eye towards her. "You thought of something?"

"Yep." Yuigahama paused. "I'm Yuigahama Yui, so... Y-Yuiyui, I guess."

"Pfffft!" I snorted without thinking.

Oi, was she for real? That was supremely embarrassing.

"H-heeeey! Why're you laughing?!" Yuigahama flared up, but Yukinoshita only regarded her with concern.

"Is thinking of such an embarrassing nickname for yourself the height of masochism? If you have problems, you should seek help..."

"You're worrying about me with a straight face?!"

On the other hand, Totsuka and Komachi seemed cool with it.

"I think it's nice," said Totsuka. "Isn't it cute?"

"Indeed it is," said Komachi. "It fits Yui-san."

Upon being told that, Yuigahama's confidence returned to her. "I-I know, right? I'm not in pain at all!"

"Ahh, it sounds like a plea for help when you say it yourself."

"She just turned her eyes away with a strained smile!" Yuigahama clutched her head in agony, but inadvertently, reinforcements arrived.

"Hmph, however, one can get used to it while you're saying it. When I first assumed the name of the Master Fencer General, it felt out of place, but three days later, the conviction that nothing had changed was born in me."

"Chuuni, you said something neat! But don't lump me with you!"

"Uuuuurk!"

After sinking the lifeboat Zaimokuza ought to have represented, Yuigahama turned to Yukinoshita.

"Anyway, Yukinon, would you try calling me that?"

"Absolutely not."

"Uwaaah. That was a quick response from Yukino-san..." Yukinoshita's refusal was so prompt it made Komachi wince.

"Ohhhhhh." With evident chagrin, Yuigahama turned her full attention to me.

"Th-then, Hikki... w-would you try calling me that...?"

"H-huuuh? I don't wanna call out such a fancy and fairytale-ish name..."

And seriously, it was just too embarrassing. As I was hesitating, Yuigahama's gaze met mine for one brief moment before she quickly looked away.

"...okay, then. Just Yui is fine."

As if she thought her nickname was embarrassing too, she gripped the hem of her skirt tightly with her fingertips and averted her gaze with a faintly red face.

Zaimokuza snorted. "You seem to be destroying the definition of nickname."

“Chuuni-san, that’s a good thing right now, so please shut the hell up,” said Komachi.

“Y-yes’m.”

Then, for a slight moment, the air was still. A tranquil silence fell over the surroundings.

“Hey, Hikki...”

Slowly, Yuigahama raised her watery eyes and looked at me with an earnest gaze.

“Yu... Yu... argh, if it’s nicknames we’re talking, why not just call yourself something dumb like Gahama-san and be done with it?”

“You don’t plan to call me Yui even though you had the guts?!” Yuigahama was taken aback.

“My onii-chan’s good for nothing...” Komachi muttered, making fun of me slightly.

Er, I mean, it’s embarrassing, after all...

Anyway, without any nicknames being decided, our leader Yukinoshita summarised the proceedings.

“In any case... it’s fine to call Yuigahama-san by her first name?”

“That’s enough already...”

Track 12

Totsuka gripped his drink with both hands and made a sucking sound through his straw. “Ah, my drink’s all gone.”

“Hm, okay, I’ll bring one over.”

Gingerly, I took the glass from Totsuka and stood up, holding my own glass while I was at it. Having guessed my intentions, Totsuka smiled brightly and told me his order. “Thanks. Then I’ll have a coffee.”

“Roger that. Anyone else?” I asked, looking around.

Yukinoshita raised her cup quickly. “Hikigaya-kun, I’ll have grey tea.”

“Right.”

“Then I’ll have cola,” Komachi said.

“kay. What about you, Gahama-san?” I went on to ask Gahama-san, but she turned her nose up at me and refused to answer.

“...tsuuuuuuuun.”

“Gahama-san?”

“Urk! ...hmpf!”

Even though I tried asking her again, Gahama-san turned to me with anger on her face for a split moment, and then immediately turned away, leaving me scratching my head in slight concern. There was nothing for it. I would have to call her by *that* name.

“Ahhh... you wanna drink something? Yuiyui.”

“Ah, sorry, I’ll do without the nickname after all...” Yuiyui said as she clapped her hands together.

“Don’t be shy. Drink something, Yuiyui.”

“Stop it, I said! I’ll have the same thing as Komachi!”

“Aye aye, one cola coming up, Yui.”

“Quit it! ...huh?” Yuigahama blinked rapidly a couple of times, a dumbfounded look on her face.

Well, um, how do you say it? I’d slipped up with her name just now.

Next was Zaimokuza.

“Zaimokuza, you drinking something? Curry?”

“Are you treating me as a fat character, you lout...? I will have the Ultra Divine Water¹.”

“Cider then. Got it.”

“He actually understood that...” Komachi muttered. “Onii-chan sure gets along with Chuuni-san...”

After I took everyone’s orders, I opened the door and left the room.

¹ The Ultra Divine Water is magic water from *Dragon Ball* that will increase the drinker’s strength if they can survive its poisonous effects.

Track 13

“Uhhhh, coffee, grey tea, cola and... was it curry again?”

As I prepared each drink one-by-one at the drink bar, I heard loud noises and singing. Seemed like it was coming from the room next to us, for some reason.

“Ohh, they’re fired up next door. But, well, it’s not good if they make such a racket and hit the ceiling... might be a good idea to caution them a bit...”

There was no way I could have known at the time that I would regret my whimsical action. If I had never seen that horrifying sight, I’m sure I might have been able to go home with happiness in my heart. To think I would lay eyes on such a tragedy...

I went all the way up to the front of the room next door and knocked lightly. But it seemed the sound of my knocking was being drowned out by the music.

“Hmm? They can’t hear it? Meh, guess I’ll take a look.”

I turned the doorknob discretely and peered through the slight gap.

“Ahhh, is that Hiratsuka-sensei? She’s all alone, but there’s no mistaking that’s her.”

Hiratsuka-sensei was more or less always on her own, so there was no mistaking it was her.

Even as Hiratsuka-sensei gripped the microphone, she was staring vacantly at the screen and looking rather drained of energy.

She sighed. “Love songs are just frauds and deceptions and lies... I don’t feel like singing one... and the people next door seem to be having a wedding, making all that cheerful-sounding noise... riajuu, you should just explode...”

As soon as that voice reached me, I slammed the door shut. But I wasn’t able to shut away the sobbing voice, slipping through the cracks.

I couldn't help but sob myself. "H-Hiratsuka-sensei... someone, please take her already... oh crap, she's coming this way."

Since Hiratsuka-sensei had guessed that the door had open and shut, I hurried away from the door and ran towards the drink corner with a nonchalant look.

Hiratsuka-sensei was walking that way with a tired expression. "I'm so thirsty..." she sighed. "Oh? Hikigaya. I'm surprised to see you here."

"L-long day, huh. S-sensei, why are *you* here...?" I asked.

For a moment, Hiratsuka-sensei was dismayed, but soon enough she was back to her ordinary self. "Me, huh. I, uh... w-well, it's a way of letting out stress. You, though... oh, right. Yuigahama's birthday party, huh? Having fun there?"

"Well, I guess," I answered.

All of a sudden, Hiratsuka-sensei broke out into a gentle smile. "I see," she said after a pause. "Ah, sorry, let me take a puff."

With that offhand apology, she pulled out a cigarette from her breast pocket and lit it up. The smoke she puffed out wandered through the air.

"You've changed a bit these days. The old you would never have gone to something like a birthday party. I am proud as your teacher to be the one that started it and to see the signs of your growth."

"Sensei..."

"Well, even though I say that, Hikigaya, it's you we're talking about. At any rate, you're probably feeling this everyday life is a fraud and thinking of it as fake. That's fine for now. The depth of your doubt is proof that you're continuing to think hard. I like that part about you. No need to rush. One day, the answer will come to you."

This person had really been watching me. She neither affirmed nor denied the current me, but saw me for who I was. Thinking of that, I felt my heart warm up just a little bit.

“...sensei. Since you’re here, why not announce yourself?”

“Hm? I’m happy at your invitation, but...” She started mumbling. “I told Yuigahama I had a party just before... if she by any chance found out I was driven out of a wedding party...” She cleared her throat. “Ah, I’ll have to refuse. It won’t be good if I be myself and get in the way.”

“You won’t be getting in the way. Our ages are so different we won’t know the songs, so even if you sing them it’ll just be killing time!”

I’d been showing my concern, but for some reason Hiratsuka-sensei slowly clenched her fists.

“Hikigaya, shut up and bite the bullet. Shocking First Bulleeeeeeeeet!”

Track 14

“So anyway, there’s a drink bar here too. I thought for sure it was only in family restaurants.”

“Nah, I think there’s something like a drink bar in pretty much every karaoke place.”

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were talking. Komachi’s voice drifted over to them.

“But come to think of it, why do they have it at karaoke? If it’s all-you-can-drink, then why the family restaurant as well...?”

“Isn’t it because these are private rooms?” Totsuka answered.

“Oh, I seeeee,” said Komachi, accepting the response. “But since we’ve come all the way here, I wanna sing.”

Komachi’s voice rang out like an invitation. Sensing that, Yuigahama got right on board. “I know, right! Aha, I kinda felt like people didn’t want to sing today, so I went along with it without thinking!”

“As usual, Yuigahama-san, you lead a very tiring life... there’s no need to hold back,” said Yukinoshita. “Moreover, today is your birthday. You’re allowed to indulge just a little.”

“Yukinon... ah, w-well then.”

That was the conversation I heard when I came to the door. I knocked on it lightly.

“Ooooooi, open the door for me!”

“Onii-chan, you came back,” said Komachi.

“Hachiman, I’ll open it right now.” Totsuka paced over to the door and opened it.

“Thank you, Totsuka.”

A slight twinge of sadness must have coloured my voice, because Totsuka looked up at my face with concern. “H-Hachiman? Is something wrong? Did something sad happen?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. Nothing happened. Nothing sad happened at all...”

Right, nothing happened. There *was* no sad female teacher, still single... I attacked that memory and erased it. If I didn’t do that, I would be ever so slightly sad myself.

When I put down the tray full of glasses, Zaimokuza responded with exaggerated fury. “Hachiman! You sure took your time! Do not leave me alone! I started playing a cell phone game without thinking!”

“Quiet, you. No one’s better at working than a loner at these times, so you are free from pitying glances!”

“Wow, what a yucky skill to level up.” Komachi was showering me with admiration - except not for the reasons I intended.

As if my reasoning had killed his spirit as well, Zaimokuza groaned for a while, and when he was done with that, he slapped his knee. “Next time you go get drinks, it’s fine to invite me too! I allow you!”

“What kinda tsundere is that? Here, Yukinoshita, your tea.”

I passed over the cup to Yukinoshita, who took it speedily. “Thank you,” she said, before facing Yuigahama. “Now then, Yuigahama-san, what were you going to say?”

“Oh, right. Yukinon, will you sing with me? It’s embarrassing to do it alone.”

“Absolutely not.”

Once again, the answer was prompt.

“Huuuuuh?! Didn’t you say I could ask you anything just before?!”

“I did not say anything of the sort...”

“See here, Yuigahama. Yukinoshita has no confidence in her singing. Get a clue.”

“Is that so?” Yuigahama asked blankly, to which Yukinoshita threw out her chest and folded her arms with a self-assured manner.

“Hmph, I’m troubled that you underrate me so. The violin, piano, Electone... I’m inclined towards all kinds of music.”

“Piano and Electone are both played the same way¹...”

Whatever the case, she seemed to be saying she was accomplished in the musical arts.

“I have no disinclination towards singing in itself. But I am uncertain whether I have the physical strength to sing more than one song.”

“Your lack of stamina is hardcore...” How was she even alive?

Yuigahama pulled on Yukinoshita’s sleeve insistently. “Yukinon, Yukinon, if we sing together, it takes half the energy, right?”

“What kind of equation is that, I wonder...? Whatever, if you insist, I will accompany you for just one song.”

“Yay!” Yuigahama was in high spirits upon receiving Yukinoshita’s affirmation.

Meanwhile, Komachi pulled the remote control towards herself. “Then I’ll sing after those two, I guess. Totsuka-san, what about you?”

As the two of them stared at the remote control, Totsuka pointed tentatively.

“Mmm, I want to sing this...”

“That has girl vocals, you know?”

“Ah, I see... I wonder if I can hit the notes...” Totsuka seemed a little forlorn.

¹ Electone is the trademark for electronic organs used by Yamaha, a Japanese brand of musical instruments.

"No, I wouldn't be worried about that at all... if you're uneasy, I'll help you out, y'know?"

At Komachi's words, Totsuka brightened up with a smile. "Really? Thank you. It'd be kinda embarrassing if I did it alone..."

"Ooooh, th-this is... because I know onii-chan would lose his mind over it..."

Right, right. So she did understand, huh. Also, I wasn't really losing my mind or anything.

"Hmph, looks like it has come down to the two of us again." For some reason, Zaimokuza closed the distance between us.

"Huh? Oi oi, hold on just a sec. Isn't this weird? Isn't it supposed to be one-boy, one-girl? Wait, who decided I'm pairing with *you*!?" I said, although he didn't listen to me one bit.

"Heh, it seems my anime song folder is erupting. Now then, which one of these late 90s songs shall we start our attack with?"

"Hey, while I might like that era too, I don't wanna sing with you!"

"Oi oi, you'll put me in trouble if you say that *now*. I, for one, do not want to sing alone in this situation! If I sing, the mood will turn sour."

"Speaking from personal experience, huh... in that case, give it up. Just sit quietly by the edge and just tap to the rhythm with your knees..."

"Nay, that's the limit! I'll sing! When I'm singing, we'll need the best Ultra Orange stick."

"Who the hell cares about the colour of the glow stick²?!"

Not to mention it was patently obvious that we didn't have a choice in Ultra Orange sticks when we were the biggest downers.

² Japanese audiences frequently wave glow sticks at the concerts of popular idols.

As all of this was going on, the other pairs were steadily making progress with their preparations.

“Ah, then Yukinon and I will sing this.”

“You know, I don’t know that song well, so could I listen to it for a bit?”

As if Yukinoshita’s words failed to reach her, Yuigahama wasted no time inputting the song.

“Er... where’s the transmit button...?”

“It’s here, it’s here.”

Right after that, there was an electronic pinging noise.

“Ah, ahhhhh ahhhhh, the dividing driver! Hmph, the state of my throat seems fine...”

“W-wait just a minute, please! With Totsuka - at least let me sing with Totsuka!”

As Zaimokuza was seriously practicing his throat exercises (“GAGAGA!”), a robotic and inflectionless mechanical voice rang out.

“Your performance will begin shortly.”

Hearing that, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh. “Geez.”

“Yukinon, c’mom, c’mom! It’s starting!”

“Yuigahama-san, pass the mic.”

“You’re surprisingly fired up!”

-
I’d struggled in belonging at a birthday party, I relived my trauma about the nicknames I’d been called, and I sang a duet with a boy when we did karaoke... my teen romcom... is wrong as I expected...

Track 15

When the automated doors opened, Yuigahama stretched as she walked outside.

“Mmm! I sang my fill! It’s been so long since I last had fun at karaoke. We should come again, Yukinon!”

“If I go with you, you’ll make me song any number of songs, so I’m not inclined... to think you made me sing five songs back there...” Yukinoshita said wearily as she followed Yuigahama out.

Yuigahama responded by raising her voice. “Huuuuh?! But you were so *good*, so let’s go again!” she entreated.

“Ah, me too, me too,” said Komachi. “I want to go too.”

Then Komachi flew into step with Yukinoshita. Sandwiched between two people, Yukinoshita’s cheeks reddened slightly.

“...well, I suppose it’s all right once in a while.”

“Yep, thank you. That counts for today as well,” said Yuigahama. “I was happy that so many different people celebrated with me...”

“I am not the one you should thank. He was the one who gathered people.”

“Y-you’re right... H-Hikki, um.”

As I was walking outside to follow the girls, Yuigahama span around to face me.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Um, thanks for tod- huh?” Yuigahama was in the middle of saying something, but then she turned her gaze behind me dubiously. When I looked behind me in turn, it was at the exact moment the automated doors opened and the figure of a person appeared.

At the same time the mechanical noise sounded, a single woman walked out.

"I spent so much time alone again," she said, sighing. "Well, I'll be alone even if I go home... heh."

As she looked at the woman who was laughing at herself derisively, Yuigahama raised her voice in a puzzled manner. "Hiratsuka-sensei? Weren't you at a party?"

"Y-Yuigahama?! Y-you guys are still here?!" Caught in a frenzy, Hiratsuka looked at each of us in turn.

Having figured out what she meant by the word party, I spoke up without thinking. "By party, did you mean a wedding party by any cha-"

"...did it not work out?" Yukinoshita said with sympathy laced in her tone.

Yuigahama spoke to Hiratsuka-sensei comfortingly. "S-sensei? Look, uhhhh. Getting married isn't everything! You have your job, and you're strong so I'm sure you can take care of yourself. So please cheer up!"

But the moment she heard that, Hiratsuka-sensei's eyes started blurring with tears.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah... I got told that a long time ago..." she muttered something that sounded very sad to me.

And then all of a sudden, Hiratsuka-sensei dashed off into the distance.

"Ah, she ran off."

Hiratsuka-sensei's voice rang out throughout the night sky, perhaps because of the Doppler Effect.

"Waaah... I wanna get married..."

(Bonus Track "*Birthday Song for You*" End.)

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