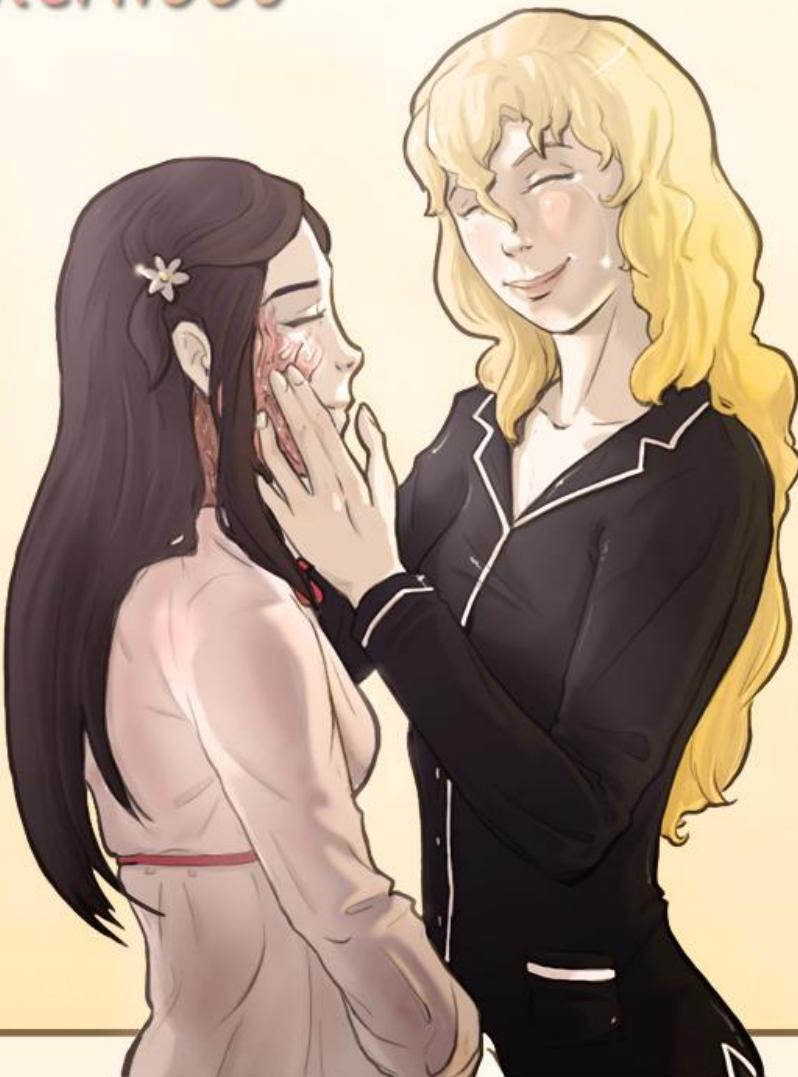


Sisterhood



By: Guest Poster

Kindle/epub conversion by: Qwcan

Chapter 1 (Lilly)

01

It has been a little over a week since Akira and I arrived at our parents' home, and although the official reason for coming over was seeing (or perhaps seeing off, though her situation miraculously stabilized shortly before our arrival) Mother's ailing sister, our whole time here has felt more like a vacation. I have spent most of our time here sitting in the backyard reading the books I brought along and occasionally chatting with Akira.

After finishing the remainders of breakfast that were left in the kitchen for me (Mother and Father appear to be early risers; I wonder what side of the family I take after), I navigate my way to the yard hoping for an opportunity to catch a few rays. As I step outside, I'm greeted by the familiar sound of a sharp snap followed by the short hiss of a beer can being opened. I turn my head towards the source of the sound and do my best to appear as disapproving as I can.

"Akira, do you really think it's a wise idea to be drinking this early? How can you think of drinking alcohol before we've even had lunch?"

"Hey, unlike you I've been up and about for four hours already. Besides, I have a reason to celebrate. Check out what I got this morning."

As I hold out my hand, my sister passes me a rectangular piece of paper that has a familiar size. I remember having held a similar piece not too long ago.

"A plane ticket! So you have finished making arrangements for our trip back to Japan?"

"Not just that. I managed to convince the old man to let us fly business class! We'll be travelling back in STYLE, BABY!!!"

I wince a little at my sister's overly enthusiastic announcement, but manage to compose myself and smile.

"Fitting accommodations for your new position in the legal affairs department at head office, are they not?"

The playful retort I was expecting doesn't come. Uncomfortable silences aren't exactly common around Akira. Did I misjudge her yesterday evening?

"Why don't we have a little walk, Sis? A little stroll by the bay shore'll do you good."

02

The area near the bay shore where we're taking a break is pleasant to be sure, but the atmosphere remains somewhat heavy. As I am still determining the best way to bring up the obvious subject, my sister turns to me.

"Be honest, Lils. You think my decision was made a little too hastily, don't ya? It's written all over your face."

I sigh. I didn't really think it was my place to tell Akira what to do with her life, especially not after she sacrificed the latter part of her youth to look after me. But when Father told her that a position had opened up at the corporate headquarters here in Inverness, she accepted the job in seconds. And within a week, she'll be back in Japan breaking up a relationship that she seemed happy with before.

"I don't think I can deny you've made your choice extremely quickly. For how long have you been dating..."

"I've been making quick decisions since I started working, Sis. I went with my gut instinct there, but I've been sleeping on it and I think I managed to work out why my gut told me to do what I did."

I hear a whoosh from my sister's direction, followed by several short splashes in the distance.

Is she skipping rocks?

"You know, there's a part of this whole deal that I don't like...at all. But I've made a clear choice on what to do with my life years ago and this seems like the best road to take."

I nod silently. She may not seem like it at first impression, but Akira's pretty ambitious. And there are still several rungs of the corporate ladder left that she wants to climb.

"This might seem a tad weird to you, but in a way I'm securing my future stability. You can't get any higher than head office. So if I find someone else and settle down here, future promotions ain't gonna force me to move anymore. I can get where I wanna go and secure my financial future right here." She chuckles shortly. "Better to get this step behind me before my good looks start fading."

"Not everybody makes a big deal out of looks."

We both get a good laugh out of that. I suddenly feel how she takes my hand and pushes a small flat rock into it before turning me around.

"Here, give it a try."

Splash

"Anyway, if I ever have any kids of my own, this will at least mean I can work my way to the top without having to leave them behind in another country. And they definitely seem more open to part-time employment than the management in Japan. Must be a cultural thing."

Akira suddenly sounds very bitter. I cringe a bit at her sudden change of tone. I've never really felt comfortable when she vented about our parents, but I've never denied her a chance to do so, even though my own feelings are more nuanced.

"Of course, the old man didn't exactly hide the fact he pulled some strings to help me get this job, so I think we both know what'll be expected of me in return for taking it."

"Wh-what would that be?"

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"I'll be expected to stop giving him a hard time about leaving us to fend for ourselves. He'll have paid me back, so all's fine and dandy again. Like every person has his price."

I want to deny it, but I too have the impression Mother and Father are trying to make up for their sudden migration six years ago. A migration that Akira always interpreted as an escape. An escape from us...from me.

Splash - splash - splash

"W-wouldn't it be good to have them try and make amends, even if it's a little late? We're still a family after all."

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"It might have been good if I had been in a position to accept or decline."

"Aren't you?"

"Whaddayathink? Word of my recommendation already spread around. You really think my job won't hit a dead end if I decline? You think anyone at home would give a promotion opportunity to someone who declined a recommendation from head office? I was extremely lucky to get as far as I already got, but I only have to push things once and it'll be over. Me declining the offer I got would be just the excuse they'd need."

SPLOOSH

That was probably more than just a pebble she just threw.

"I could start at the bottom rung of the ladder at another company, but chances are pretty high I'd get stuck there permanently. Assuming they'd want to hire me."

"All things considered, this new position is something I probably wouldn't have turned down anyway, but it would have been nice if the choice would have felt more like my own. Now it has a bitter aftertaste I'm still trying to get out of my mouth."

I didn't see it like that before. I want to say it is just paranoia on her part, but I know I'm not going to win that discussion. Akira has been in the business long enough to get a feel for the unwritten rules of the place. I don't really have any reason to doubt her assessment of her own situation.

"This is why I hate the notion of office politics. I cannot even begin to imagine how I would feel in that kind of situation."

I stifle a cry as Akira gives me a cheerful slap on the back.

"Probably like a goldfish in a shark tank. Stick with your own dream, Lils. You'll thank yourself later."

Splash - splash - splash

"Is this what you'll be telling your boyfriend as well?"

"Something like that. He knows I want to work my way up. If I give it all up for his sake, I'll probably end up resenting him over it, even if the decision was completely my own. No relationship can survive with that kinda baggage. I think he'll understand. I hope he'll understand. Anyway, let's start walking back."

"D-Did you really consider all these things during the few seconds between when Father asked you and you accepted?"

"Like I said, it was a gut feeling. It took me a whole night of mulling to figure out the specifics."

I am impressed. Akira wasn't the only one who was asked to move from Japan to Scotland. I too have been asked to move back in with our parents. But where she accepted almost immediately, I have been trying to avoid even thinking about the choice that has been offered to me. Akira trusts her instincts blindly. I'm not quite as confident in my gut feelings and tend to mull over things longer than I should.

"You know, there's one thing that kinda bothers me about my decision. And that concerns you."

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"You wanna be an English teacher and I think you'd be a mighty good one. The nice thing about a teaching gig is that you don't have to worry about promotions as long as you can get the job to begin with."

"I am not certain what you are getting at."

"So I'm guessing the decision you're gonna make is eventually gonna come down to the people who'll be affected by your choice. But since I made my own decision right in front of you, I probably influenced your choice already and that felt kinda wrong. I probably could've shut up and let you figure out what to do for yourself."

"I do have my family over here. And your decision would have mattered to me."

"True, you got our little family over here, but you got your little family over there too, right?" She chuckled. "And I'm not referring to that competitive cousin of ours with whom you get along so well."

I sigh. Akira is correct, unfortunately. When Mother and Father told me they liked me to move to Scotland and live with them again, Hanako and Hisao were the first thought that came to my mind. We were almost our own little family, the three of us - at least that is how I feel. And right now I am very worried about how they are doing.

"Hisao called last week to tell me Hanako had withdrawn within herself. Just like last year. He's been showing interest in her lately, but I'm not certain if it's the kind of interest she would appreciate. All in all, I've been worried."

"Hey, how badly could they screw up in the short time we've been here? You're probably worrying about nothing."

"You're probably right."

Suddenly, something smooth is pushed into my hand. I recognize the feeling of a cell phone.

"If you wanna ease your mind, why not contact them? I've got the tickets, which means you've got an official excuse"

I smile appreciatively at Akira as I dial Hanako's number. Just hearing her voice would probably ease my worries. I feel a bit guilty for not having called earlier, but I know from before that Hanako would have been unlikely to respond during her birthday depression.

"A-Akira?"

Hanako's voice sounds very far away, but the reception isn't all that bad.

"Hello Hanako."

"Lilly!"

Hanako sounds delighted to hear from me. That's good. It means she must have bounced back from last week sooner than expected.

"It is good to hear from you, Hanako. How are you doing right now? And how is Hisao?"

"W-we're doing very well. And how are you doing, Lilly? D-Do you have any idea when you'll be heading back?"

It takes me a moment to place Hanako's tone. While I've known Hanako for about a year and have been around during her good moods, this is the first time in a long while she's sounding outright cheerful.

"We'll be returning to Japan near the end of the week. Akira will be dropping me off, so I'm hoping the two of you will be welcoming us at the gate."

"S-Sure, we'll be there."

"Hanako, you sound like you're in an unusually good mood right now."

"Ummm...Lilly, there's something I have to tell you when you get back."

I have no doubt that whatever she wants to tell me is responsible for the good mood she's currently in, and I'm not looking forward to spending several more days wondering what it might be, so I decide to press the issue a bit.

"Hanako, did something good happen to you?"

"I...I can't tell you yet. I promised to keep it a secret until we could tell you in person."

"Hmmm...would you be willing to elaborate on who 'we' might be?"

"Ah...no, I mean....I meant to say 'I could tell you in person'"

"Hanako, do you mind if I make a few guesses?"

By the time Akira and I arrive at the driveway of our parents' mansion, we're both wearing a huge smile on our face. Akira chuckles lightly.

"Hah, I still can't believe she got herself a boyfriend. Who would have known? Didn't think she had it in her."

"I think it's very sweet. They have so much in common. I am sure they'll be a very nice couple."

As we enter the mansion through the patio doors, Akira turns around and gives me a playful poke in the ribs.

"How about I go down to the cellar and fetch us something to celebrate? Wanna open up a little bottle of champagne and perform a toast?"

I smile at my sibling and nod playfully.

"Yes, please."

03

Chapter 2 (Hisao)

01

I let out a loud yawn as I approach the running track wearing my gym shorts. It has been a while since I wore them as I am still exempted from P.E. classes, and that running session during my first week was also the last time I made an active attempt to improve my health. Even then, it was mostly a desire to get the head nurse off my back that drove me to the running track. Today will be the first day I am here of my own free will.

Two days ago, Hanako and I met in the park in an attempt to salvage our friendship, which had taken a turn for the extremely awkward after we spent the night with each other the evening before. If anything, our mutual confession highlighted just how riddled with misunderstandings and false assumptions our friendship had been up to that point, and clearing those up was a painful process for both of us. But it was also this very process that allowed the two of us to make a fresh start as boyfriend and girlfriend who made a promise of mutual support to each other.

My new relationship with Hanako is also the reason I approached the nurse yesterday with a request for a training schedule. A week ago, I would have seen a heart flutter as something that was nobody's problem but my own, but now that I have a girlfriend I feel a newfound responsibility to stay in shape. The nurse had been quick to draw, in addition to his own conclusions about my motivations, a training regimen for me to follow.

As I reach the track, I see a familiar girl sitting on the bleachers. As I approach, she looks up, gives me a wave and a smile and then continues adjusting the prosthetic running blades attached to the stumps just below her knees. I remember running with her on the track before, during my first week here. But since she's not in my class and I have spent most of my free time in the library, the tea room or my dorm, we haven't really talked much since then. I guess if my determination to get in shape holds out, we'll get to know each other better soon enough. According to the nurse, running is pretty much a daily ritual for Emi.

02

"Hey there! It's been forever since I've seen you here."

"Yeah, I've been making some early New Year resolutions and decided to make a serious attempt to get into shape."

Emi gets up from the bleachers and bounces up and down on her leg blades a few times to test their stability.

"Nurse told me about your visit yesterday. He asked me to keep an eye on you, just in case something happens."

She looks at me quizzically.

"What exactly was he talking about?"

I take a moment to consider how to reply. When I first started attending here, I felt like my arrhythmia was none of other people's business, but over time I've slowly gotten more comfortable with it, and at this point a few of my classmates know about it. It is probably best to give Emi a run-down of the situation, just in case something does happen.

"I'm at this school because I have a heart condition, so for me shaping up is more about avoiding sudden death than it is about avoiding weight gain. Until recently, I just walked some short distances every now and then, but I recently picked up dating, so I have an additional reason to improve my health and stay in shape. I'd hate to leave a grieving girlfriend behind."

Emi responds with a smile, but suddenly makes wide eyes and mouths a soundless "ahah" as if she just had a revelation of some kind.

"Ohhh, so THAT was what the nurse was talking about."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

Emi strikes a pose, puts her hands in the pockets of an imaginative coat and squeezes her eyes shut while contorting her face in a grin that is as wide as it is artificial.

"I have reason to believe young Hisao is being driven by the oldest motivation known to man."

I don't know whether to be amused by Emi's over-the-top (but still frighteningly accurate) imitation of the nurse or annoyed by the insinuation she's making.

"I don't really see what's wrong with the desire to stay alive."

Emi gives me an impish smile that indicates she really isn't buying my attempt to sidestep her remark.

"I think he was talking about sex, Hisao. You know, keeping the species going and all?"

"Whatever. Can we save the rest of the small talk for the cool down lap?"

That sounded a little bit grumpier than I intended, but Emi doesn't seem to pay it any heed and cheerfully accepts my suggestion to start the morning run.

The laps around the track actually turn out better than I expected. The last time I participated in this activity took place a week after I was released from the hospital, and my physical condition was outright pathetic. Nowadays, my condition is sufficient to allow me to walk from town back to school without feeling like an old man afterwards. Though I recently discovered it still wasn't good enough.

I wonder how Emi and the nurse would react if they knew their teasing had an element of truth in it. Getting healthy enough to have sex wasn't the only reason behind my resolve to start working out, but the brief hiccup my heart experienced during the night Hanako and I slept together was enough to scare us both for a moment, and my condition hanging over our newly formed relationship like a dark cloud was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

Emi politely waited for me at the finish line, and now we are casually doing our cool down lap. She doesn't waste any time bringing up a subject to talk about.

"So, Hisao...are the rumors I've heard true?"

"What rumors would that be?"

"Don't tell me you don't know. I don't keep up with gossip much, and even I have heard about it."

I sigh. Of course I knew. After Hanako and I bared our souls to one another in the park and we were walking through town to get something to drink, Hanako gave me what she called her first gift to me: a sweet kiss on the lips that marked the official start of our relationship. But it turned out that our little public display of affection had been spotted by some fellow students, and a day later the rumor mill was working overtime spreading the news throughout the hallways of Yamaku.

"What have you heard?"

"About Hanako Ikezawa... kissing someone in the middle of the street... a transfer student."

"Guilty as charged. Is that enough for you?"

Emi giggled and gave me a wink.

"I bet I'm not the first one to bother you about this, am I?"

"More like the sixth. Which isn't too bad. Given the fact the entire school seems to know about it, I was prepared for more interrogations than I've received so far."

As we finish our lap, we walk to the bleachers and take a few sips from the water bottles we brought along. We sit down for a moment, and Emi gently starts rubbing the spots where her legs meet her prosthetics.

"The rumor's not really about you, you know. I mean, you're just a new transfer student. But Hanako's been the shyest girl in school for the better part of three years. It's no wonder people talk about something like this."

"It's surprising so many people seem to know her, given the effort she usually makes to avoid drawing attention to herself."

"I don't think anyone except you and Lilly Satou really know her. But I bet most students know who she is. Sometimes, when you try hard enough to avoid being noticed, you end up standing out all the more."

We get up and take another sip. Emi lets out a cute little belch that most people would only associate with infants and we start walking towards the staff building.

"How did she react to the attention?"

"She hates it. What did you expect? Before, she merely thought people were staring at her all the time. Now, she KNOWS people are staring. She's been ditching the last few minutes of every class so far in an attempt to avoid the crowds."

Emi looks down for a moment as she hears this. She gives me a sad smile.

"That's too bad. I mean, I get that she hates people staring, but I don't think this kind of attention is a bad thing. It's a shame she can't enjoy it."

"What do you mean?"

"Every student here has baggage of some kind. Some have gotten accustomed to things, but others are still working on it. But we all have...you know...milestones we have reached or still want to reach."

She lightly taps her right leg blade in order to accentuate her point.

"When I first heard the rumor, I was reminded of the time I took my first few steps with these. Or the first time I successfully navigated a staircase. For people like me, it brings back a pleasant memory. For people who are still coping, it's a little glimmer of hope, I think. Anyway, maybe I'm too optimistic, but I think right now most students, even though they don't know her, are genuinely happy for her. If she doesn't realize that and can't enjoy that, she's missing out."

Emi's words sound oddly logical to me. Without exception, all students here must have dealt with hardships in their life, some more than others. Hanako's act was an undeniable sign of recovery, and no doubt something that would resonate with a lot of people here. I smile at Emi appreciatively.

"That actually makes a lot of sense. I don't think it'll change the way she feels about this, but I bet it'll make her feel a little bit better when I tell her. You know, you're a lot deeper than I expected."

Emi looks annoyed at this.

"You think I'm shallow or an airhead or something?" Her frown quickly makes way for a mischievous grin. "You'd better watch what you say to me. I bet I could convince the nurse to tack on a few extra laps to that daily training schedule of yours."

"Bring it on. It'll only make me healthy sooner."

Emi laughs at me calling her bluff and as she opens the door of the nurse's office she playfully pokes me in the ribs with her finger.

"Let's hope you still have that drive tomorrow morning. The second days are always the worst ones."

After delivering that ominous premonition, she closes the door behind her.

03

Chapter 3 (Hisao)

01

After listening for a moment, the nurse puts away his stethoscope and gives a satisfied nod to indicate I can put my shirt back on.

"You sound good to me. No chest pains or dizziness this morning?"

I shake my head. I've been doing these morning jogs for several days now, and so far my heart hasn't acted up a single time despite the exhaustion I feel at the end of each practice session.

"And what do you think of the coach I assigned you?"

"When I got overconfident and tried to keep up with her yesterday morning, she immediately started yelling at me to stick to my schedule. She can be pretty intimidating despite her short stature."

The nurse laughs at this.

"Is that a compliment?"

"I can't really complain about her. She can be harsh, but fair and pretty fun to chat with. Why are you so interested?"

As I finish putting my shirt back on, the nurse leans in and speaks in a conspiring tone.

"The reason I asked her to get this involved with your practice sessions is because I want to know how open she is to the idea of using her athletic experience to help others. Running has always been a solitary thing for her, so it would be good if she took a liking to this whole coaching gig, as informal as it is."

"Are you hoping she'll want to turn it into a career?"

He gives me a sheepish look.

"Graduation is less than a year away, and Emi doesn't have any clear plans on what to do afterwards. She kind of likes to live by the day. She's not exactly a bookworm if you know what I mean. But sports are something she's genuinely passionate about."

You don't have to tell me that.

"Are you trying to talk her into becoming a trainer or a coach? Aren't those usually retired athletes?"

"More like a P.E. teacher. She might make a lively colleague, don't you think?"

The nurse suddenly looks pensive and snaps his fingers with a guilty look on his face.

"Speaking of which...that reminds me. A colleague of mine has been asking me about you and wanted to meet you. Do you have some time to spare later this day?"

"I have obligations today, but that's early in the evening. I could manage right after the last class. But what is this about?"

Today is a special day as Lilly called us from Scotland a few days ago, saying she and Akira would be flying in today, and Hanako and I are planning to welcome them back. But I'm pretty curious why someone on Yamaku's staff would call on the nurse to arrange a meeting. I don't recall getting particularly bad marks lately, and even if that were the case, a teacher would be more likely to approach Mutou or Shizune in order to get in touch with me.

"Just an informal chat, I've been told. If you could drop by after your last class ends, that'd be great."

That isn't a satisfying answer at all, but I still need to get back to the dorms and take a shower before class, so I leave the office without prying any further.

02

After class, as I reach the corridor leading to the nurse's office, I can see he's already waiting for me outside. He greets me with his usual fox-like smile.

"Good to see you could come so quickly. This way please."

He leads me through a few hallways and up two sets of stairs to a part of the staff building I've never been to before. He stops at a door at the end of one of the hallways and knocks loudly before opening it and making an inviting gesture like a porter beckoning a guest.

"After you."

I expected to see just another office on the other side of the door; a variation of the nurse's home turf, but the room I step into fits neither a medical staff building nor a school. The best way to describe it would be a rather old-fashioned living room filled with nothing but wooden furniture and curtains in a style similar to ones my grandparents used to own. The only piece of technology in plain sight is the phone on a small table in one of the corners. As much out of place as the room feels in the building we're in, I have to admit it fits its sole occupant like a glove. Behind the table in the middle of the room sits a short old lady who looks like she's in her late fifties or even her early sixties. She's dressed in a violet shawl and a long black skirt, and her graying hair is held back in a bun.

The nurse seems amused by my surprised reaction and puts his hand on my shoulder in an overly personal fashion.

"I feel that over the last few days we've grown close enough to each other for me to introduce you to my mother."

Before I can fully digest his extremely out-of-place joke, the old lady behind the table rises to her feet and approaches us while shooting the nurse a stern glare.

"If I was truly your mother, dear colleague, I would have taught you how impolite it is to make these kinds of remarks before even introducing us properly."

The nurse acknowledges her words with a cheerful nod and a slightly apologetic gesture.

"This young man next to me is Hisao Nakai whom I'm certain you've heard plenty about by now. My colleague here who wanted to meet you is called Miss Takawa."

"Yumi Takawa. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mister Nakai."

The old woman in front of us makes a graceful bow as the nurse continues.

"Here at Yamaku, our primary focus is to help students deal with the physical implications of their conditions, but in certain cases where a student's condition is the result of an accident of some sort, some additional support can be desired, and if I feel their circumstances warrant it, I usually refer them to Miss Takawa here or one of her co-workers. Eventually the final decision lies with the students, but most of them accept the additional help we offer them here."

I notice how his smile shortly fades for a moment during the last part of his statement, but before I can ponder on whether he had some specific people in mind, his jovial expression returns, and he reaches for the door handle.

"I'm sure the two of you will do fine without me. I'll be going now. See you after your next practice run."

As the nurse closes the door, the woman in front of me gives a tired smile.

"You'll have to excuse my colleague. He is a fine young man, but I believe he enjoys his own jokes a little bit too much sometimes."

She makes an inviting gesture over to the table in the middle of the room.

03

"May I have the honor of getting you some green tea, Mister Nakai?"

"Uh...sure. I mean...please."

I take a seat at the low table in the middle of the room as my host walks over to a corner and fills two ornate tea bowls with the contents of a kettle boiling on a small brazier there. After returning to the table and putting one of the bowls in my hands, she sits down across from me and gives a small bow to indicate it's okay to drink.

As I drink, I am reminded of the many lunch breaks I've spent in the tea room with Hanako and Lilly. This room seems to have the same relaxing atmosphere, maybe even more so, and the grandmotherly feeling that the old woman in front of me is giving off reminds me slightly of Lilly's composed demeanor. But unlike Lilly's unfocused and cloudy gaze, Miss Takawa's gaze is sharp and analytical.

"If I may ask, Mister Nakai... Did my colleague tell you why I wanted to meet you?"

"No, not really. All he said was that it was informal."

"Correct. I have no reason to believe you yourself are in need of my services."

Services? The nurse said that this Miss Takawa gives "additional support" after accidents. Did he mean psychiatric help? Is this old lady a shrink? Suddenly, a realization dawns on me.

"You're a counselor, aren't you? Are you by any chance Hanako's therapist?"

The old lady gives an appreciative smile at my deduction.

"Well reasoned, Mister Nakai. My specialty is cognitive behavioral therapy, and Miss Ikezawa does indeed happen to be one of my clients."

I have to admit I have wondered about the person Hanako was seeing ever since Lilly first brought up the subject, but this old lady was not what I was expecting a therapist to look like at all.

"Sorry for the reaction. I've always thought of therapists as bearded guys with thick glasses."

Miss Takawa covers her mouth with her hand and chuckles briefly. I doubt this was the first time she heard about that stereotype.

"Plenty of those exist around here as well."

"So I guess this is about my relationship with Hanako?"

"You've come up with increasing frequency in recent sessions. When Miss Ikezawa started referring to you as her boyfriend, I felt it might be a good idea to meet you myself and create my own impression of you."

She smiles playfully.

"Miss Ikezawa is presumably expecting me to say something positive about you during the next session, so it would probably pay off for you to be on your best behavior here."

"Does Hanako know you're having this talk with me?"

"If she hadn't consented to this, you would not be sitting here right now."

"So what exactly are you expecting of me?"

"I merely wish to get a general impression of you. Would you be willing to tell me a few things about how your relationship with Miss Ikezawa came to be from your perspective?"

There are plenty of things and events that took place regarding our relationship that I don't care to talk about with this person, especially since I don't know what Hanako has told her, so I just end up describing a few moments I've had with Hanako to her like our first meeting in the library, our first game of chess during the festival and our various outings in the city. As I relay these events, Miss Takawa listens to me without saying a single word.

"Thank you for your account of these events, Mister Nakai. I very much appreciate your time."

"I suppose you aren't willing to tell me a few things in return? Or is that all covered under patient confidentiality?"

I don't have high hopes for any attempts to learn more about Hanako from a therapist, especially since the nurse was already so tight-lipped about it, but for some reason it seems unfair for me to be the only one giving out information.

"Client confidentiality, Mister Nakai. And I'm afraid that I'm indeed not at liberty to tell you anything that was confided in me during closed sessions. All I can tell you is that I'm content with Miss Ikezawa's progress so far."

I can't resist a frown at that statement. If the nurse was correct, Hanako must have been in therapy at Yamaku since she came here two and a half years ago, but when I first met her she was still too skittish to even hold a conversation with me. Was Hanako even worse when she first came here, or is this therapist exaggerating the progress that was made? Of course, there was also a third possibility.

"May I ask for how long you've been treating Hanako? Are you the only person who's been treating her?"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I cannot disclose information of that kind to you."

"Can I ask you something that won't force you to violate your client confidentiality?"

"By all means."

"For how long have you worked here at Yamaku?"

Miss Takawa raises her eyebrows for a second and then smiles.

"Very well played, Mister Nakai. I have only worked here for a little over a year."

That means Hanako must have been meeting with at least one previous therapist in the past to whom she presumably didn't open up. Somehow I'm not really that surprised. I am still a bit skeptical about Miss Takawa's claim of the therapy's effectiveness though. Was it just a coincidence Hanako started opening up more when I befriended her? I don't think so. Miss Takawa seems to read my thoughts.

"Am I correct in my assumption that you don't seem to believe me?"

"I haven't known Hanako for as long as you have, but considering how she's grown over the last period, I feel that instead of therapy, maybe all Hanako really needed were friends."

I prepare myself for an offended reaction, but Miss Takawa doesn't seem fazed.

"I don't believe that the two are mutually exclusive. In fact, I believe Miss Ikezawa benefits most from having both."

I don't really think there's a point in arguing that sort of thing with her. After taking another sip of her tea, she gives me another one of those analytical stares.

"Mister Nakai, I won't take up much more of your time. I already appreciate you coming here. Would you be adverse to one more question?"

"Go ahead."

"What is it that drew you to Miss Ikezawa? Why is it that you are attracted to her?"

That's kind of a personal question. Fortunately, it's something I've often thought over myself, so I don't have difficulty coming up with an answer.

"Multiple things, I guess. We both enjoy reading and playing games. We both like spending time away from the bustle of the rest of the world. She's also a really sweet girl and once you get used to the scars, she's actually pretty attractive too. Also...I can't really describe it very well but I feel some kind of kinship with her. Like she's a kindred spirit. It's hard to explain. We figured we could both use support from someone and we made a promise to be that someone for each other during tough times."

My answer seems to satisfy her as she nods appreciatively.

"You didn't even need to think before answering. Very good. I have no further questions for you, Mister Nakai. You can take your leave if you wish."

I have plenty of questions left for her, but I don't think she's going to answer them, so I finish my bowl of tea and get up.

"Then I'll be going now. Hanako and I are planning to welcome Lilly back this evening."

She rises as well and walks me to the door before giving a polite bow as a farewell.

"I hope Miss Satou has had a pleasant trip abroad. Take care of yourself, Mister Nakai."

After a polite greeting I leave the secluded 'office' and hurry back to the exit of the staff building. There are still plenty of things to do before tonight.

Chapter 4 (Hisao)

01

The sun is already setting by the time Hanako and I make our way to the parking lot. Hanako received a text message from Akira confirming they landed safely, and Akira is going to drop Lilly off at the school gates.

"Are you sure they'll be here soon?"

"Y...yes. It should take them less than an hour to get here."

I was already aching to see Lilly back after two very eventful weeks, but I'm particularly excited to break the news of Hanako and me going out. I'm very curious about how she'll react.

"I wonder how we should tell them about us. Maybe we could hold hands when they arrive."

"H-hold hands?"

Hanako seems a bit absentminded ever since we left the school grounds. I wonder if something's wrong. She seemed excited to see Lilly again earlier today.

"Yeah. And then leave it to Akira to point that out. Then again, she might just keep it to herself just to mess with Lilly a bit. I wouldn't put it past her."

Hanako doesn't respond. I notice she's playing with something she's holding in her hand.

"Are you considering wearing that when they arrive?"

"I don't really know yet."

"It's your choice."

"Y...yes."

Neither of us really knows how to continue the discussion. While the silences between us are no longer as frequent or awkward as they once were, they still rear their head every now and again. This is one of those times.

We went to town the other day to do some shopping for this evening. Neither of us thought Lilly would have much energy for a party, but we wanted to make the evening a bit special nevertheless and bought a batch of fragrant tea as well as a box of sweets for her.

Hanako is still toying around with her little trinket as I spot a car heading up the parking lot and approaching us. As it gets closer, I see the distinctive hair color of the Satou sisters behind the windshield. The car stops in front of us, and Hanako lets out a small sigh, putting the trinket back in her pocket. Looks like she isn't ready yet to let Akira see her new look.

The car door opens, and Akira steps out, giving an enthusiastic wave. I have no idea how much energy this woman has, but an intercontinental flight and a ride from the airport to Yamaku seem insufficient to diminish it. Lilly, on the other hand, looks a little worse for wear.

02

"Lilly!"

Hanako's fidgety mood seems to vanish the moment Lilly gets out of the car as she rushes forward and grabs Lilly in a tight hug with a huge smile on her face. Lilly is visibly surprised but then recollects herself and returns Hanako's hug with a gentle embrace of her own. I can't help but smile myself as I see this display of unrestricted affection between them.

"It's so good to meet you again, Hanako."

"I'm so happy to see you again, Lilly."

Lilly carefully signals Hanako to break her embrace and then places both hands on her shoulders.

"Hanako, I'm very happy for you. Happy and proud."

She then turns to my general direction.

"Very happy for both of you."

I shoot Hanako a suspicious look and notice she's started fidgeting again.

"Both of us? Wait, did you...?"

Lilly doesn't reply and merely maintains a cheeky grin on her face. Akira is noticeably less subtle.

"Congratulations, lover boy! Looks like ya caught yourself a nice fish while we were gone."

I'm starting to understand why Hanako seemed nervous while I was considering how to announce our relationship. Lilly probably sweet talked the news out of her days ago.

"Hanako, didn't we agree to tell them the news in person?"

Hanako gives me such a guilty look I'm starting to feel heartless for scolding her.

"I...I'm sorry, Hisao. I meant to keep it a secret, but..."

"Don't be upset, Hisao. It took me a great deal of effort to convince Hanako that keeping such happy news bottled up is an unhealthy and frustrating thing to do to herself. She seemed genuinely relieved when she finally decided to break the news to us ahead of time."

Now she's pretending this was all for Hanako's benefit instead of satisfying her own curiosity. Lilly's playful expression shows she is all too eager to take full responsibility for this premature leaking of information, and she doesn't look even a little bit guilty about it. Akira merely looks at me with a mischievous grin.

"My sis can be pushy in her own polite and passive way, you know?"

Akira walks back to the car, opens the trunk, fishes Lilly's luggage out and beckons me to take on the role of porter.

"I'd like to stick around, but I still have a big distance to drive and a boyfriend to catch up with."

"Aren't you at least a little bit tired after travelling for so long?"

"Nope. When I was born, I hogged all the genetic jet-lag immunity I could get. As you'll find out soon, there wasn't anything left for Lilly afterwards."

Lilly let out a light groan before carefully walking over to Akira and giving her a polite hug.

"Stay in touch."

"Will do. And think about the upcoming weekend, will ya?"

"I will."

With that, Lilly and Akira part ways, and a minute later we're watching the car drive off into the distance. I walk over to Lilly and give her a quick hug.

"Welcome back, Lilly. You're probably tired, but Hanako and I planned a little private party for you to celebrate your return. If you wish to go to bed right now, we'd understand, but if you can bear with us for another hour or so, we can take the opportunity to catch up."

Lilly smiles gratefully at us.

"I accept the offer as long as you don't mind me being a little less talkative than usual."

"Hanako, I'll help Lilly carry her luggage back to the dorms. Would you go ahead and prepare the tea?"

"Sure!"

As Hanako dashes off to the girl's dorm, I turn to Lilly.

"What was with Akira's remark about the upcoming weekend?"

Lilly smiles mysteriously.

"Later."

03

"I needed that."

As Lilly puts her second cup of tea down, she lets out a satisfied sigh. She still looks a bit tired, but the caffeine seems to have taken the edge off. None of us have said a lot since we reached Lilly's room and Hanako brought in a pot of fragrant tea. It doesn't really matter much. Lilly's presence always seems to turn otherwise uncomfortable silences comfortable.

"I suppose what I originally planned to talk about was the news that the two of us are dating now, but with that cat already out of the bag, maybe we could hear some tales from Scotland instead."

"I'd like to leave those for another time, if that's not a problem."

Lilly reaches down, takes a piece of candy from the box we bought and brings it to her lips as if to further justify leaving the talking to us.

"You could tell me about your first official date, if you'd like."

Hanako really must have spilled her guts to Lilly.

"So you know about that too?"

"Only that it was meant to take place a few days ago."

I look at Hanako who's sitting next to me, still looking a little guilty.

"Go ahead."

Hanako bashfully nods and gently takes Lilly's hand. She reaches into her pocket, fishes something out of it and puts it into Lilly's hand.

"This is a gift Hisao gave me."

Lilly takes the object and softly runs her sensitive fingertips alongside it. After careful examination, she smiles.

"A little hair clip. With a small flower on top. What a nice gift. Were you wearing it when we arrived?"

"N..no. Not yet. I could wear it now if you like."

I look at Hanako as she takes back the clip from Lilly, pauses for a moment, carefully brushes aside the lock of hair that's usually covering the right side of her face and applies the clip to pin it in place. I'm still a bit unused to the sight of Hanako's face being completely exposed, but that's more because I've been staring at that lock for so long I've gotten used to it.

The clip, its flower decoration a miniature version of the one on Hanako's phone strap, was something I gave to her just before our first date with the request to wear it on occasion when we were alone. I told her that the sight of her face wasn't going to be a big deal to me, and I wanted to be able to look my own girlfriend in both eyes. It also served a more practical purpose as I found it awkward to kiss her with that lock of hair constantly getting in the way. As far as I know, this is the first time she's worn it in the presence of someone other than me. With Lilly, it obviously doesn't make much of a difference.

I sit back and nibble on a piece of candy myself as Hanako gives Lilly a brief summary of our date. I can't help but be a bit amused as her retelling actually makes it sound much more spectacular than it really was. In fact, it was probably as tried-and-true a date as we could have managed. This was a bit intentional on my part as I wanted our first date to be as comfortable as possible.

We started with a quiet little dinner at the Shanghai, a familiar place without a lot of people around. It was here that I gave Hanako the hair clip that she's now carrying with her all the time. After finishing our meal, I took her to a small movie theatre in the city. The movie we went to was actually a film adaption of a book we both read before, so neither of us was very surprised by most of the twists in the plot, but we had the benefit of having additional discussion material on our way home, and being able to avoid awkward silences with Hanako is always a good thing. I was even entertained at how passionate she got for a moment while we were debating the way the director changed a few things about the ending before slipping back into her usual meek demeanor. One thing about our date that stood out was Hanako's uneasiness with the idea of me paying for everything, so we ended up paying for each other's meal and movie ticket.

"It sounds like you both had a really good time."

Lilly seems pleased with Hanako's story. She pauses for a moment before addressing us with a sheepish expression on her face.

"Are there any more dates planned for the upcoming weekend? Or am I not privy to such information?"

"Not at the moment. We both wanted to catch up on things with you. Why?"

"I was thinking that with us having the upcoming three days off, we could spend our time away from Yamaku. Our family owns a summerhouse in Hokkaido we can stay in."

"Is that what Akira was talking about before she left?"

"Correct. She is planning to stay there next weekend with her boyfriend."

Her expression clouds for a moment.

"Which...means that if we go there...we will probably end up cleaning the place up for them."

I share a brief look with Hanako. Having to do some cleaning seems a small price to pay for a cheap vacation, and spending that vacation with Hanako and Lilly only makes the prospect even more attractive.

"I'd love to go. I've never been to Hokkaido before. How about you, Hanako?"

Hanako beams.

"Me neither. I'd really like to go too."

Lilly claps her hands together.

"I suppose it's settled then. We'll have to leave early in the morning in order to catch the train there. Maybe it's best if we retire for the evening for now. We won't be able to sleep in tomorrow."

Hanako gets up and gathers the tea cups and tea pot from the table.

"I'll go and clean the tea service downstairs. And I think I'll go to bed afterwards."

As I get up myself to leave as well, Hanako gives me a quick kiss on the lips before removing her hair clip and walking out of Lilly's room. Before I can follow her, Lilly softly calls my name.

"Hisao, would you mind helping me unpack a few things? I'd like to get some sleep myself, and I will still have to pack a few things tomorrow morning as well."

For a second I want to ask if it wouldn't have been more appropriate to ask Hanako to help her with that, but then I realize that this may very well be Lilly's roundabout way of asking me to stick around for a small talk. Which is fine, because there's something I've been meaning to ask her as well. As I start messing with the lock of the suitcase, Lilly sits down on her bed with a tired but cheerful expression on her face.

"So...you and Hanako..."

"Yes, life can take some interesting turns. Thankfully this one was far more positive than most of the other big changes in my life this year."

"I'm happy you two found each other. Hanako's mood seems to have improved so much compared to how she used to be."

"Things could have worked out very differently. By the way, thanks for the advice the other day. I needed that wake-up call pretty badly."

That's an understatement. Not too long ago, I was thinking of nothing but protecting Hanako from the world around her. I was obsessing with her emotional condition and thought of nothing except on how to prevent her from getting hurt more than she had already been. I didn't realize how patronizing my disposition must have been until Lilly called me out on it that evening. Not only was Lilly's judgment of my behavior spot on, but Hanako was aware of it too and instead of protecting her, my attitude was actively hurting her. If anything, I want to forget about this stage of our relationship as soon as possible.

"I'm glad I could help. Though you two probably would have been able to sort things out yourselves."

"I don't think so. Hanako turned out to be aware of my obsessive worrying, and it only served to make her feel worse. I'm not sure how things would have turned out if you hadn't told me to back off a bit, but I doubt we'd be where we are now. But there's one thing you said during that phone call that I'd like to ask you about."

"What is it that you would like to know?"

"You told me not to doubt my bond with Hanako, because of some reason or another, but you cut yourself off before elaborating."

"I promised Hanako not to tell you about how she felt about you. I caught myself in time to avoid breaking that promise."

"I'm a bit surprised she told you about that. I would have expected her to keep something like that to herself."

Lilly remains silent for a few seconds, carefully choosing her words before answering.

"She didn't. At least not at first. We frequently spoke about you while spending time together. Shortly after the festival, Hanako suddenly started asking me what I thought of you. She wanted to know whether I...liked you. She was uncharacteristically persistent in her questioning."

"And you in return wanted to know why she was so interested?"

"Yes. After some digging on my part I got her to admit to me that she was in love with you herself."

"So it was like she was asking you if it was safe for her to pursue me without becoming a rival to you?"

"I do not think she had any plans to pursue you. But in the case I liked you as well, she would have tried to push her own feelings away for my benefit..."

For a moment Lilly looks genuinely sad.

"...regardless of how you felt about her. That's the kind of person she is."

That does sound like something Hanako would do. I put a hand on Lilly's shoulder.

"Well, things worked out in the end. We got together, and I'm happy I'm able to call her my girlfriend."

Lilly nods silently before smiling inquisitively at me.

"Hisao...if I may ask. How did you two get together? How did things... fall into place between you two? I asked Hanako, but she wouldn't tell me much about it."

That's a tricky question. Things falling into place was probably the worst description of how our relationship came to be. It was a whole lot more accurate to say things were blown to very tiny bits that we ended up using to piece together something more stable. We ended up playing emotional hide and seek, we ended up hurting each other and pushing each other away and to top it off, we had sexual intercourse for misguided reasons that neither of us was emotionally ready for. It wasn't exactly romance novel material we took part in. I have my sincere doubts Lilly would really want to know even half of these things.

"The right word would be...messily, Lilly. It's probably better to leave this to your imagination. Please take my word for that."

"Oh."

Thank goodness she doesn't pry. One more thing bothered me though. There were many things Hanako told me during our confession in the park that day; many things that I didn't think Lilly was aware of, and some of them applied to her as well. The difficulty with trusting friends Hanako admitted to having was one thing that came to mind, and part of me wants to let Lilly in on this. But I'm not certain yet if the risk would be worth it. The things Hanako told me in the park were things she confided in me, because she trusted me. Earning her trust has been a ride through hell, and something tells me it won't be easily regained if she feels I betrayed it. With luck and Hanako's slowly growing confidence, she'll be able to improve her friendship with Lilly on her own without me having to meddle in it.

I finish emptying Lilly's suitcase, stand up and get ready to return to my own dorm room.

"Don't worry too much about it. The important thing is we're fine now. Let's focus on what's ahead of us. Starting with a few days in Hokkaido."

Lilly gets up from the bed and gives a polite bow.

"Thank you for tonight, Hisao. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

"Me too. Goodnight Lilly."

"Goodnight Hisao."

04

Chapter 5 (Hisao)

01

I lift my arm, hold my watch in front of my face and press a button on the side, causing the display to light up. I hear the soft voice of my girlfriend who's lying on the ground to my left.

"Hisao, what time is it?"

"It's nearly half past ten."

"Do you think we should head back?"

"Not yet. Lilly probably hasn't finished her book yet."

A momentary silence. Silences around Hanako are sometimes uncomfortable, but right now they feel alright due how relaxing our surroundings are.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"How many romance stories do you think have a chapter where a couple is lying in an open field gazing at the stars?"

I hear an amused giggle from Hanako.

"I...I could name at least nine."

I suppose that would make us number ten. After getting up early - too early - yesterday morning we took the train to Hokkaido and arrived at the Satou summer home late in the afternoon. I failed to get a great deal of sleep the night before, so I spent a large part of the evening napping while Lilly and Hanako cleaned up the house and made supper. I felt a bit guilty about it, but neither seemed to mind it very much.

The day afterwards, we walked to the nearby town which was more exhausting than I thought due to the heat. We had ice-cream to cool down once we reached our destination, and Hanako spent most of the time afterwards browsing clothes for Lilly, herself and me. After a filling lunch in town and more shopping, we walked back to the summer home, had a delicious dinner and then went out for an evening walk while Lilly remained behind in order to finish the book she started on the train a day ago. After lazily strolling through the surrounding area, we decided to take a break, and now we're lying side by side in the wheat field behind the summer home just staring at the sky.

I sneak a sideway glance at Hanako, though I can't see her very well since it's already pretty dark, there isn't a single street lamp in a three mile radius and Hanako's face is partially obscured by several stalks of wheat.

"Umm...Hisao?"

"What is it?"

"What do you think of our trip so far?"

I take a moment to think. We haven't really been doing anything spectacular ever since we got here... Lilly's blindness, my heart condition and Hanako's difficulty with crowds rule out a lot of activities, but somehow it hasn't detracted from the experience. Something about our little outing feels... just right.

"I like it. A lot. I'm happy we got the opportunity to go here. It's nice to relax a bit after all the studying."

Not to mention the stress related to other recent events.

"I really like it too. I'm thinking of why I like it so much."

"Well?"

"Promise you won't laugh at me."

"I won't."

Hanako hesitates for a bit and then takes a deep breath.

"It...feels...like..."

"It feels like what?"

"It...feels like....I... have a family again..."

"A family huh?"

"Y-yes. A small disabled family, but a family all the same."

I think about Hanako's words for a bit. The atmosphere between us really has felt like that over the last two days. The way Hanako and Lilly looked while preparing our meals together. The way we had breakfast and dinner together. The way we huddled on the couch while watching television together. The way we relaxed in the back yard, reading books or playing games. It all felt so strangely comfortable.

"I think I know what you mean."

"You feel the same?"

"I think I do. I keep trying to imagine what this kind of trip would have been like with the friends I used to hang out with before I came to Yamaku, and I don't think things would have felt this... natural. This... homey."

"Maybe we both needed to be away from Yamaku for a while. To... you know... maybe... remember what it's like to be n-normal."

That's a pretty good point Hanako is bringing up. When passing by students from other classes, I still tend to revert to thinking of them as "that girl with the crutch" or "that guy who's missing several fingers" from time to time, and every time I catch myself, I'm reminded of my own condition. On the other hand, I'm now so familiar with both Lilly and Hanako that I find it harder and harder to see their condition as something out of the ordinary. It simply has become part of who they are in my mind.

Life here has been very relaxed. Lilly's familiarity with the building has allowed her to get around without needing her cane. Having no other people in a one-mile radius has allowed Hanako to relax to the point where she's been wearing her hairclip almost constantly, and although she's still not as chatty

as Emi or Misha usually is, she's calm enough to hold conversations with us without her usual stammering.

The only time I was reminded of my own condition was when I was forced to admit to Hanako yesterday evening that I hadn't thought about taking my medication for the day yet after she asked me about it. While taking my pills has become an automatism for me at Yamaku, I was confronted by the fact I become prone to forgetting about them when suddenly taken out of my usual daily routine. While I'm thankful that Hanako takes her promise of mutual support so seriously, I'm not thrilled by the prospect of her watching me like a hawk for the remainder of the trip. Still, her scolding was only a minor inconvenience.

"You're right. It's been months since I've felt this...normal."

"F-for me it's probably been years."

A silence. While she didn't sound sad while saying it, the reminder of how stagnant Hanako's life has been until recently depresses me a bit. Eager to steer the discussion away from that topic, I return to what we were talking about previously.

"So, if we're like a family, what would that make Akira? The loud and feisty aunt?"

Hanako giggles at that mental image.

"Probably."

"And I guess Lilly would be the mother of the bunch?"

"N-no mother or father. Just Lilly, you and me."

My question was merely in jest, so I raise an eyebrow at how seriously Hanako answers it. Does Hanako object to the suggestion of her and Lilly's relationship being like a mother-daughter relationship or does she think the idea of other people being like a mother or father figure is inappropriate since her own parents died? If it's anything related to the latter, there's no way I'm going to explore that right now, lest I ruin her mood for the rest of our time here.

"Is Lilly like a sister to you then?"

"I... I can't really tell for sure. I was an only child, so I don't really know."

"Same here. We could have asked Lilly if she were here right now."

Hanako lets out an audible sigh. I wouldn't be surprised if her thoughts are the same as mine right now.

"About Lilly... Have you noticed as well?"

"It'd be really hard to miss it. She's kind of acting like she accidentally joined us on our honeymoon."

The length Lilly's going to give Hanako and me private time together seems a bit much. It's been mostly small things, like deciding to finish a book when we asked her to take a walk with us and suddenly wanting to take a break and catch a tan for an hour while we were in town, so Hanako and I could (or rather had to) do some shopping without her, but they have started adding up.

"Is she avoiding us?"

"Naw, she's just trying to give us some space. Wouldn't you do the same for her if it was her who just got a new boyfriend?"

"P-probably... Maybe. It's just that it feels like she's trying to get us to hook up even though we're already together. So I don't really understand."

Good point. It's like she's trying to play match maker, which seemed strange since we have all the time in the world to do this at our own pace, and unlike her cousin, Lilly isn't really the type to try and hurry people along. Then again, she did do something similar back when she had Akira take her and us to that pool club in town in an attempt to get Hanako and me closer to each other.

"It's her motherly streak. She can get carried away with it at times. Just give it time. It'll probably blow over in a week or two."

"You're probably right."

We fall silent, neither of us really knowing how to continue the conversation. One thing remains on my mind. Even though most of Lilly's actions to give Hanako and me some time alone were rather small, one of them was decidedly less so. When we arrived at the summer home and made preparations to unpack, Lilly gave us a small tour of the house ending up in the house's only bedroom; a fairly large room with a double bed near the window and a smaller single bed near the corner. She then dropped a bombshell by announcing that she herself would be using the convertible futon in the living room to spend the night on before casually walking out of the room, leaving Hanako beet red and me baffled at this uncharacteristically unsubtle move on her part. I later questioned her about it, but she replied by saying she wasn't forcing us to sleep in the same bed, and the sight of Hanako in her nightgown wasn't anything new to me. When I realized that in order to continue the discussion I'd have to get into how far along Hanako and I were in that area, I decided not to paint myself into corner and dropped the subject while I was still ahead. I was, of course, a gentleman, so Hanako was given the double bed while I spent the first night in the smaller one. All in all, it was still a pretty comfortable place to sleep.

Still, the question how far Hanako and I were in "that" area lingers on my mind. We have kissed each other of course and sometimes shared a tight hug, but I'm not really sure if that was any indicator on the rest. We slept together once, but Hanako merely initiated that because she thought it was the only way to prevent me from drifting away from her, and she was so uncomfortable during the whole experience that it is clear to me in hindsight that she certainly wasn't ready for the act itself.

Is having that kind of intimacy something Hanako will ever be doing for her own enjoyment to begin with? We have never mentioned that night we spent together again after we started dating, and I don't really know how Hanako sees sex. She isn't exactly a flirty person or someone who I'd expect to come onto me of her own. How open to sex is Hanako when the threat of losing our friendship isn't looming over her? Would she reluctantly offer herself to me again if I took the initiative out of fear that I might lose interest in her otherwise rather than because she wants me? The only way to avoid that would be to leave the initiative up to her, but that could again cause the risk of her making a move on me because she feels she has to. If anything, our night together made things more complicated. I wonder if there's an opportunity to talk to her about it without her freezing up in embarrassment. If anything, I've learned over the last few weeks that making assumptions about Hanako isn't always the smartest thing to do.

I gently sit upright to look at Hanako. It's too dark to see her face clearly, but the fact she doesn't react to me staring at her suggests she has her eyes closed.

"Hanako."

"Yes?"

"You weren't sleeping, were you?

"No, just relaxing a bit."

Feeling a little playful, I pick up one of the straws that broke off when we sat down here and use it to gently tickle the side of Hanako's face. She doesn't react. I carefully move the straw closer to the center of her face. When there's still no reaction and I start tickling her nose, she lets out a gasp, opens her eyes, puffs out her cheeks and blows the straw upwards. I bring it closer to her face again and for a second time she blows it away. We repeat this little charade a few times until she gets tired of it, sits up and playfully snatches the straw away.

"You're m-mean, suddenly tickling my nose like that."

"It wasn't exactly sudden. You just didn't react before."

02

Hanako thinks for a moment, then suddenly slumps her shoulders.

"Oh..."

Why does she suddenly sound depressed? Did I do something wrong?

"H-hey, what's the matter?"

"You t-touched the right side of my face, d-didn't you?"

"Y-yes."

"I...I...don't r-really feel anything there. Not anymore..."

I feel the urge to punch myself. I really should have spotted that landmine from a mile away, and yet I happily pranced right onto it.

"I-I'm sorry, Hanako."

"It's t-the s-same for my right shoulder and arm and...*sigh*..well, y-you've seen it for yourself."

I have. But I hadn't really thought much about the fact that a not insignificant part of her body was devoid of the sense of touch.

"You can't feel anything in any of those areas?"

"A-around some areas, I can f-feel it when you press hard enough. B-but nothing s-softer. N-not any pleasant sensations anymore."

I wrap my arms around her. I start realizing why Hanako often hugged me so tightly when we exchanged kisses. Since the sensation on her back and shoulders was partially numbed, she had the tendency to press herself against me to maximize the sensations she was feeling from the front.

"I-It's p-probably for the better though. It could have been w-worse. I-It's better to feel n-nothing at all than to be in c-constant pain, i-isn't it?"

That's true, but that can't feel like much of a consolation right now. I don't think it's going to do much good offering her sympathy. What she needs me to do right now is cheer her up. I think for a moment. I have an idea that might work, even if it's a bit of a gamble. It might also end up backfiring on me, but I decide to take the risk. I sit a little bit closer to her.

"You know, maybe it's not as bad as you think it is."

03

Hanako looks at me with a puzzled expression, clearly having expected a different response. Keeping my left arm around her, I gently move my right hand downward to a point just above her hip and start tickling her side. Hanako's puzzled expression gets uncomfortable and she suddenly lets out a forced giggle. I smile inwardly. This was the reaction I was hoping for.

"H-hey, t-that tickles."

I give her a mischievous grin and keep going. Hanako's body begins to squirm, and she starts trying to push herself away from me.

"D-don't do that."

I let her try to get away for a moment, then unexpectedly let go of her, causing Hanako to fall backwards. Before she can sit upright again, I move over to her and quickly straddle her.

"H-Hisao!?"

"Hanako, I bet you still have plenty of sensitive spots left."

I quickly reach down and start tickling her left side again, drawing out another giggle.

"D-don't."

"And I won't stop until you admit that."

She moves her arm down to shield herself, so I quickly move my hand and start tickling her neck instead. One more involuntary giggle is the result.

"S-stop."

"I don't even have to look very hard, Hanako."

When she moves her arms up to ward off my hand, I swiftly go for her armpit instead.

"Hi-hee hee-sao, c-cut it out hee hee hee."

"Admit it and I'll stop."

She tries to buck her hips in an attempt to knock me off, but I barely even feel it. As she lowers her arm, I grab it and start tickling the lower part of her arm...

"hee hee hee."

A gasp.

...then her collarbone when she yanks her arm away...

"P-please *snort* st-stop."

She's now giggling uncontrollably.

..then her tummy...

"Hahahahaha!"

...then her ribs just beneath her breasts.

"S-stop, h-h-hee-hee-hee!"

At this point I'm using both hands to tickle several areas at once. Hanako is literally crying with laughter. I realize I'm taking a bit of a risk right now. If one of her flailing arms accidentally hits me in the chest, I'll probably go out like a light and I doubt an ambulance could get here very quickly. Still, seeing the usually subdued Hanako like this is an interesting experience.

"Hahaha st-stop, I hee hee a-admit hee hee it! I admit it!"

04

I immediately stop tickling her, get off of her and sit across from her as she tries her hardest to catch her breath.

"I never knew you were this ticklish."

Hanako's now panting as if she just sprinted a kilometer uphill.

As her breathing slowly returns to normal, she sits up and wipes the tears from her eyes. I half expect her to angrily walk away, but instead she just sits there.

"I think this kind of proves my point, don't you agree?"

"Ummm...."

Not willing to let her back down, I reach out and make a tickling motion in the air with my fingers. Hanako immediately shivers, crosses her arms in front of her chest and lets out an involuntary giggle.

"Th-that tickles. D-don't get near me."

"I didn't even touch you just now. Anyway, don't you agree?"

She doesn't say anything, but she carefully leans forward and gives me a kiss on the lips. As unorthodox as it may have been, I think my method of cheering her up worked. I've never heard Hanako laugh like that before. I hope that someday she'll be able to laugh like that without being forced into it.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"I'm okay now. Just d-don't do that again, promise?"

"It's a big temptation, but okay. I promise."

"Shall we go back now? I'm a bit tired after all this."

"Lead the way."

We slowly walk back to the summer home at the far end of the wheat field. As we approach the patio, which is pitch-black due to being in the shadow of the building, we hear Lilly's familiar voice from somewhere.

"Welcome back, Hanako, Hisao. Have you enjoyed your walk?"

I am about to ask Lilly where she is when I hear a soft thud followed by a startled yelp. Seems like Hanako, who was walking slightly ahead, has already found her.

"I-I'm sorry, Lilly. I didn't see you."

"My, is it that late already? Please wait here for a moment."

We hear measured steps head towards the house followed by the sound of an opening door. A few seconds later, a light near the patio door flicks on as Lilly emerges and heads back towards the chair she was sitting in before Hanako nearly tripped over her.

"We'll be going inside, Lilly. Care to join us?"

Lilly picks up a discarded book lying near the chair and holds it up for a moment.

"I only have a few pages left. I will be with you in a few minutes. Please make yourselves comfortable. And ah...Hanako?"

"Yes, Lilly?"

She sends us a playful grin.

"Can you retrieve the bottle we opened this morning? I believe a glass before bedtime will help us sleep all the better."

05

Chapter 0 (Hanako)

01

"Come in, please!"

After I hear the reply to my knocking, I hesitantly open the door leading into the 'office' where I have my sessions every other week. Office isn't really a good word to describe it. Den or living room seem more appropriate. Miss Yumi has very peculiar tastes when it comes to her work place.

"Good day, Miss Hanako."

"G-good day, Miss Yumi."

As I enter, Miss Yumi gets up, approaches me and we exchange greetings and polite bows.

"May I have the honor of getting you some tea, Miss Hanako?"

"I-I humbly accept, Miss Yumi."

The little ritual we practice at the start of every session is a bit old-fashioned, just like the room and Miss Yumi herself. But it serves its purpose well. Since it's exactly the same every time, I can simply repeat the phrases I always use without having to think too hard about how to respond. (Which usually causes me to start stuttering)

A small bowl of tea is gently placed in my hands, and after a small bow, we both take a careful drink. When I was admitted to this school, the head nurse explained to me the teachers were not going to make a fuss if I felt anxious and wanted to leave class to catch my bearings. However, he also mentioned he was assigning me one of the therapists at school for sessions outside of school hours. I sensed that they expected me to go along with this in return for the lenience I'd receive in regard to my school attendance, so I reluctantly accepted.

My first therapist was a middle-aged man with thick glasses and a scruffy beard. He was polite enough, but also really intimidating. I always felt a bit like a research specimen during our sessions. Eventually I was referred to another person; a rather young man with a stubble, sneakers and an awful sweater. He was nice enough, but I always felt uneasy around him. The third person was Miss Takawa, who was new to Yamaku at the time. She told me I could start calling her Miss Yumi as a sign of trust once I felt we established such a thing and since a few weeks I've been calling her that.

"Well then, shall we start?"

"Y-yes, please."

Miss Yumi gives a small nod, and I place the first black stone onto the game board. Miss Yumi takes one of her white stones and puts it in place with a dull tap.

"So, Miss Hanako, how have you been sleeping lately?"

Tap

"Not t-too badly."

We usually have an agreement that only the person whose turn it is is allowed to speak. If I want things to slow down, I can simply wait a bit before placing my next stone.

Tap

"That's good to hear. May I suggest we try a week without sleeping pills again and see if things remain that way? The worst weeks should be behind us for now."

Tap

"If you say so."

Miss Yumi is an enthusiastic Go player, and ever since our third meeting we've been playing as part of our session.

Tap

"If we can get you your daily eight hours of sleep again without any medication, then that's a goal we should not pass up. If you still have bad dreams three weeks after...that day...you could try some herbal tea. I happen to know a recipe that tends to work very well."

Tap

"O-kay then."

I don't think I actually relax while playing games, as Miss Yumi thought at first. It's quite the opposite...I grow more focused than usual. But since I get to focus on something other than my anxiety, my head tends to be clearer, and I'm less nervous in my interactions.

Tap

"If you were a little older, I could recommend a few sips of sake as well, but I don't think that'd be a good idea right now. If the principal were to find out, these old bones would be dragged onto the street in a heartbeat."

Tap

I suppress a small giggle. While Miss Yumi is always a bit formal, she's not always serious and is quick to fill the silences with some small talk whenever I don't have much to say myself.

Tap

"So, how is life in the dorms these days?"

Tap

"S-same as always. Except the girl in the room next to mine has moved out recently."

Tap

"I see. Have you ever spoken to her?"

Tap

Not that I can remember. SHE tried to speak to ME though, around the time I moved in here. Or rather, barged into my room and pretended living next to each other was enough to make us instant buddies. I've kept my door locked ever since.

"N-no. I haven't."

Tap

"So I suppose you can expect to get a new neighbor soon. I doubt the housing department will leave that room empty for long."

Tap

That would be too much to hope for.

"Maybe."

Tap

"Maybe even someone nice."

Tap

Hopefully nice enough to ignore me instead of staring at me.

"Maybe."

Tap

"That's not a bad move, Miss Hanako. You're getting much better at this."

Tap

She's just flattering me. While it's nice to play against her, I haven't beaten her a single time. She's a formidable player and doesn't feel the need to hold back for her opponent's sake.

"N-not really."

Tap

"I have the not-very-scientific belief that it's possible to deduce certain personality aspects of a person through their playing style while they're still learning the ropes of a game."

Tap

What does that say about me? Has she been analyzing me through this? Like a creative variation of a typical question form?

"R-really?"

Tap

"Your defensive playing style fits your personality, Miss Hanako. Am I right to assume your favorite chess strategies also focus on defense?"

Tap

That's a pretty good deduction. Am I really that predictable?

"That's...right."

Tap

"But pure defense will never win you anything. At best, it results in a stalemate."

Tap

Isn't that still better than losing? Is she saying I should go on the offensive instead? That'd just get me beaten sooner.

"S-should I play aggressively then?"

Tap

"Playing aggressively doesn't suit you. It would be better for you to stick to what comes naturally to you and improve upon it. A good offensive player forces opportunities. A good defensive player takes advantage of opportunities as they arise."

Tap

Are we still talking about Go here?

"Ah..."

Tap

"We could practice it if you'd like. I'm going to leave you a few openings now and then and it's up to you to spot them and exploit them as quickly as you can."

She smiles as her eyes scan the board.

"You might find that games like these and life in general have quite a few parallels."

Tap

I just nod and try to focus on the result of Miss Yumi's latest move. Am I already supposed to look for openings?

Tap

"By the way, Miss Hanako, I almost forgot to tell you that I will be on leave for the next two weeks. So our next session will be in twenty-one days. If anything happens, you can always contact the head nurse here. I have no plans to take any trips, so he should have no problems getting in touch with me in the unlikely case of an emergency."

Tap
02

That news makes me feel sad. I didn't think about it at first, but I've come to enjoy these sessions. I can be on my own just fine most of the time without feeling miserable, but now that I'm being told I'll have to wait for three weeks before we'll get to talk and play games again, I suddenly start to feel lonely.

Tap

She said she's not going to be away from home.

Tap

Should I ask if I can visit her sometime? Just to play a few more games?

Tap

What if she rejects me?

Tap

She's an adult. She has been for a long time. She's different from my old schoolmates. We get along well. She doesn't mind my scars.

Tap

"Is something bothering you, Miss Hanako?"

Tap

"Umm...I..."

My social anxiety, which usually remains subdued during these sessions, has just returned in full force and is threatening to choke me. As my breathing starts speeding up, Miss Yumi places her bowl in front of me and then gets up to get the kettle from the brazier in the corner.

"Don't force yourself, dear. Take a sip, a few deep breaths, close your eyes and think of a clear sky or flowing water."

Just a few sentences. I can do this.

"M-Miss Yumi...c-c-can I...c-c-come o-over n-next...w-week and p-p-play a...a g-game w-with y-y-you?"

Miss Yumi merely looks at me with an unreadable expression on her face. Or rather, stares at me.

"Come over next week, you say?"

Don't tell me she didn't understand. Did I really cut such a pathetic figure? I gather all of what's left of my rapidly vaporizing determination and force myself to smile at her.

"M-m-Miss Yumi...c-c-can I b-be...b-b-be f-f-friends w-with you?"

I exhale deeply. I said it. I didn't think I could do it, but I said it. But strangely enough, Miss Yumi doesn't react. As I look at her, I still see that same neutral expression on her face. Just when I'm about to ask her if she's heard me (I don't think I could bear to repeat my question), she slowly starts speaking.

"Miss Hanako, your friendship is the second most valuable gift in the world you can offer another person...and a priceless gift it is."

Her gaze suddenly lowers and shifts to one of the corners of the table. A feeling of dread starts to well up inside me. Miss Yumi shuts her eyes for a few seconds and then forces herself to look right at me.

03

"I am very sorry that I cannot possibly accept it."

"Of...of course not."

I try to think of something more to say. Some way to change the subject. But I can't. Of course she wouldn't want me around. Who would want to spend time with a useless person like me? She's only tolerating me because she's being paid for it.

I have to get out of here.

I feel a lump in my throat. I desperately try to swallow it.

I have to get out of here.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but I can't prevent tears from rolling down my cheeks.

I have to get out of here now.

"Miss Hanako..."

Go somewhere. Anywhere. Away from here.

"Miss Hanako..."

Far away from here.

"Miss Hanako!"

Miss Yumi's stern voice snaps me out of it. When I look at her, I notice she has a tissue in her hand which she offers me while her eyes look sadly, but compassionately at me.

"Before you draw your own conclusions, please let me explain."

Explain? Is this where she's going to make up excuses? Tell me she's not worthy or something?

"I'm not refusing your gift because I don't enjoy spending time with you or because you're not a sweet and caring girl. I do and you are. I cannot accept your gift because... a friendship between us would be inappropriate."

Inappropriate? You know what's inappropriate? Your friendliness! Playing games with me and acting all interested in me! Pretending that you care! It's just a facade. Another tool to pry me open so you can take a look inside and determine just how broken things are!

I'm trying to restrain myself, but suddenly I feel furious. Before I can stop myself, I hiss a reply to her.

"I-I'm j-just another br-broken human being f-for you to f-fix."

I regret those vitriolic words the instant they leave my mouth, but Miss Yumi doesn't flinch. Instead, she refills the tea bowl and calmly looks back at me.

"Supporting your recovery, or 'fixing you' to use your own words, is what I'm here for. It'd be disingenuous of me to pretend otherwise. I am a therapist after all."

I freeze. That's not the reaction I expected at all.

"Miss Hanako, the desire for friendship you expressed just now is undeniably a good thing, and I'd greatly encourage you to hold onto it, but not all friendships are undeniably good. Some friendships can be downright unhealthy. And friendships with therapists are the unhealthiest of them all."

"I...I don't understand."

"Friendship is a bond of mutually accepted equality, Miss Hanako. True friends are equals. Two people cannot be equals if one of them is being paid to spend time with the other. Two people cannot be equals if one has learned the history of the other through a case file. True friends are willing to share both each other's joy and each other's grief."

"And you... can't?"

"As your therapist, I will be here as long as you need my help, but when you stop requiring that assistance... when you start getting better, people like me will start backing out of your life in order to shift their attention to those more in need of their presence. It's what a therapist does. It's not something a friend would ever do."

"So... Are you saying we cannot be friends? Ever?"

"I believe that a good therapist will never try to become your friend, and a good friend will never try to become your therapist. No person should try to fulfill both roles for you. I believe I can serve you best as a therapist because we work well together... unless you can no longer believe in me after today."

"I...I'm not sure."

"Please let me assure you right now, Miss Hanako, that still I believe in you. Just because I cannot be your friend doesn't mean I'm going to give up on you. I believe that you'll get the friendships you desire in time."

"W-why?"

"Because I learned one more thing from watching you play."

"What's that?"

"That you're not a quitter, even though life, like me, hasn't been going easy on you. And because quitting is not in your character, you'll eventually come across the right opportunities."

Now I believe she's merely trying to cheer me up. I really need some time alone at the moment. I get up to leave and Miss Yumi lets me go without protesting.

As I open the door and turn around to bid her farewell, Miss Yumi performs what has to be the deepest and most prolonged bow I've ever seen from her, and when she rises I'm shocked to see an expression of genuine sadness on her face.

"Truth be told...I've been forced to have this talk with several people over the years, and it still breaks my heart every time I have to repeat it. I'm truly sorry, Hanako."

For a moment I forget my own sadness and disappointment. Then, her smile is back and the moment is lost as her words echo in the hallway.

"I hope to see you here again in three weeks. Please take care."

My head understands her words, but my heart is still feeling miserable.

04

Chapter 6 (Hanako)

01

"...Hisao?"

"Hanako. Are you still awake?"

"I...had a bad dream just now. I couldn't get back to sleep right away. Then I heard you tossing and turning."

"Sorry about that."

"You don't have to apologize."

A silence. Should I try to talk to Hisao some more, or would he dislike being kept awake? This is the second consecutive night we spent sleeping in the same bedroom; a result of Lilly's match making mood. I was given the double bed Lilly's parents must have used in the past while Hisao has been using the smaller bed in the corner.

"H-Hisao, d-do you want to talk for a bit?"

"Sure."

I'm wondering if Hisao is thinking about the same thing I am right now. Even though we're girlfriend and boyfriend, we're currently not exactly acting as a couple. Are we supposed to right now?

"Umm...I w-wouldn't mind if you got a little closer."

"Like sit on the edge of your bed? That would indeed talk a little bit easier."

"Y-you c-can lie n-next to m-me if you want."

"I-if you don't mind."

I hear the sound of shuffling steps slowly coming closer. Due to the heavy curtains covering the windows and the absence of street lights outside, the room is pitch black. I hope Hisao won't bump into something like I did when I nearly knocked over Lilly earlier this night. As the shuffling stops, I move a bit to my right to give him some space, and a moment later I hear him get into the bed.

"..."

"..."

This feels awkward. I try to make conversation by asking the first question that pops into my mind.

"H-Hisao, do you often have trouble sleeping?"

"On occasion. It's my medication. It sometimes messes with my sleeping patterns. Sometimes I just wake up in the middle of the night, and sometimes I can't fall asleep no matter how tired I feel."

"I'm sorry."

"How about you? Do you often have bad dreams?"

"S-sometimes. A-about the accident or a-about elementary school. It used to be worse than it is now."

"You've been getting better?"

"Therapy is helping a bit. Though I still take sleeping pills sometimes during periods when things get especially bad, I'm trying not to rely on them too much."

"I met Miss Takawa a few days ago."

"I know. She asked me if she could meet you."

"She seems nice. A bit odd, but nice."

"She... is."

Another silence. I want to say what's on my mind, but I'm not sure how to put it.

"Hisao... How has your h-heart been lately?"

"Not bad. I've responded well to those early morning jogs."

"Nothing happened like... during... that... night?"

I feel him freezing for a moment. We never mentioned "that night" again after we started dating. Even the memory is still painfully awkward for us both.

"No... Not even a small flutter. With luck it'll stay that way. Look at today. We walked to town and back in warm weather, and we had another long walk this evening. I'm not saying I'm in perfect shape yet, but I'm slowly getting better at handling physical activity."

"Because... we're... in a r-relation right now, but I thought you... were worried about your heart and erm..."

I hear him sigh. He probably understands where I am going.

"You want to know why I picked my own bed if I wasn't worried about my heart."

"...we have shared a bed before."

"It's pretty confusing, isn't it? We just started dating. We haven't done anything besides kissing and hugging. And yet we've lost our virginity to one another. Sharing a bed shouldn't be a problem, right? We've gone further than just sleeping next to each other."

"It...is a bit confusing."

"I wasn't sure how you felt about physical intimacy beyond what we've done so far. I don't want to feel the way I felt last time ever again."

"I d-don't understand."

Hisao takes a long pause.

"...I feel that last time, sleeping with me was just a means to an end to you. You didn't want the experience itself, you just wanted me to see you in a different light. I did something to you that you didn't really want. Something very intimate that you didn't really want. Afterwards, when I learned your motivation, I felt like I had my way with you. Like I took advantage of you."

I had no idea he felt this bad about it. It's true I let him have sex with me, but I didn't feel like he forced me to.

"...I... don't really see it that way. I... feel it was me who was t-taking advantage of you. I had ulterior m-motives I didn't tell you about. At least not until later."

"Even so, the whole thing was painful for you, wasn't it?"

"That... last... part was kind of painful, to be honest. But... I've read that... it... hurts for most girls during their first time, so I don't think it was your fault. And there was one thing I enjoyed about the whole thing."

"What was that?"

"People often recoil when they see even part of my face. You... saw much more of me that night. But you still... wanted me."

"Your scars really don't do much to diminish your beauty, Hanako."

He says it with such sincerity that I can't help but smile. I'm still not quite used to the idea of being attractive to someone, but it always feels good when Hisao is flattering me. It makes me want to ease his anxiety in return.

"Hisao... What happened that night... It wasn't the right t-time. But for me, it was at least with the right p-person. I'm happy it was with you. As awkward as it was, it was with someone I r-really, really liked. That's what's important to me. So p-please don't feel bad about this anymore."

I hear him shift, and I suddenly feel a soft kiss on my... nose? I giggle. It has to be tough to kiss someone when you can't see your hand in front of your face.

"Hanako... Have you ever thought about... you know... what it'd be like if we went a step further?"

I feel my cheeks burning when he asks me this question. It seems he's trying to find out if I have a sex drive without actually having to ask me directly.

"I'm not really sure... Not too long ago, I was still considering intimacy something that other people had, but I w-would never have. So I told myself it was something I neither needed nor wanted. But when you showed me the scar on your chest and allowed me to touch it... I found out I enjoyed the physical contact. It really surprised me when I discovered that aspect of myself."

"Was it a pleasant discovery?"

"I... don't really know. I'm still in the process of getting used to the idea. I... do occasionally wonder what it would b-be like if we... became more intimate. But when I think about it for too long, I still get a bit scared. How about you, Hisao? Aren't you scared you'd get heart trouble if you got too carried away?"

"I'm kinda trying to lower the chances of that happening. At this point, I think I should be able to handle something not too intense."

"...Are you... proposing something?"

"Until now, I simply assumed you weren't up to it anyway, but then I realized I should at least make the effort to ask if you'd like to..."

"...l-like to what?"

"Like to make out."

I smile. I realize I still come across as fragile and shy despite my new-found resolve to try and become more confident. I appreciate the fact Hisao is at least making the effort to find out what I really feel and want instead of making assumptions about me, even if they're probably largely correct.

"W-Why so sudden?"

"Circumstances, I guess. We have a big room and a big bed all to ourselves right now. The only person within a mile is Lilly, who's a pretty heavy sleeper and isn't going to barge in on us. We don't get this kind of convenience and privacy at Yamaku. It kinda feels like a shame to waste the opportunity. But on the other hand, I'd hate to do something you're not ready for... again."

I take some time to consider Hisao's words. I enjoy kissing and hugging him. It turned out that I'm not quite as frightened of physical contact as I'd always thought I'd be. I'm admittedly a bit curious. Hisao's right that right now would not be a bad opportunity. The fact that it's too dark for him to actually see me might make me feel more at ease too. But if I want to relax, I have to be sure about one thing.

"W-we c-could g-give it a try. But I... I'm not too sure what I... am or am not... ready for."

I hear Hisao shifting a bit next to me. I then feel him touching my arm and then bringing my hand to his face.

"Any time you feel like it's too much, just pinch my cheek really sharply, and I'll stop right away. Got that?"

"Y-yes."

"Also, it's probably best if you take the active role."

"Ah... M-me t-taking...?"

Judging from Hisao's tone, he likes that idea, but I'm not so thrilled myself. I'm not exactly the most pro-active person in the world, and having this rely on me might make for a very passive experience. Still, since I was the one who voiced reluctance, it makes sense to do it this way. I lean over to the nightstand, pick up and put in my hair clip and turn my head in Hisao's general direction.

"Ummmm...w-what should I do now?"

02

"Could you lie on top of me?"

I take a deep breath, feel my way over to him, carefully straddle him, lie down and adjust my position until I'm fairly certain my face is about on the same level as his.

"Now just take your time and try to relax."

I rest my head on his shoulder, letting his left cheek brush against my own and wait for my heart to stop racing. I'm not sure how long we spend lying like this. Two minutes? Five? Just as I start wondering if this hadn't been a bad idea all along, I feel a sensation on the back of my head.

"H-Hisao?"

...

He's running his hand through my hair.

...

So much for my active role.

...

It feels nice though.

I gently raise my head a bit, so his hand ends up caressing the back of my head. He whispers to me.

"Do you like that?"

"Y-Yes."

Having received my consent, Hisao brings up his other hand and starts using both to stroke the back and sides of my head. As the feelings from his touch wash over me, my body starts to relax.

...

This is nice.

...

It feels like that hug I shared with Lilly when she came back.

...

But better.

...

So much better.

...

Am I supposed to return the favor?

...

Would he like it?

...

Maybe I should try it out.

I move my body a bit to get more comfortable and raise my head a bit more, then place my hand on the side of his face. As Hisao resumes stroking my hair, I nervously start running my fingers through his, hoping he'll start feeling the same thing I am.

"That feels good, Hanako."

His encouragement makes me feel a little bit more confident, and I gently lower my head, letting my forehead rest against his. As I lightly start stroking his neck with my fingertips, his breathing speeds up ever so slightly, and I let out an awkward giggle as I feel his breath brush across the left side of my face. Apparently Hisao is eager to return the favor as his right hand slides down to the nape of my neck and starts caressing it.

...

This is more comfortable than I thought it'd be.

...

It also feels more intimate than that time we actually had sex.

...

After what feels like an hour of petting and caressing, I turn my head to the side. So far Hisao hasn't taken much initiative, content to let me determine the pace - a role I'm slowly growing into. Deciding to take another step closer, I lean in and kiss him on his left cheek. For a second there's no reaction,

before he unexpectedly turns his head, causing his lips to touch mine and making me pull back with a surprised gasp.

As I get ready to return the kiss, a playful idea gets into my head. I carefully approach his mouth with mine until I can feel his breath tickling my lips, stopping what I think is barely an inch away from his face. I quietly count to three in my head and then place an unexpected kiss on his right cheek. As he turns his head again, I swiftly move my head back just a bit so my lips remain just out of his reach. I blow gently on his lips to tease him, then move my head and plant a kiss on his left cheekbone before retreating again as his lips attempt to catch mine.

This is fun.

I move my head again to go for his other cheek, but as I bring my lips down again, I'm surprised to find his own meeting me. As I quickly move back again, I hear a soft chuckle. Determined not to let him catch up to me in this little game of tag, I hold my breath to prevent him from tracking me, then swiftly place a kiss on his right cheek again.

And then on his left cheek.

Near his right eyebrow.

Now he starts holding his breath too to avoid giving himself away, but I won't have any of that. Bracing myself, I gently wiggle my body a bit, causing him to exhale sharply as it rubs against his.

Another kiss on his right cheek...

One on his left ear...

"I-I give up already!"

I giggle at his mock-desperate claim of surrender. I wouldn't have minded keeping this up a little longer, but it looks like Hisao wants to move on.

"Please keep still, Hisao."

I limit myself to a few quick pecks on his mouth first, but when I feel his arms wrap around me I move in for a longer kiss, this time welcoming the touch of his lips. I feel him open his mouth just slightly as we press our lips together. When I carefully pull away after kissing his lower lip for several moments, I feel no anxiety or fear, just a little nervousness and more than a little anticipation. I move in again, this time going for his upper lip. This time he starts returning my kisses.

...

We're really getting into this.

...

"Ow!"

"Sorry."

We mumble a quick apology to each other after we accidentally clash teeth during a slightly too enthusiastic kiss.

...

I wonder if I should...

During the next kiss, I softly tickle his lower lip with my tongue. As we press our lips together, I bashfully move my tongue past his lips, only to retreat with a gasp the moment it meets his.

"Go ahead, Hanako."

Attempt number two then. I do my best to relax and slip my tongue into his mouth again. This time I let his tongue touch mine, though it's mostly passive contact. Is there a right way to do this? It looks so easy on television.

Attempt number three. I try to stroke his tongue with mine a bit. Am I doing this correctly?

As I clumsily explore his mouth with my tongue, I feel his hand stroking my back. It's nice, but he's sticking too much to a scarred area. I doubt he can feel this with my nightgown in the way.

"A little lower."

"Sure."

Our kisses are starting to get more feverish.

...

He uses his hand to gently push my head aside and kisses my neck, causing me to shiver.

...

I wildly ruffle his hair with my hands as I accept his tongue into my mouth.

...

I return the neck kiss he gave me earlier. His body is starting to wiggle under me.

...

The sensation from his hand and his tongue is causing me to start rubbing my body against his as well. I start wondering where this will end.

...

"Hanako....I..."

"H-Hisao..."

"I'd like... Would you want to..."

I know what he wants to say.

"...g-go a-all the way?"

"Yes. Do you...?"

"I... I..."

Part of me would probably like that. But another part of me is still afraid. Afraid of being... penetrated again. Afraid of the pain and awkwardness that came with it last time. And above all... afraid of not being able to enjoy it. Before this night, I might have ignored that fear. Last time, me enjoying it wasn't a priority or even a concern for me. But now that Hisao has told me how awful he felt afterwards about our last night together, I can't bear to sleep with him under false pretenses again. Especially considering how much effort he's made this night to adjust things to my pace. I decide that killing the mood is better than betraying his trust.

03

"I'm s-sorry, Hisao. I c-can't do it y-yet."

He sighs. That was to be expected.

"I understand Hanako. We've already gotten really far."

That's the problem. We've gotten this far and now I'm blue balling you. That has to be frustrating. Please don't pretend it's not. Please don't pretend to be understanding.

"I appreciate you being honest about this. It's okay."

Except that it's not okay. I felt that bulge in your pants just now while we were grinding against each other. And now you're going to sleep on a dissatisfied note. Or worse, sneak off to the bathroom when I'm asleep to hand yourself that happy ending I can't give you.

...

I can't?

A bold idea suddenly pops up in my head. Maybe there IS something I can do.

I want to thank him for tonight. Make him feel good.

It's embarrassing, but not any worse than the intercourse we've had before.

I can do this.

The hardest part is bringing it up. I have to act quickly.

For you, Hisao.

I seek out his lips again and give him a long kiss in an attempt to salvage the mood before it vanishes completely.

"Hisao... I... ummm... I could..."

"Hanako?"

"...if you'd like... I c-could..."

Do it, dammit. Do it before you start thinking too much about this.

"...I c-could... s-s-stroke y-you... d-d-down t-t-there... m-make you f-f-feel g-good."

A silence.

Say something already before I break down and start apologizing for saying this.

"Would you do that, Hanako?"

"Y-yes... Yes."

"In that case... I'm all yours."

Yes!

04

Giving him another quick kiss, I move off of him to give him some room and grin as a thought comes to me.

"H-Hisao... I-I think we should take off your c-clothes. Those pajamas you're wearing are b-borrowed, aren't they?"

I chuckle.

"Yeah, getting these soiled might call down Lilly's ancestors from the heavens to place an ancient Scottish curse on me."

The ridiculous mental image that remark conjures up combined with the tension I was feeling before is too much for me to bear, and I snort with laughter. When I catch my breath, I can hear the rustling of his pajamas as they're being taken off. I softly stroke his leg, and as my hand runs across his boxers, I whisper a final request for confirmation.

"Hisao?"

"Go ahead."

I nervously take hold of his boxers, and he lifts his hips as I take them off before dropping them over the side of the bed. I pull the covers back up to his chin, lie on my side next to him, wrap my left arm around him and sneak my right hand down to his abdomen. Making an attempt to get back in the mood as it was before I got cold feet, I seek out his lips with my own and start kissing him again as I gently tickle his stomach. The fact that he's naked, vulnerable and leaving himself in my hands (and the fact we can't see each other) gives me enough confidence to take the lead. As I start caressing his thighs and hear his breathing accelerate, I suddenly think of something. Letting up my kissing, I move my head to the side of his, playfully kiss his earlobe and then whisper in his ear as I place my hand on his chest. His heartbeat is fairly quick, but steady.

"Hisao, if you start feeling d-distress or chest pain or... anything alarming, just say stop and I'll stop immediately. That or just pinch my side. Okay? My left side."

"Okay."

I resume my kisses and my stroking of his thighs. I feel his breath halt for a moment when I carefully run a finger up and down the length of his member.

...

Then two fingers, one on each side this time.

Another gasp.

...

Then I wrap my fingers around him. I slowly move my hand, playfully squeezing every now and again. As he starts moving his body in tandem with my motions, I start speeding up.

A pleased sigh.

...

As Hisao's breathing becomes even more irregular, I lean in and start frantically kissing the side of his neck. I can tell by the movement of his hips, his breathing and the occasional stifled groan that he's near his limit. As I prepare to give him a final nudge...

"Stop! Hanako, stop, stop, please..."

I quickly let go of him and listen as he struggles to catch his breath. Is he going to have an episode? Did I go too far? I let my hand rest on top of his chest, but his heartbeat, although rapid, seems steady.

"H-Hisao!... Are you... Did I...?"

"It's... okay, Hanako. I'm... perfectly fine."

"Then why did you ask me to stop?"

He chuckles.

"I just didn't want it to end yet."

I breathe a sigh of relief, settle down next to him again and kiss his cheek.

"P-please don't scare me like that anymore."

"Sorry."

We share a short moment of silence.

"Hisao, d-did you like it so far?"

"Yeah, it felt really good. You seem to be having fun as well, Hanako."

I giggle cheerfully.

"I am. I really like making you feel good. It feels good pampering you. This probably feels as good to me emotionally as it does to you physically. Both types of fun are rewarding."

"Can't we have both?"

I reply with a kiss and reach down to pick up where we left off.

"It sounds like you're ready for me to continue."

We soon get back into the rhythm.

"Hmmm, Hanako..."

This even gets me a little turned on.

"...H-Hanako..."

I can do this for as long as you like, Hisao.

"Hanako, w-wait a bit..."

Does he want to say something?

He puts his hand on top of my own as an indicator to stop.

"Hanako...I was actually serious just now."

"About what?"

"When we were making out earlier, I felt good both from giving and receiving. I'd like to keep this going."

"What do you mean?"

"If you...ah...were to switch places with me, I think we can both...you know..."

"W-WHAT?"

"The last time we shared a bed, when I tried to...um...get you ready for intercourse...did that feel good?"

I feel awkward thinking back on that. I didn't exactly hate it, but good was too strong a term. The circumstances were less than ideal back then.

"I...I think l-last time I was t-too nervous to enjoy it much. B-but it d-didn't hurt."

"Maybe I could help you relax this time."

"How?"

"By leaving things up to you and following your lead. That worked very well before. We can stop any time it becomes too much."

"D-do really want to do... this... with me that badly?"

"I won't press you if really don't want to. But if possible, I'd like this to be something I can experience together with you."

I think for a bit. I can't ignore the fact that I warmed up to making out pretty quickly, despite being nervous about it earlier. Would this be the same? Can I do this without freaking out? Hisao entrusted himself to me. I'd like to give him the same level of trust.

"O-okay, let's... try... together... then."

I sit upright and hesitantly pull my nightgown over my head before dropping it onto the floor. Before I can change my mind, I whisper to him.

"G-g-go a-ahead, Hisao."

I lie back and raise my bottom just a bit. I blush heavily as I feel my underwear being pulled down. I wonder if Hisao felt this vulnerable when I took off his.

"S-so, now what?"

"Could you lie on top of me like before?"

"O-okay."

I get on top of him again and am immediately overwhelmed by the sensation of his body against mine. Even when we had sex last time, we didn't get this close to each other. I feel his body warmth like never before.

"And now?"

"Try to relax."

I once again rest my head on his shoulder. I try to remember what helped me relax before.

"C-could you stroke my head again like you did earlier?"

His arms wrap around me. I don't feel them on my upper back very well, but the sensation of my chest being pressed against his is all the stronger for it. I feel his hand stroke the back of my head. As we lie there, I slowly feel my tension ebb away.

"Hisao, isn't this frustrating for you? I-I got you really aroused before, and now you're being forced to slow down again because of me."

"I'm not bothered by it, Hanako. I was the one who suggested to slow down and get you more involved to begin with, wasn't I?"

I nod even though I know he can't see it and seek out his lips. I try to speed up my pace a little bit for his sake, and soon we're back to the intense kisses we shared just before I started pleasuring him. As I pull away for a moment in order for us to catch our breath, he breaks our embrace.

"Hanako... When you think you're ready, could you lie on your back next to me?"

I swallow, gather my courage and slide off of him. He rolls on his side, wraps his left arm around me and starts stroking the side of my face with his other hand.

"Hanako?"

"Y-yes?"

"I'm going to leave the rest up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Could you...guide me?"

What does he mean by that?

...

Should I tell him what to do?

...

Or maybe...

I place my hand on top of his and gently guide it down to my neck. As I let go, Hisao begins stroking the side of my neck.

So that's what he meant.

Following in my footsteps, Hisao starts kissing me in order to increase the stimulation. I take his hand again and speed up the motion slightly.

...

I slowly guide his hand downward until it rests on my collarbone. He starts running his hand across, stroking my left shoulder and then heading back. I start moving my upper torso in response to the sensation.

This feels really nice.

I suddenly notice that his hand is slowly edging down towards my breasts.

Very sneaky, Hisao.

I quickly take his hand and guide it upwards again. The response is a disappointed huff. I let out a giggle.

"Hisao..."

"Yes?"

"Y-you can stroke my chest, if I can stroke yours."

I put my right hand on his chest and softly run it along his scar, smiling at the memory this brings up. When I feel his hand slide down to my breast, it feels a bit awkward, but I'm no longer afraid.

As we fondle each other and a very pleasant feeling starts spreading through my chest, I realize why Hisao wanted me to participate in this so badly.

It really does feel better to do this together.

I work my way up to his neck and am pleased to find out Hisao's hand follows suit. Looks like I found a new way to guide him.

...

I move down his collarbone and across his chest again. And once more the favor is returned.

Then I slide my hand to his lower belly. Both our stroking and breathing becomes heavier as we get closer to each other's private regions.

I kiss him passionately as we start caressing each other's inner thighs. We both took a major step earlier this night and another one is only a few inches away from my fingers.

I... I'm ready for this, I think.

I once again wrap my fingers around him and gasp as his hand slides over my most intimate area.

"Are you alright, Hanako?"

"Just... let me... get used... to... it."

I spread my legs a little bit more and take hold of his hand.

A little higher.

...

A little bit to the left.

...

A little slower.

"C-could you try... continuing... like... this, Hisao?"

The last time Hisao did this to me, I merely felt a tingling sensation that caused my body to become aroused, but didn't do much to ease my nervousness. This time, it's much stronger, and I reel from each sensation his hand sends through my abdomen. I'm getting so absorbed in the experience that I almost miss him calling out to me.

"H-Hanako...ahh...s-stop, stop."

I quickly let go of him. Judging from his heaving breath he wouldn't have lasted longer than a few more seconds.

"D-do you... hahh... want to take a... (gasp)... break, Hisao?"

"I'll take some time to catch my bearings, Hanako. You just lie back and enjoy."

He continues to stimulate me, and as I hang back and focus completely on my own pleasure, the feeling becomes so intense I arch my back and let out a soft moan.

This feels so good.

I start gyrating my sensitive area against his hand.

"F-faster...just a little bit."

I put my hand on his and speed up the pace a bit.

"Mmmmmmm..."

He starts kissing my collarbone and left breast.

I love this.

I guide his hand to make the strokes shorter and firmer.

"H-Hisao... I-like this... ahhh..."

I don't think I'm going to last much longer. The sensation has grown so overwhelming I can barely think straight.

My breathing is ragged and shallow.

I grab hold of Hisao again. I want to do the final stretch together with him.

We're getting there.

He leans over and starts kissing my neck.

Almost.

I feel how he starts making thrusting motions with his hips.

Almost!

The muscles of my abdomen and inner thighs start twitching.

Almost!

He playfully licks my earlobe. That's more than I can take. My body makes a bucking motion, my hips tense up and I feel three... four shocks between my legs, each of them sending a delightful shudder up my spine. I squeeze my lips shut, but can't prevent myself from letting out several stifled moans.

As my climax subsides, I become aware of Hisao again who's still rapidly thrusting his hips. Eager to let him follow suit, I increase the pace of my strokes even more and gently lick his neck. Suddenly, I hear a muffled groan followed by the sensation of something wet hitting my belly. Hisao's body relaxes and slumps against me. For a moment, all that's audible in the room is the sound of our heavy breathing.

...

05

"Hisao? Are you... alright?"

"I-I'm fine... I think."

"Thank goodness."

He shifts and I suddenly feel the covers being pulled back.

"Hisao... You aren't going to...?"

Just then I feel something soft rubbing against my stomach.

"What's that?"

"Handkerchief. I didn't want that stuff to dry up on your tummy."

I giggle. That sounded so sweet.

"You're a real gentleman, Hisao."

"I try."

He pulls the sheets back up, and I snuggle up against him. Laying my head on his chest, I can hear his heartbeat. Still swift, but steady. I sigh contentedly as he puts his arm around me and strokes my head once more.

"What were you about to ask before?"

"Umm... I was afraid you wanted to sleep in your own bed after this."

"Don't be silly."

...

"Hanako, can you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Please still be here when I wake up next morning."

I give him a quick kiss.

"I promise."

"Hanako, did you..."

"I-I enjoyed this, Hisao. Thanks for being so patient with me."

"Me too, Hanako. And I don't mind the slow pace. Gotta watch the old ticker, after all."

I think he was just being polite there. How long did this whole thing take? And how many guys would really want to do the long-winded approach of one baby step at a time until their girlfriend would finally manage to keep her nerves in check? I don't have any personal experience, but I'm pretty sure most guys would get bored with the slow pace and get the desire to quickly skip to the end. It makes me appreciate Hisao all the more.

Tomorrow morning will probably be very awkward, but I promise myself to wake him up with a smile tomorrow.

Hisao's breathing has already changed to the slow and steady rhythm of slumber, and just before I join him, one final thought goes through my mind. Just before he nudged me over the edge, for only a single second, I wanted to go further... wanted him to go further. I smile. With luck, it won't be too long before I'm ready to take another step with him.

06

Chapter 7 (Hanako)

01

Ten more minutes until lunch break. We've already completed the assignment we were given, so now I've taken out one of my library books and am trying to finish a chapter before the school bell rings. Truth be told I'm still a little tense, so it's not going as quickly as I had been hoping for. The reason for the tension I feel is the fact I just completed my first group assignment in class (the occasional assignments Hisao and I do together notwithstanding). Or rather, my first group assignment that didn't end in disaster, like some time ago in science class, when I was struck with a panic attack. And Hisao wasn't even part of the group I worked with today, or things probably would have been less awkward.

Today in Japanese class, we were instructed to work in groups of three people maximum and write a short piece on parliament elections. Hisao immediately got up to join me, only to be pushed back into his seat by Misha and being forced into a heated discussion about having dodged a student council assignment the other day. (I don't think it was meant to be a public argument, but Misha is very easy to eavesdrop on.) I was familiar enough with Shizune and Misha (as well as Hisao's playfully tense relationship with them) to figure out that they were going to use that group assignment as an excuse to drag a promise out of him to make up for it somehow, meaning the chances of Hisao doing group work with me just dropped to exactly zero. A suspicion confirmed by an apologetic shrug on his part.

Just as I got ready to start the assignment on my own, I noticed Hisao was making a gesture with his head towards a point to my right. I followed his gaze and noticed my two neighbors on the right side were the only students not part of a group of three yet. My eyes grew wide as I realized his intention.

Was he telling me to join some other group just like that? I quickly shook my head and gave him a begging look, but he just made a gesture towards Shizune as if to say 'matters are out of my hands'. Later on, I started wondering whether he was really unable to ditch the student council duo or whether this was a subtle attempt on his part to help me widen the circle of people I could have social interaction with.

I took another look at my neighbors only to quickly look away when they caught my gaze. I looked back at Hisao again, and this time he was smiling at me. I knew that expression; I came to know it as his 'everything will be alright'-smile. It didn't do a lot to inspire confidence in me this time, though. In all my time in this class, I could count the words I exchanged with my neighbors on one hand, and I had no clue why they would even want to work with me after I spent the better part of two years trying to avoid even basic interaction with them.

"Ummmm..."

As usual when faced with an unexpected social situation, my mind completely froze up, and I couldn't come up with even a single way to formulate that simple request that most people could make without even having to think about it. The fact that my neighbor is a very outgoing person herself didn't exactly ease my mind.

"E-exc...e-excuse me..."

That got their attention. The girls looked at me, and when I didn't reply, they looked at Hisao who gave them a quick nod. My neighbor gave me a cheerful grin.

"Looking for a group to work with, Ikezawa?"

I gave them a timid nod.

"No probs. Feel free to tag along. Three know more than two, right?"

As I moved my desk over to theirs, my neighbor Naomi wasted no time in making conversation.

"Bet you were disappointed you couldn't work with Nakai this time, weren't you? You two usually do assignments together these days. Heh, I guess the powers that be decided otherwise, didn't they?"

Am I really supposed to answer all of that?

"You're usually not big on group work, aren't you? Didn't something happen that time before in science class? Don't worry, stuff like that happens to the best of us. But you know that, don't you? You're usually stuck with the front row seat when I short out."

The last statement was accompanied by a cheerful wink.

Too many questions!

While I was still reeling from Naomi's verbal machinegun fire, her neighbor Natsume cut in with a question of her own.

"Japanese is one of your stronger subjects, is it not?"

I responded with another meek nod. It's true, Japanese is probably my best subject. It was one of the benefits of being a bookworm. The fact that I was fairly confident I'd be able to pull my weight on this assignment was one of the things that made the whole thing slightly easier.

"Great, then we'll finish this all the sooner."

Naomi seemed eager to begin, and I quickly nodded in order to avoid more conversations. We divided the workload into three parts and got to work. While writing my section of the piece, I occasionally observed my new group mates. Natsume and Naomi remind me a bit of less extreme versions of Shizune and Misha. Natsume wears glasses and has a stern appearance, but isn't as bossy or forceful as Shizune. The most striking part of Naomi's appearance is her hair which, while not dyed like Misha's, is bleached to a distinct light blonde color. Her personality is a bit like Misha's as well - up-beat, loud and a bit hyper, though Naomi's volume control button doesn't seem to be permanently stuck on the max setting. Also, like Shizune and Misha, the two seem together constantly.

We finished the assignment with a good amount of time to spare and my group mates had started on a piece of homework I already finished the other day. If I had been working with Hisao, we'd probably have spent the remaining time talking with one another, but I don't think I'd be able to have small talk with my new group mates... Keeping semi-normal interaction going with them had already drained most of my energy, and the tension I felt during our working session isn't fading nearly as quickly as I hoped.

"Well, CRAP!"

I look at Naomi from behind my book, startled by her sudden exclamation, and see her wrestling with a pair of compasses. She's been playfully fiddling with them over the course of the entire assignment and now she seems to have jammed them somehow.

"Natsume!"

"They were never meant to be used to grind little pieces of your eraser into powder."

"I know. I know. Now can I just..."

"I left mine in my dorm room. I already finished that question this morning before heading to classes."

She lets out a disappointed sigh.

After a few more seconds of trying to get her compasses unstuck, Naomi suddenly turns to me, causing me to instinctively raise my book as if to shield myself.

"Hey Ikezawa, don't you have a pair of compasses I could use? Just for a sec. I'll be really, really careful with them. Okay? Just to complete this little graph. You'll have them back in the blink of an eye. Pretty please with sugar on top?"

"I-I d-don't have any of t-those."

"You don't? Then how did you take care of that problem where we had to draw up that pie chart as part of the answer?"

"I t-t-typed it up."

"Huh?"

I sigh inwardly. I don't think I'd be able to finish a verbal explanation without it taking another hour, so I reach into my bag and just show her the answer sheet I put together the day before, neatly typed out on one of the school's computers. I used the word processor's graph features to generate the pie chart.

"Oh hey, that first answer is totally different from what I had. I wonder if I missed something or if you were simply over thinking the... Eh, never mind. That's pretty neat you put together your answers like that. Do you often use computers to type up your homework?"

Why is she so interested?

"S-sometimes, b-but not v-very often."

I mostly use the school computers to put together essays or other homework that requires a lot of writing. The scar tissue on my right wrist sometimes hampers my movement a bit, so I'm not a very quick writer. Typing out my homework can be a big time-saver at times. The only downer is the fact the computer lab has no quiet little corners, meaning I only use the place when it's nearly deserted, which isn't very often.

Naomi seems satisfied with my answer, and I return to my book. As I turn another page, I'm starting to notice something is different. Naomi and Natsume are no longer working on their homework, but are speaking to each other in whispers too quiet for me to make out, and they occasionally look in my direction.

I wonder if it's about me. I get very uncomfortable. Are they gossiping about me? Both are members of the newspaper club which is responsible for writing and printing the school newspaper, and Naomi in particular loves to keep on top of the local rumors floating around. Is acute indiscretion an officially recognized condition? If so, she'd probably be diagnosed with it. As if to confirm my suspicions, Naomi suddenly addresses me with a conspiring smile.

"Hey, Nakai is still your boyfriend, isn't he? I mean, you guys haven't broken up yet or anything, right?"

I visibly reel back from the impact of this blunt question and barely manage to shake my head.

"W-we're s-still d-dating."

"You know, as of last week you're officially dating a geek. You're not put off by nerdy traits in your guys, are you?"

Your guys? She's talking as if I've been dating boys ever since I enrolled here. I know what this is about though. A new club was formed last week and our homeroom teacher Mutou is in charge of it. It's a science club, of course... The only kind of club he'd have interest in setting up. And I'm currently dating its sole member. It's a bit weird, but Hisao said the club's main activity, reading and discussing scientific literature, has been pretty fun so far.

"Er..."

"It's kinda sad there's still only one member though. I suppose you're not joining to flesh out membership?"

I did actually offer to join, but Hisao shot that suggestion down almost immediately. "Science isn't really your thing, Hanako," he told me. "It'd just feel like class to you. If you want to join a club, you'd be better off finding something that actually captures your interest." I couldn't really argue with that. Unlike Hisao, who seems to have a knack for deciphering Mutou's convoluted lectures, I'm not exactly a star pupil in science class, and it's hardly my favorite subject.

"N-no, I'm n-not."

"But you won't be able to hang out with your boyfriend after school hours, because he's in a club and you're not, right?"

What is she trying to get at?

Natsume, who had remained silent during the whole interrogation put her hand on Naomi's arm to indicate she wanted to say something.

"What Naomi is trying to ask you is if you'd be willing to help out the newspaper club with an emergency situation for a few days."

"Hey, I was still getting to that point!"

"H-help out?"

Is this a veiled recruiting attempt? And why me? There's probably dozens of other students more suitable.

"Yeah, you probably know we're both members there. Most of the members write or collect stories for the school newspaper, but we also have someone to put them together on the computer before we send the whole thing to the copy shop. At least, we usually do."

"Unfortunately, the girl who usually does the job is out of commission for a little while. She injured herself a few days ago and certainly won't be able to help before the deadline."

"Yeah, she broke her hand after tripping outside her dorm room. She has this thing called os...osto-something. Anyway she breaks easily. And now we need someone who can do the data entry and some minor editing jobs in her place for a few days."

"B-but w-w-why me?"

"There aren't that many students here who aren't already part of another club or don't have other tasks like class representative duties to tend to and who are also capable with computers. When we saw the way you made a digital print of your homework, we thought you might be able to help us out."

"Yeah, I mean, it's not a really complex task. And there's not a lot of distractions there either. The place the club uses has a small side room where we keep the computers and archives."

I really don't know about this. The idea of getting involved in a club with nothing but people I'm unfamiliar with sounds terrifying.

"You don't have to decide right now, you know? But it'd be good if we got a yay or nay before the end of tomorrow."

"Well...I..."

While I'm still fumbling with my words, the school bell sounds, and most people immediately start getting up. Hisao collects his things, quickly gets away from Shizune and Misha and approaches my desk.

"Hey Hanako. Sorry about not being able to team up. Did you complete the assignment?"

"Y-yes, we even managed to finish ahead of time."

"Great. Let's head to the tea room, then."

Phew. Saved by the cavalry.

"S-sure, I'll be with you in a second."

As Hisao starts heading towards the exit, Naomi suddenly addresses me again.

"Hey Ikezawa, just to reassure you; this isn't a recruiting attempt, though we always welcome new members of course. But if you'd be willing to help out the newspaper club, we'd be really thankful. Think about it, okay?"

Why is she shouting like that? I'm sitting right in front of her.

Without waiting for a reply, Naomi and Natsume gather their belongings and walk off, past Hisao who has turned around and is looking at me with a curious expression on his face. Wait... Did he overhear?

"That sounded pretty interesting, Hanako."

I can only sit there with my mouth agape as I realize that my cavalry has just been turned into Naomi's cavalry instead.

02

"Were you really asked to join a club?"

As expected, the main talk of our lunch break was Naomi's proposal. Lilly was understandably surprised to hear of this sudden development.

"I-it's not really about joining. They have a deadline for the end of the week and need some help."

"Have you already decided what to do?"

I haven't. On the one hand, I must admit I'm a bit curious. On the other hand, Naomi and Natsume, with whom I've never even really interacted before, are the most familiar people in there, and I can't really say their presence is a calming factor for me. While I don't think Naomi is the kind of person to hold a grudge, the fact remains that if I mess up or disappoint somehow, classes will become much more uncomfortable. Naomi and Natsume will still be my neighbors until the end of the school year.

"N-no, I haven't."

"Someone told me not too long ago that it's important to seize opportunities if they're handed to you on a platter like this."

Hisao has decided to jump into the fray too. I roll my eyes at his remark. Those are the exact same words I used last week to convince him to give Mutou's science club idea a chance. At first he was reluctant, afraid he'd have less time to spend with me. The last thing I wanted to do was hold him back, so I did my best to convince him to give the whole thing a try. I knew the subject interested him, and I hoped this would also encourage him to make more definite plans for his future. He consistently scores the highest marks in class in Mutou's subject, and I genuinely believe that he'd do very well if he went for a career in that direction.

"I-I know I said that last week. I'm not ruling the opportunity out r-right away."

"You could choose to see it as a sign that fate is extending you a helping hand."

By breaking somebody else's? That's kind of a cruel way to motivate someone. Fate must know how easily I can be guilt tripped.

I merely nod. I don't believe the work itself will give me much trouble. What scares me is the idea of being thrown into a group of unfamiliar people who might stare at my scars, who might be put off by my stammering (which always gets worse whenever I'm feeling nervous), my shyness and inability to make conversation. A few weeks ago, I was still the 'shy kid who kissed her first boyfriend in public' to people, but tomorrow I might be the 'shy kid who panics at the most mundane things' once again.

"Anyway, if you're considering it, it might be best to go this afternoon. I could pick you up afterwards when I'm done with my club meeting. If you're nervous and wait until tomorrow, you might lose sleep over it."

That's a pretty good point. Knowing myself, I'd probably mull over it all night long, and I'd only become more prone to messing up.

"O-okay, I'll give it a t-try after classes t-today."

Lilly claps her hands excitedly upon hearing my words.

"Wonderful. I hope you two will be willing to join me for some tea tonight. I'd really like to hear how things played out."

I smile. It's been a while since we last sat together in Lilly's room to talk and relax. Having something to look forward to will make things easier.

"T-that would be nice."

"We'll be there, Lilly."

03

"So while the classroom is the place we use as an editorial office, most of the editing takes place here. We have two computers here, though only one is regularly used. The other's more like a digital archive. You can take a look at it later for examples of how we've been doing things. And here's the cabinet where we store most of our equipment. It isn't very large as you can see. Oh hey, you're not claustrophobic, are you?"

"N-n-no, I'm n-not."

Naomi was visibly surprised when I showed up at their club's classroom after school, but wasted no time giving me a brief tour. Good thing only she and Natsume were around when I arrived.

"I think Jun, the girl who is usually doing this, has some templates saved which she uses for the various pages of each issue. But that's not really the number one priority we have at this point. The most important thing to do now is to get all the stuff we have digital. By the way, do you have any questions so far?"

"Ummm... s-so I j-just t-type up the a-articles you wrote?"

"Eager to get started, huh? Neat."

More like eager to end this one-sided conversation.

Naomi opens the nearby cabinet and fishes out several small digital recording devices and a flash drive. Putting them and a small pile of hand-written notes on the nearby desk, she makes a sweeping gesture over it.

"Here's what we have so far! Jun has already made a folder for the upcoming issue and a shortcut on the desktop. This memory stick is from Kaoru. He likes to type up all his articles himself, so all you have to do is copy them to the right folder and then print me a copy to look it over."

She takes out one of the recorders and picks up a small USB cable from the desk.

"Several of our members use these to compose their contributions. Hideki's completely blind and not too techno-savvy, so he just dictates his articles. Natsume uses these too whenever her joints are hurting. Like... the last few days. Anyway, just plug one of these in with this cable here, and the application for playing the contents should start automatically. It'll be easier than rewinding and replaying manually. Always check the sections at the very end first. They often contain comments on whether to omit or alter certain portions. And the written notes here just contain articles and interviews by the rest."

"I-I'll s-start p-putting these in then."

"Cool. I'd do this myself, but I can't sit in front of monitors for very long for a while. Nurse's latest orders. I can be a bit sensitive to them. They sometimes cause, you know, short-circuiting."

I know alright. Naomi's reason for attending Yamaku is a pretty heavy case of epilepsy, and over the years, she's had several harsh episodes right next to me in class. The first time she fell out of her chair and started thrashing around on the floor got me so riled up I couldn't sleep for days. I'm still not completely used to it.

"Anyway, be sure to let the computer do a spelling and grammar check on everything to save ourselves some trouble later. You have any questions, Natsume and I'll be in the other room."

"A-alright."

Having left Lilly's room, I unlock the door to my own bedroom and prepare to kiss Hisao goodnight and retire for the day when he stops me.

"Can I come in for a little while?"

"S-sure."

We go in, and he sits next to me on the bed.

"You're going back to the newspaper club tomorrow, aren't you? Even though you said you didn't know yet."

"I... I think I want to at least finish what I started today."

That isn't the only reason. I also want to start feeling more reliable. For a long time, I've felt like a useless person, unable to be there for others. Today, I had an opportunity to deconstruct that belief, but my social anxiety nearly ruined it for me. Even though Naomi and Natsume were friendly, I felt on edge all the time. By the time we went back to the dorms, I felt exhausted. Even though we just had tea with Lilly, I'm still tense all over.

"You look tired. And tensed up."

"D-do you think I s-should skip tomorrow?"

"I don't think I can make that decision for you. But if it helps, I might be able to help you relax a little bit. Do you want to?"

He sits back a bit, spreads his legs and gestures me to sit in front of him. I smile.

"Y-yes, please."

I sit in front of him, drape my hair over my shoulders and gently pull the shoulders of my nightgown away, causing it to slide down to just above my breasts. I let my chin rest on my chest and try to relax. I hear him rub his hands together for a bit and then feel one touch my exposed left shoulder.

"Wow, your shoulders and your neck are really stiff this time."

"I'm... not very good with people, so situations like these will probably always cause me stress."

"Even though people were friendly today?"

"I-It's not something rational. I really wish it was. It'd be a lot easier to control."

He starts carefully rubbing and kneading my neck and shoulders. We've been giving each other these little massages for a while now, and I've really come to enjoy them. While I can't feel the sensation of his hand touching and rubbing the skin of my right shoulder, I still feel the result in my muscles there afterwards. It almost feels like I'm challenging my condition this way.

"But it'll get less as you get used to it, right? You used to be awkward in my presence too, remember?"

"Y-yes. It will get less as long as I can manage to keep going. At least, I hope it will."

"Then we'll keep helping you relax afterwards. Lilly and me. We'll just repeat this evening tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow. Until it's no longer necessary."

"T-thank you, Hisao."

We remain silent for a few minutes as Hisao finishes massaging my shoulders, neck and upper back. He moves back, gives a quiet nod to me, and I lie down and let my head rest in his lap. I close my eyes as his hands start massaging my scalp and temples.

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes."

...

"Hanako?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you have any plans for the upcoming weekend?"

"Not really."

"Would you like to go on a date the upcoming Saturday?"

"Sure."

"Great. We'll have a bite to eat at the Shanghai around six and then be on our way."

"Do you already have something planned?"

"Yep. I was already planning it before this whole newspaper club business came up."

"What is it?"

"A surprise."

"Awww."

Hisao finishes his massage with a ruffle of my hair. I get up and fix the shoulders of my nightgown.

"Loosened up a bit?"

"Yes, it really helped."

As I turn around to face him, Hisao gives me a playful wink.

"If you want me to give you a more extensive massage..."

As I grasp the meaning behind his remark, I reflexively turn my head away although I doubt my attempt at hiding my extensive blush is successful. Lately there have been a few times we started with a mutual backrub and ended up... doing... what we did that night in Hokkaido.

"N-n-not t-this t-time."

"Okay."

"Ummm..."

"Yes?"

"C-can I return the favor, Hisao?"

"You don't really need to. I'm not feeling tense right now."

As he gets up from the bed, I grab hold of his hand.

"Umm... P-please?"

Hisao gives me an extended analytical stare that makes me nervous, but then gives a quick nod, sits down in front of me and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

"Alright then, Hanako."

05

"Nice! You got all content digital now?"

"Y-yes. Everything."

"Great, that was pretty quick overall."

It was more work than I expected. Especially the audio recordings took a while to type up. But now all articles and interviews are saved as documents.

"T-thanks."

"Could you print them all out? The pictures and templates for all the pages too. And then come and sit here next to me."

"I-I'm not done yet?"

"I can't force you to do more than you want, but there's still something else to do and we're getting to the part that I think you'll like."

I simply nod and return to the computer room. A few minutes later I return to Naomi with a stack of paper containing everything I digitized over the last two days. Naomi is usually loud and somewhat chaotic, but in her role of editor-in-chief she becomes a bit more serious and structured than usual and I have an easier time keeping up (and putting up) with her.

"So here's the templates we have for each page of the newspaper. Now we're gonna have to see what articles go where. We have the front page for the main article, five pages for internal news, three pages for external news, one page for advertisements, one page for columns and one page for sponsor-related stuff."

"So n-now what?"

"Each article has a number. So now we take a few empty sheets of paper and each try to come up with a layout that'll get us the articles in the places we want."

"T-two layout proposals?"

"It's nice to have a second opinion. Just try to estimate how much space each article will take up and how much redundant content each article has that can be cut or shortened."

We spend the next hour trying to come up with our own layout. I do my best not to look in Naomi's direction in order to avoid copying her idea. After I hand in my proposal, she puts the two sheets of paper side by side.

"Looks like we have similar ideas on a lot of stuff. But I didn't think of putting that article about the exposition into external news instead of internal."

"I-I thought i-it could fit b-both. I-it's being organized b-by a teacher from here, b-but t-together with an ex-external p-party and n-not on the school grounds."

"Maybe. Maybe. It'd save us from having to severely truncate that story about the baseball tournament. Okay, we'll go with my layout with the exposition story moved from page five to page eight instead. Could you paste the contents into the template pages? You'll run outside the borders in several places, but we need to know what articles to trim or reword a bit. You can fiddle a bit with the pictures on page two, five and six as long as the faces remain recognizable. Let's get started."

"Y-yes."

I quickly get to work. We have one and a half day to get everything done. I'll have time to relax this evening, but until then, I feel pressed to work as swiftly as possible.

06

Barely breathing, I wait as Lilly runs her slender fingers across the last page of the newspaper's Braille edition. Since she appears to be getting close to the end, her fingers must be near the staff section right now. Suddenly, her fingers stop and skim over a section a second time. It looks like she read the part that bears my name.

"Assistant Editor: Hanako Ikezawa."

Lilly breaks into a dazzling smile as she reads the line I knew would catch her attention. A smile that proves very infectious.

"Hanako, this is great."

I nod humbly, but in truth I'm very proud of the result. It took a lot of effort, but we managed to meet the deadline and get the newspaper printed today. Everyone at the newspaper club was very satisfied

with this latest issue. Tomorrow, the student council will be distributing it among the rest of the student body, but I couldn't wait that long and took three copies in advance. One for Hisao, one for myself and a Braille edition for Lilly.

"Hey Hanako, is it difficult to create a newspaper in Braille?"

I nod my head.

"The newspaper club has software that can convert normal documents into a file type that a Braille printer can work with. I've used it myself yesterday. It's a lot of work, but there's a member at the club who can read Braille and helps us with this. I just operate the software according to his instructions."

Hisao laughs and playfully ruffles my hair.

"I didn't know my girlfriend had this nerdy side to her."

Before I can think up a reaction of my own, Lilly is already eagerly pouncing on his remark.

"Wouldn't that make her a perfect match for the current president of the science club, Hisao?"

Hisao's only reply is a mock-offended huff that makes both of us burst out in giggles.

"I'm not going to argue that point."

"A wise decision, Hisao."

"So Hanako, do you have any plans to continue this?"

"T-this was only a temporary solution to meet this week's deadline. But they said they'd welcome any help I could offer them."

"It sounds like they want you to stick around."

"I-I might give it another try next week. Maybe."

"Sounds like a great plan. Where were they this afternoon anyway? The club's classroom was deserted when I dropped by."

I smile a bit sadly at that.

"After a new issue is printed and handed over to the student council for distribution, the club always goes into town to relax and celebrate the release in one of the coffee shops there."

Lilly frowns a bit at my explanation.

"And they did not invite you to come along as well?"

"They did. It's just... If I went along, I don't think I'd be able to relax enough to have fun. All I'd be doing would be watching the others have fun."

That was pretty much the gist of it. This week, I've been forced to communicate with the club members in order to get things done, and I found that as long as the conversation remained strictly about the tasks at hand, I could manage with a bit of effort, but in the face of any small talk, I'd quickly freeze up. I didn't think I'd add much to the social event the club was planning, and it'd be better if I didn't go and attend. I can be on my own just fine, but being at a celebration and being the only one not having fun never fails to make me feel terribly lonely. I felt pretty good about the release and didn't want to do anything that might ruin my mood.

"Maybe if you spend enough time there, they'll grow on you."

"M-maybe."

We spend the rest of the time making small talk with me occasionally answering questions about last week's activities until Lilly lets out a small yawn from behind her hand that we take as a cue to retire for the night. As Hisao and I rise to return to our dorm rooms, Lilly navigates her way around the table and approaches us.

"Hanako, it seems unfair that the rest of the club got to have a celebration, and the person who helped them out of a difficult spot did not. Maybe you can see this little tea party as your own private celebration."

"I-I think I'll do that."

"Hanako..."

07

Suddenly, Lilly gets close to me and wraps her arms around me in a warm embrace. I let out a startled gasp.

"...I think you did a terrific job this week."

"Lilly's right. You really did."

Without warning, Hisao also hugs me. For a second, this weird three-way hug takes me off-guard. Then I return the embrace, wrapping one arm around each of them and gently pulling them closer. It really feels nice. It feels like the way things felt in Hokkaido while we were staying there.

A small disabled family.

My family.

I suddenly feel a lump in my throat. I want to laugh and cry at the same time. Are Lilly and Hisao feeling the way I'm feeling right now?

I sniffle briefly.

"L-Lilly...H-Hisao..."

"Yes, Hanako?"

I love you. I love you both so much. Please let me be here for you the way you're here for me.

"...t-thank you."

We break the embrace and I quickly wipe my eye. As Lilly sees us off, she smiles at me.

"Enjoy your date tomorrow."

"Thanks. I'm sure we will. And um... Lilly... I... um... really enjoyed our time together this week. W-we should hold these tea ceremonies more often again."

For a split-second Lilly's expression seems sad, but before I can react the door closes, and the moment is gone.

"Can I come in for a little while?"

"S-sure."

We go in and he places his hands on my shoulders.

"I thought I felt it earlier. You're not nearly as tense as you were during the last few days."

"Today I didn't have much stress, just the printing process and delivery of the papers - and then the tea ceremony with you and Lilly."

"So I guess you won't be needing a shoulder massage today."

"I-I'm not sure yet."

I doubt I need my shoulders or neck loosened up, but I don't want him to leave yet.

This week was tough.

But we're going on a date tomorrow, and I'm looking forward to it.

A fitting conclusion to a stressful week.

I kinda made another important step this week.

Maybe I've earned a little something extra.

Maybe we've both earned something.

Should I...?

"H-H-Hisao...?"

"Yeah?"

I blush.

"Ummm... T-that e-e-extensive m-massage you o-offered earlier t-this w-week...?"

He grins.

"That offer is still valid, Hanako."

"...s-share o-one t-together?"

"I'd love to."

He removes his socks and shoes and sits on my bed. I open one of my drawers, take a few tissues to avoid us messing up my blanket too much and then turn off the lights. I feel my way over to the bed, position myself in front of him and lean forward for a kiss.

"R-ready, Hisao?"

"I'm all yours, Hanako."

08

Chapter 8 (Hanako)

01

"The right one, focus on the right one!"

"Y-yes!"

I aim my gun and a moment later the cyborg who just ambushed us from the nearby niche goes down in a hail of sparks. In the meantime, Hisao is struggling to hit another cyborg shooting at us from a vehicle straight ahead, but he has difficulty getting a clear shot due to several allied soldiers running ahead of us and blocking the line of fire.

"Cover me, Corporal Ikezawa!"

I giggle, more than eager to play along.

"A-affirmative, Sergeant Nakai."

We take aim at the main attacker and unleash a torrent of bullets onto his head and chest.

"Mission cleared!"

At the mechanical announcement, we both drop the gun-shaped controllers we've been holding while the next mission starts loading up.

"H-Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you played these kinds of games before?"

"Before I had my heart attack, I sometimes visited game centers with friends. These rail shooters were among the kinds of things we used to play. The ones I played were much more primitive than this one though. Technology sure speeds along."

"Get ready!"

As another droning announcement indicates we're about to start the next level, we take up the gun units again and ready them.

"You know, I never suspected that the next time I'd be visiting a game center, it'd be as part of a date."

I smile. An arcade center isn't exactly a place the average teenager would take his girlfriend to, but I guess I'm not exactly the average girlfriend either. In a way, it was a pretty clever idea on Hisao's part. While there are quite a few people around, the hall itself is rather dark so my scarring isn't very noticeable, especially since I'm also wearing my hat. And while we're playing games, there's no need for small talk.

"I...I really like it so far."

This time we're on top of some vehicle chasing an enemy truck.

"Have you played many video games in the past, Hanako?"

Several enemy troops appear on the roof of the truck and start shooting at us. We quickly return fire, each of us trying to focus on different enemies.

"N-not many. We had an old Super Famicom at the orphanage that was donated by one of the staff members whose son was given a more recent system for his birthday. It was pretty popular with the other kids, so I didn't get around to using it very often."

We clear the roof of the truck. Now what?

"They have a retro section here as well. We could check it out later. We might run into some familiar titles."

"Sure."

Suddenly explosive charges are being tossed at us from inside the truck. A big blast and our life meters drop down by 20%.

"Hey, how the heck are we supposed to deal with that?"

We both try shooting the vehicle, but nothing happens. Another charge is tossed and now our life meters are at 60%.

"T-the tires perhaps?"

Again, nothing. Another charge gets tossed, but as Hisao shoots at it, it explodes prematurely and the enemy truck shakes from the blast.

"We're supposed to shoot the charges before they reach us!"

Another charge gets tossed. This time I intercept it and the truck shakes even more.

"Good shot, Hanako."

"They're always coming from the same point."

Another charge is blown, but this time the truck starts moving from side to side.

"Oh come on!"

We miss the next two charges and now we're at 20%. Hisao gets the next one and the back of the truck ignites.

"D-did we do it?"

Then one more charge is thrown from the burning truck, the screen turns red and a big countdown appears.

"Blast!"

I hastily reach for my purse and take out a coin, so we can continue. But as I bend down to slide it into the slot...

"Ouch!"

"OW!!!"

Something hits me in the head, causing me to drop the coin. I quickly get down on my knees to retrieve it before it rolls under one of the cabinets. As I grab it and look behind me, two things draw my attention.

One is the arcade cabinet we were standing in front of with a big "GAME OVER" message on the screen.

The other is my boyfriend, also kneeling on the floor and looking at the screen, then looking at me. His one hand is holding a coin as well. His other hand is rubbing his forehead.

As the ridiculousness of the situation sinks in, I press my hand to my mouth in order to stifle a burst of laughter that would surely attract the attention of the other people around us. Hisao merely chuckles while wearing a silly grin on his face.

We both did the exact same thing at the exact same time.

Hisao lets out a resigned sigh.

"I don't know about you, but I don't feel like playing through those previous stages again. Let's go and do something else."

"O-kay."

I look at Hisao as he makes his way past the rows of arcade machines with me in tow. He's not wearing the usual sweater vest he usually has on when not wearing his school uniform. Instead, he's wearing a shirt I picked out for him during our shopping trip in Hokkaido. I kinda like the way it looks on him, though I suspect he's also wearing it to stand out less in our current environment. As we reach a quieter area, Hisao suddenly stops. This corner of the hall contains several air hockey tables.

"Wanna play a little match, Hanako?"

"Sure."

I walk over to the table closest to the corner and insert a coin. The table hums to life, the display on the rail around the playing field lights up to reveal two zeros, and a cool breeze starts to blow on the table's surface. I look around to confirm no other people are in the immediate vicinity and use my hair clip to move my hair lock out of the way just enough to prevent it from creating a blind spot in my peripheral vision. I pick up a mallet, take the puck from the tray beneath my goal and place it on the table.

"Ready, Hisao?"

"Bring it on."

I launch the puck towards him. He hits it towards the right railing. I deflect the puck with more luck than skill. Then he sends the puck straight ahead before I can react.

TSCHAK

1:0

I fish the puck out of my tray and place it in front of my mallet again.

"Hey Hanako, it wasn't necessary for you to pay up back there."

I bat the puck across the field. It ricochets off his mallet and goes straight towards me again. I aim for the left rail and hit the puck towards it.

"But you were the one who paid for the first credit."

tic - TSCHAK

1:1

"I offered to foot the bill for this entire visit, didn't I?"

"Y-you really don't have to."

I launch the puck towards him again, but this time he tilts his mallet causing the puck to get stuck under it.

Isn't that officially a foul?

"You'd rather I didn't or you really don't want me to?"

"Huh?"

"That day we started our relationship, you were worried that you were useless. That you weren't able to do anything for the people you cared about. Do you still feel that way?"

He takes his mallet off the puck and gently bats it in my direction. I stop it with my hand, take aim and hit it towards the rail near me, causing it to fly across the field in a frantic zigzag, but he catches it and hits it back in a similar manner. I try to deflect it, but accidentally bounce it into my own goal.

TSCHAK

2:1

"I'm not really sure. I... don't... think... I... do."

He picks up the puck and launches it towards the right rail, but this time I deflect it towards the left rail in time. He hits it under the same angle and we repeat this pattern several times until I change the angle just a little bit and the puck slides into his goal.

TSCHAK

2:2

"I don't think there's need to doubt yourself. I mean, we often study together. You supported me in getting into the science club. And I have lots of fun hanging out with you."

"S-so, isn't everything okay then?"

He bats the puck hard into my left corner so it bounces out of my reach before I can react. Then the right corner. Then the left again. Then the right. As I move my mallet to the left in order to catch where I predict the puck will go next, he sends a straight shot right into my goal.

TSCHAK

3:2

"There's something I noticed lately. Something about our relationship."

I try the zigzag shot again. He deflects it, so I try the zigzag on the other rail. This breaks through his guard.

TSCHAK

3:3

"W-what is it?"

TSCHAK

4:3

"Whenever I help you with your science homework..."

TSCHAK

4:4

"...you insist on doing some Japanese exercises with me in return."

TSCHAK

5:4

"Whenever I give you a shoulder rub to ease your stress..."

TSCHAK

5:5

"...you insist on returning the favor, even if I'm not stressed myself."

TSCHAK

6:5

"Whenever we go on a date..."

TSCHAK

6:6

"...you always insist on paying at least half. Even if I say the whole thing's on me."

TSCHAK

7:6

"What's wrong with having a give-and-receive relationship?"

TSCHAK

7:7

Hisao takes the puck out of the tray, but doesn't immediately place it onto the field.

"It feels off sometimes. As if you're keeping a tally. Trying to carefully balance things out each time. Making sure you never receive more than you give. That's not a give-and-receive relationship. That's more like a give-and-pay-back-relationship. I enjoy doing things for you, but only if you don't see those things as debts that must be paid off as quickly as possible."

I fall silent as I try to recall those moments and what I felt at the time. Was it fear? Fear of us once more slipping into a caretaker-caretakee relationship if I didn't actively prevent it from happening? Fear of me depending more on him than him on me? Fear of being deemed useless? I feel embarrassed upon being called out on this, as if I got caught with my hand in a cookie jar.

"You have faith in me, don't you Hanako? I'm not gonna walk out on you just like that. I feel there's a whole lot more between us than just a list of favors and counter favors. This isn't how intimate relationships are supposed to work."

I know that, of course. Just like I know that whenever I have to pass through a crowd, the odds of everyone in there noticing my scarring at exactly the same moment and all of them staring at me at once is pretty close to non-existent, but I'm still terrified of it happening. None of my anxieties really make sense from a rational point of view, but that doesn't make them any less real for me. If Miss Yumi is to be believed, anxieties don't go away overnight just like that, nor can they be dismissed with logic. What was it she said? Something about the heart not listening to reason, only to experiences?

I watch Hisao place the puck back on the table and prepare for another assault. We pass it back and forth several times before it slips past my mallet.

TSCHAK

8:7

"I'm not saying I don't enjoy getting a backrub in return on occasion, but it shouldn't be mandatory."

TSCHAK

9:7

"I really enjoy the lunches you bring along for me every so often. I'm not sure if you were expecting..."

"No, no, no, no... I really d-don't need you to r-return the favor. I r-really enjoy m-making them f-for you."

As I blurt out a denial of his suggestion, the puck zips into my goal slot. Looks like Hisao made his winning point.

TSCHAK

10:7

"Just like I enjoy doing things for you on occasion. Giving and receiving can both be fun in their own way. I don't think we should keep score... Trying to keep things exactly even will only make our relation appear rigid and unnatural."

I nod. I understand what he's trying to tell me.

"I-I have faith in you, Hisao. Do you also h-have faith in me?"

"I do, Hanako."

"I-I'm trying, and I promise to t-try even harder from n-now on."

Hisao walks over to me and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"That's enough for me, Hanako. Thanks."

He gives me a sly grin.

"We could give a try right now if you like."

"Umm... what do you mean?"

"Would you be okay if I foot the bill for the rest of the evening? Or at least the majority of it?"

Not really. I really want to show Hisao I got the point he was trying to make earlier, but I want to share in the costs too, if possible. Suddenly, an idea pops into my head.

"Umm... I have another idea. W-we could play rock-paper-scissors before we start a game. The winner p-pays until we move on. S-so if you win every contest, you cover the entire evening."

"And if you win every time, everything'll be on you, right?"

"That's right. But I p-promise I'll accept the outcome, no matter w-what it is."

"Okay then. But perhaps we can do something more practical than rock-paper-scissors. Something that never results in a tie."

"What do you suggest?"

"How about flipping a coin?"

"O-okay."

We decide on sides and then head over to the retro section Hisao brought up earlier.

"See anything you like?"

"Hmmm...let's try that one."

We walk over to the machine, Hisao looks at the coin slot, then at me and gives a nod. I take a coin from my purse, toss it up, catch it and place it on my left hand.

"T-t-tails."

"That's your side. We should pick four credits for cooperative games and three for competitive."

I slip three coins into the slot, and we both press our respective start button.

I think I remember how some of the moves are meant to be done.

As the announcer calls the start of the fight, Hisao's character lets out a roar and flies at me immediately.

Ouch. He's not kidding around. Pulling the stick away makes you block attacks, right?

He approaches me again, but this time I deliver a kick to push him back. Hisao is stronger and faster, but I've got better reach.

He moves in again and we trade several blows. I manage to grab him and throw him away from me.

I think it was a quarter-circle motion with the joystick.

After two tries, I manage to shoot a projectile at him. He jumps over it, but I manage to nail him with a kick as he lands.

The game's announcer confirms my victory. The second round begins, and I manage to block another flying attack from Hisao.

"Hisao?"

I'm getting the hang of the projectile motion and start shooting a stream of fireballs at Hisao in order to keep him at bay.

"Yes?"

He gets a few hard blows in after jumping my projectiles, but I manage to regain the upper hand after a successful throw.

"When we left Lilly's room yesterday, I noticed she looked sad for a moment."

I start shooting fireballs again, this time of varying speed in order to keep him on his toes and manage to wear him down enough to win the second round.

"Are you sure?"

"It was for a split-second. Before she closed the door."

We're back at the character select screen and Hisao picks another fighter to play with.

"Why would she be sad?"

"I'm not sure. All I said was that I'd like to have these kinds of tea parties more often."

The second match starts and I try the strategy I used to win the last battle, but this time Hisao shoots my projectiles out of the air with his own.

"I wouldn't call that a particularly depressing statement."

The round ends with a timeout after a long fireball war that I lose after messing up the motion a few times.

"I'm... a bit worried, Hisao. I wonder if Lilly is really giving us space to be on our own or if there's something that's bothering her."

"Something that's bothering her?"

This time I try to be more aggressive and trip him up by sliding under his projectiles. It works a few times until Hisao starts throwing projectiles at my feet instead.

"C-causing her to spend less time with us than before. She's often missed lunch in the tea room these days in favor of class representative duties, and until this week, we haven't really been to her room either."

"Well, she has been scarcer than usual lately, but I'm not sure if that means something's on her mind and if so what it could be that bothers her."

I try to switch to jumping attacks, only to find out my character is much too slow for that tactic, and I end up losing the second round as well after being knocked out of the air several times.

"Maybe...us?"

"Us?"

"I s-sometimes wonder if she... likes you too?"

I take a moment to pick my character for the final match and decide on a speedier fighter.

"Lilly having feelings for me?"

She never admitted it, but the last time I asked her she ended up reversing the question instead of answering it.

The first round is quickly devolves into a slugfest with me taking some time to get used to fight without projectiles and Hisao taking some time to learn how to deal with a faster opponent. The round ends with us taking a simultaneous blow that depletes the last of my energy.

"If t-that were true... being with you and me would be p-painful for her, right?"

The second round ends more favorably for me as I start figuring out a pattern in the altitude of Hisao's projectiles and am able to evade them with slidings and quick jumps long enough to whittle down his health.

"I'm not sure if that's the case. If Lilly was interested in me, she'd probably have flirted with me or something. I don't think she'd stay completely passive."

No, that's more like my strong suit.

"U-unless she held back f-for my sake."

The final round once again devolves into us trading blows with me trying to capitalize on my longer reach as much as possible. For a while the outcome appears to mirror the result of the first round until I manage to barely escape his attack with a quick jump off the wall and slam Hisao into the floor after landing behind him.

"I don't think we should jump to conclusions, Hanako. When she came back from her trip, she seemed genuinely happy for us. Let's just ask her on Monday. Until then, try not to think about it, okay?"

"O-okay."

I really hope I'm wrong. If something is on Lilly's mind, I want to help her get through it, but if it's my relationship with Hisao that's bothering her, I really don't know what I could say to her to cheer her up.

I'm not really interested in taking on the single player mode, so after Hisao's timer runs out we simply leave my fighter to be beaten into submission by the CPU opponent.

"That was pretty fun. Where to now?"

"Hmmm..."

We spend the next hours, among other things, beating up cyborg soldiers with ninja weapons, navigating monster-filled dungeons in search for food and treasure, popping balloons with harpoon guns, popping bubbles with monsters inside and watching the attract mode of every cabinet in the area. As we leave the retro corner, Hisao points to a big cabinet with two motorbike-shaped seats in front of it.

"Want to take part in a little race, Hanako?"

"Sure."

"That was close."

I let out a slightly frustrated sigh. It sure was. Hisao and I crossed the finish line with only a 0.3 second difference on the clock. I'm pretty sure I can do better next race. But as I prepare to push the start button in the center of the handlebar, Hisao stops me.

"Hey Hanako, why don't we try the single player race? Might be fun too."

How are 'we' supposed to participate in the single player mode? You can only take part in the race with one bike.

"Ummm...how?"

Hisao taps the back of his motorbike with his fingers.

"Hop on board before your countdown's finished."

"I-is that okay? Those s-seats aren't made for two people, are they?"

"We'll be fine. Those seats can handle some weight. I mean, have you seen the size of some of the regular visitors here?"

I chuckle.

"O-okay then."

I quickly move over to the seat Hisao is sitting on and sit down behind him. It's still a tight fit because the seats have a depression in the middle for the player to sit and it's not quite made for two pairs of hips. I don't think either of us are sitting in a particularly stable or comfortable position. As Hisao's

screen lights up to reveal the starting line and seven other bike riders in front of us, I wrap my arms around him tightly.

A few minutes later we cross the finish line dead last. Steering turns out to be extremely tricky since it's impossible for us to lean left or right in precise tandem, meaning most of the turns we make are too late and too wide.

I giggle.

"I don't think this is going to get us very far."

"True, but wasn't it fun?"

It was. Throughout all the bumbling, colliding and zigzagging on straight parts, due to repeatedly overcompensating for each other's movements, I had to make several supreme efforts to hold back my laughter.

"We have one credit left. Want to switch places and try it again?"

"Sure."

I get off the seat, move in front of him and try to get comfortable. As I press the start button and Hisao hugs me from behind, a thought springs up in my mind.

"Umm...Hisao? W-was this whole thing j-just an excuse to hug in public?"

He laughs at my observation.

"No, just an extremely welcome addition."

The second race goes slightly better, and we end up being sixth. This is more due to us getting better at predicting each other's movements than it is about steering skills. It's still not enough to get us to the next race, but I don't think we should keep putting coins into this thing until we're good enough to get in first.

"So, what do you want to do next?"

02

The peaceful corner of the coffee shop where we decided to take a breather after leaving the arcade is a refreshing change from the bustling of the crowded arcade hall. While my difficulty with crowds hasn't raised its head enough to ruin my fun this evening, it still feels good to relax in a quiet place for a while.

"Sorry it took so long."

Hisao returns from the counter holding a bottle of soda and a cup of hot cocoa. He sits down next to me, puts the soda in front of himself and shows me a frustrated frown for a moment before giving me the cocoa.

"The couple in front of me took ages to make up their mind about their order. I was about to give up and take you somewhere else."

"It's okay. I had someone to keep me company."

We both look at the plush puppy we liberated from the crane game near the arcade's entrance through our combined efforts.

"We could have obtained several other stuffed toys for the number of efforts it took us to get this specific one."

"He's special. I'm sure he'll feel at home at Yamaku."

What's 'special' about the dog in question is actually the fact that his left eye is missing. It probably got damaged at some point. When I noticed that, I made a special effort to obtain him despite the fact he was lying pretty far away from the crane's starting point.

"A new member of our little, disabled family, huh?"

I nod.

"I'm still deciding whether to let him live in my room or let Lilly take care of him."

"Maybe you should leave him with Lilly, so he and I don't end up becoming rivals for your affection."

I giggle at this weird idea.

"I think I have more than enough affection for both of you."

"So, have you already decided on a name for him?"

"Hmmmm...I think I'll call him 'Niji'."

"Niji?"

"At the orphanage... they had a dog that some of the children there took care of. 'Niji' is what they called him."

"Were you one of those children?"

I shake my head.

"You don't like animals? I've once heard that a lot of people who... well... are not good with other people tend to form strong bonds with their pets."

"I... do like them. At least, I think I do. It's just... Everyone who wanted to take care of him was also tasked with walking the dog every few days. And that dog... really liked being outside and running in the park and playing with other dogs. But I... d-didn't really like going outside. And w-walking your dog tends to make other people approach you for s-small talk, so... ummm... I thought he w-was in better hands with... other children."

"That's a shame, Hanako. That dog missed out on a great friend. And so did you, most likely. Maybe you could reconsider it once you have a place of your own in the future."

"That's probably still far off, but... thank you, Hisao."

"Hey Hanako, are you enjoying our date so far?"

"Y-yes, I am. I... wouldn't mind going back to the game center some time. There were still many games we didn't get to play yet."

"Great. Good. I'm happy to hear that. I wouldn't mind going back there myself either."

Why is he getting nervous? And what does he mean by 'so far'? Won't we going back to Yamaku yet?

"H-Hisao... Did you have more planned? Does it have to do with that backpack you've been carrying around all the time?"

"The backpack contains, among a few other things, my medication."

His medication? Why would he take that along? Wait a second...

"H-Hisao, d-d-do you mean...?"

He takes a deep breath, realizing it's probably too late to dismiss the issue and then looks me in the eyes.

"H-Hanako, would you like it if we... spent the night together somewhere around here?"

Chapter 9 (Hanako)

As I step out of the bath, I can't help but thinking that this is like one of those romance novels where a guy and a girl go out, have dinner and a date and then spend the night at a hotel consummating the relationship. After taking a break at a coffee shop near the game center we visited, I expected us to return to Yamaku. Then Hisao proposed spending the night at a hotel nearby. And that's exactly what we ended up doing.

We ended up splitting the costs (Hisao didn't object this time) and got a nice room on the eighth floor with a soft carpet, a double bed and a clean bathroom. Hisao took a rather quick bath, but told me I could take my time, and I was happy to take some time in order to get myself cleaned up. As fun as the game center has been, the smell there wasn't exactly heavenly, and I felt like the odor of perspiration rubbed off on me. Well, maybe some of it is my own. The cabinet in the bathroom contained a few small flasks of fragrant shampoo that I gratefully made use of.

Consummating the relationship.

Hisao never said anything specific, but I'm not so naïve as to believe we're merely here to sleep in a bigger bed. Nor do I think we got ourselves a room far from the noisy dorm rooms in order to just give each other a 'helping hand' in the dark, like we've done a few times before now. If we go all the way tonight and I can manage to enjoy it, we'll be closer than before. If not, we'll probably spend the next few days apologizing to each other.

I put on the soft bathrobe that Hisao left here for my perusal. It feels very nice to the touch.

Where are all the other towels? I saw Hisao carrying some of them. What exactly is he planning?

I walk over to the place where our clothes are piled up and fish my hair clip out of the pockets of my pants. I apply the clip, say a little prayer for good luck and leave the bathroom.

01

The first thing I notice is that the room isn't quite like I expected it to be. I thought it'd either be completely dark or the lights near the bed being lit, but neither is the case. None of the lights are on, yet I can still make out the interior somewhat, particularly near the window, due to the curtains still being drawn back. I also notice the room's pretty warm. Did he turn the radiator up?

The second thing that stands out is the fact that nobody is sitting or lying on the bed. Hisao, who's wearing a bathrobe similar to mine, is sitting on the floor near the window, in the spot illuminated by the moonlight and lights from the city.

Does he want to do it on the floor? Isn't that uncomfortable?

"Hisao?"

Hisao looks in my direction and beckons. As I approach him, I notice he's spread one of the blankets on the floor and put the towels he took from the bathroom on top of it, creating what almost looks like a make-shift picnic blanket.

"A... A moonlight picnic?"

"It kinda resembles it, doesn't it?"

A little bit, though it'd be a pretty shoddy picnic. No glasses, no napkins, just a bottle of... What's in there anyway? And what's in that large flat bowl nearby?

I walk over to Hisao and sit next to him, still trying to make sense of things.

"What do you have there? Where did that bowl come from? And what's in the bottle?"

He gives me a sheepish grin.

"The stuff from the bottle needed to be mixed with some hot water, so I got this bowl. It's actually a fruit bowl. As for the bottle..."

Are we going to be intimate or practice science together?

"...in a way, you could call it lubricant and in a way..."

LUBRICANT? Does he plan to skip foreplay? Or is he planning something else...?

My expression must have given me away as Hisao puts his hand on my shoulder as if to reassure me.

"Relax, we're not going to do anything weird."

Are you sure about that?

"S-sorry."

"Anyway... You enjoyed the shoulder rubs and massages we've shared, didn't you?"

"Y-yes, I did."

"I was thinking we could do a more... intimate... massage. That stuff in the bottle is a special type of massage gel."

"D-didn't you just say it was lubricant?"

"It's both actually. Its main purpose is to act as a massage lotion, but since it's so smooth and slippery, it can double as a lubricant."

I try to digest what Hisao's saying. He has put more thought into this whole thing than I expected. A massage... So we'll be rubbing that stuff on each other? That explains why we're sitting on the floor and why he has covered the area with towels.

"Where did you get this?"

"A little shop in the city last weekend. I was actually going for some ordinary massage lotion, but the guy behind the counter said this was the ultimate experience for a couple. I didn't tell him we were fairly new at this though."

Couple. I really like the sound of that word.

"I tried to get some more information about this kind of thing, but... heh... Most sites that came up wouldn't make it through the computer lab's content filter."

That's not exactly reassuring.

"So...ummm...H-how does this w-work?"

"Do you want to try it?"

"Y-you went through a lot of effort to arrange all this."

"We can stop at any time you want."

I meekly nod. Hisao pulls me closer in a gentle hug and carefully puts his lips on mine.

"We can start with this."

"O-okay."

As his right hand starts stroking my head and his tongue starts playing around with mine, I close my eyes and try to push my insecurities to the back of my mind. I'm not completely sure how well I'll be able to relax in the spot we're in. The curtains are drawn back, but we're on the eighth floor. People couldn't possibly peek inside from the other buildings and even if they were watching, the room itself is dark, so all they'd see was the reflection of the lights on the window, right? This is the first time since that one night in my room we'll be able to see each other pretty clearly. Obviously if the room were pitch black, we'd end up toppling the bowl with lotion sooner or later.

Parting his lips from mine, Hisao breaks his hug, gives me a quick kiss on my left cheek and holds out the bowl to me.

"Do you want to sample a bit, Hanako?"

I dip my finger into the bowl in an attempt to get an impression of Hisao's concoction. The substance is more a liquid than a gel, clear and not all that much thicker than water. I stir the mixture a bit and don't meet much resistance. I hold my finger under my nose and sniff shortly, but don't smell anything. What surprises me most is its temperature.

"It's...really warm."

"Yeah, I mixed the gel from the bottle with hot water, and I've been covering the bowl until you came out of the bathroom. You don't think it's too hot, do you?"

"N-no."

"So...shall we?"

"...w-what would you l-like me to do?"

Hisao puts the bowl away, moves off the blanket and points at a small bump beneath the towels.

"I've put the small cushion from one of the chairs there for you to rest your head on. Could you undo the belt of your bathrobe and then lie down on your stomach?"

Nervously, I remove the belt of my bathrobe and lie down, putting my head on the pillow beneath the towels and laying my arms at my side.

"Like this?"

"Yes. Now just take a deep breath and relax."

I inhale deeply and then slowly exhale, trying to slow the nervous beating of my heart a bit. I feel my hips being pressed down as Hisao straddles me. He takes the shoulders of my bathrobe, slowly pulls them aside and slides it down until just beneath my waist. His hands gently run through my hair before moving it to one side, exposing my back. He then slowly strokes my neck and shoulders.

"I'm going to apply some gel. Don't get startled."

I hear a few soft splashes, and feel a trail of liquid running down my left side. I let out a soft gasp as something warm and wet hits my back and his hands start rubbing the wet substance on my neck, all the way up to my jaw line, before going down and proceeding on my shoulders. The sensation is different from the shoulder rubs I'm accustomed to. His touch is a lot softer and more gentle than the usual kneading.

"H-Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"Is... Is it okay to... you know... rub that... stuff... in my burn scars?"

"It shouldn't be harmful. The bottle says it's made out of seaweed leaves and is completely water-based. The shampoo you used to wash your hair earlier is probably more aggressive than this stuff."

"If you say so..."

"Hanako, could you put your arms by your side so your palms are facing up?"

I do as he says, and he takes my right arm gently in his hand, rubbing it in top to bottom. For the most part, I don't feel much of it, but I shudder a bit when he reaches my hand and starts caressing my palm with his fingers.

"That's not unpleasant, is it?"

I bite my lip to keep myself from laughing when he rubs in and then strokes each of my fingers.

"I-it tickles a bit."

He moves to my left arm next, carefully working his way down. He chuckles when I let out a surprised gasp.

"Do you like having your elbow stroked?"

Does he expect me to answer that?

He ends his caresses with my left palm and fingers, obviously enjoying the reactions his touches get out of me.

"Can you place your arms in front of you now?"

"Okay."

He moves back to my shoulders before spreading his hands to stroke my armpits...

I giggle. That really tickles.

...and my sides.

I let out a content sigh to let him know how nice this feels.

As he spreads and rubs the gel all over my back, it leaves a warm and comfortable sensation behind. My entire upper body is now covered in lotion and Hisao's now firmer strokes slide across my skin without much resistance, even in the scarred areas. Hisao seems content at just stroking my shoulders, neck and back for now. Is he waiting for a cue from me?

"Hisao...Should I... turn around?"

"Just a little while longer, Hanako. There's one spot left to go."

I feel him move back just a little bit and the next moment I feel my bathrobe being pulled down further, exposing my bottom. I swallow hard, but don't resist as he starts rubbing, stroking and fondling my buttocks. I don't exactly hate it. In fact, I kind of like it, but what makes me feel awkward is the

fact I just KNOW he's staring. It makes me nervous. Not only is my right buttock pretty heavily scarred, but I also have rather small hips for my size.

"A-are you s-staring?"

"Sorry. I can't exactly say it's a bad view."

Having finished applying the gel, Hisao raises his hips in order to allow me room to turn around, but before I can get up, he kneads my buttocks one last time and then gets off me. I pull my bathrobe up a bit, turn around and lie back. Hisao straddles me again, holding a handful of gel in his cupped hands that's gently trickling upon my stomach.

"Ready?"

"Y-yes."

I can feel Hisao's hands spreading the warm gel across my neck and my collarbone before they move down to my breasts, stroking them gently, then more and more firmly.

My breathing gets heavier as his hands pet and fondle my breasts, running my erect nipples between his fingers in a way that certainly would have hurt if they hadn't been this slippery, but now feels really good. After covering my belly, he gets off me, gently takes my ankles and lays my feet onto his lap.

I can't help but giggle again. The soles of my feet are so ticklish that I have to use all my willpower to prevent myself from accidentally kicking Hisao, but the way he lovingly fondles each separate toe feels wonderful. He carefully raises my legs, letting my ankles rest on his shoulders, and starts stroking my shins and the back of my knees, causing me to make a sound that's part giggle and part moan. As he slowly, teasingly, moves down to my thighs I cannot help but remember how I was depressed not too long ago because part of my body is numb to sensations. Hisao told me that evening that I still had plenty of sensitive spots left and this night I realize more than ever how right he was about that. Even in the last few minutes we've found several sweet spots I never knew I had.

"Is it okay?"

I respond with a reassuring nod and brush aside the parts of my bathrobe still covering my body. He takes another handful of gel, I close my eyes and moments later I can feel his hands moving from my thighs down to the place between them. But instead of merely the rubbing he usually does, he starts stroking and massaging it with both hands. My breath catches due to the sensation.

This feels... different from the other times I've allowed him to stroke me down there. He notices my reaction and starts trying different strokes while keeping a close eye on my face. Long, swift ones...

"What way do you like best?"

Short, swift ones...

"Hhhh-"

Too much direct stimulation.

Slow firm ones....

B-better already.

Swift circular ones...

"S-slower..."

Slow circular ones...

"Nnnngg..."

"Seems like you like this one in particular."

I nod my head, too embarrassed to admit it with words.

"Do you want me to keep going?"

"S-stop for a moment..."

I take a second to catch my breath. This has felt wonderful, but I feel a bit bad that right now I'm the only one having a good time. Usually, I try to do the final part together with him, his arousal often acting as a catalyst for my own.

"Can I r-rub you in first?"

He nods and lets go of me, letting me move aside before taking up the spot I was occupying before. He loosens his belt and lies down on his stomach in front of me. For a moment I consider putting my bathrobe back on but then decide that doing so would feel really uncomfortable with my entire body covered in lotion. The room temperature itself is high enough for me to comfortably continue without my bathrobe, though I'm a bit squeamish about the part where he'll be able to see me rubbing him in.

Did he decide to let me go first so he could be massaged by a naked girl?

Pushing these thoughts aside, I straddle him, pull his bathrobe down to his waist and use my cupped hands to gather some gel which I drop on his back with a soft splash. Then I realize I'm not really sure on how to proceed. Hisao probably secretly read up on this stuff beforehand. Maybe I should just to try and copy him as closely as I can.

Hmmm... The neck and shoulders first, right?

Then the arms.

"H-hey!"

I giggle at this surprisingly cute reaction and make a mental note that he likes having his upper arms fondled. I have to keep that in mind.

The back next.

"That feels really nice, Hanako."

He actually has a pretty nice back.

I move to pull down his bathrobe, then change my mind and carefully take it off altogether and start kneading his buttocks.

"You're not staring, are you?"

"I-I'm not."

I am, of course.

I swallow nervously as I finish with his butt and raise my hips so he can turn around. This is going to be the most awkward part. As he turns around and I gently sit down on top of him, I notice he's staring. Not a quick, sneaky peek, but a thorough almost analyzing look. Uncomfortably, I cross my arms in front of my breasts, even though he's not looking at them specifically.

"P-please don't stare at me like that."

"You're looking really beautiful, Hanako."

"D-don't say that."

There's something about his tone though. It doesn't sound like he's making some random compliment. He sounds somewhat serious.

"Could you stand up for a moment and take a look in the mirror on the far wall from here?"

"D-do I have to?"

"Just really quick."

I reluctantly get up. I hate looking at myself in mirrors, even when not wearing my badly damaged birthday suit. At least the mirror is rather far away and it's fairly dark. I look and then it strikes me that I can still see my body fairly well. Or at least, part of my body. Specifically the part of my body that isn't scarred. Of course the scar tissue is still there, but due to the rough texture, it doesn't reflect the nearby light very well despite being covered in lotion and merely appears as a dark area covering part of me. The other parts of my body and my freshly washed hair, on the other hand, are accentuated like never before, sparkling in the moonlight coming through the window due to the gel turning my smoothened skin into a semi-reflective surface. A little befuddled, I slowly turn around once. A chuckle comes from my boyfriend who's still in the same spot as I left him.

"I don't mind if you want to keep admiring yourself in the mirror a little while longer, Hanako."

My mood lifted, I get back on top of him again, taking a handful of lotion to apply to his chest. He's still looking me over like before, but for the time being, I actually feel a little bit beautiful. I lovingly fondle his chest and nipples, tickling his scar while applying the gel and watching with playful amusement whenever I reach a spot that forces a reaction out of him. My caresses have already made him pretty aroused and while stroking his feet and legs, I try my hardest to look at my hands instead of at his crotch in order to avoid embarrassment. With only one more spot of his body to cover, I straddle his upper legs, take a handful of gel and start stroking his member; first slowly and carefully, then faster and firmer.

I'm having very mixed feelings right now. On the one hand, this is great fun. Previously, I only had aural feedback to rely on while getting him off. Seeing the subtle changes in his expression as I change the pace and firmness of my touches and watching the pleasure on his face as a result of my caresses is wonderful. On the other hand, seeing his... thing... right in front of me makes me more than a little nervous.

Is that really going to go inside of me?

Well, I know it's possible since I didn't tear the last time, but it certainly hurt back then and not just when he put it in.

Part of the reason he purchased that lotion is probably to make it go smoother.

"Hanako, could you stop for a moment?"

"Hmmm?"

He looks at me with an inviting look in his eyes.

"I think we're more than ready for the next part."

How can you tell?

"Just... give me a moment."

Maybe it'll feel better if I do it myself.

Lower myself onto it and move back up if it hurts.

"Hey, don't look so scared. You're probably going to love this."

"Huh?"

"Just lie down on top of me."

"Like this?"

I carefully lie down on top of him, my chin now hovering closely above his chest.

"Could you move up a little bit so we're at the same eye level?"

I brace my feet and push myself up his body a bit...

"EEK!"

...only to find out that the lotion covering us reduced friction between our bodies to such an extent that I completely overshoot my mark and his nose ends up between my breasts.

"My eyes are down here, Hanako."

I giggle at that remark.

"Sorry."

I hastily push myself down, again sliding slightly too far, causing me to end up back where I started.

"Looks like you're picking it up pretty quickly."

I push myself up again, more gently this time, and now we level out well.

"P-picking what up?"

"Applying the lotion was just preparation."

Preparation? I'm a bit puzzled. What am I picking up? Sliding up and down? Suddenly, I have a bright moment. I smile bashfully.

"You w-want me to g-give you a f-full b-body massage?"

"This gel is made specifically for that purpose. That's why it's so extremely slippery. Do you want to give it a try?"

I nod shyly. The prospect of an extended massage sounds infinitely better than the prospect of intercourse right now. I push myself down a bit until just beneath his chest scar, then slide upwards again until I look him in the eyes once more where I am rewarded with an approving nod. For a third time I slide down and up on top of him, this time a passionate kiss being my greeting. For nearly half an hour, we go on like this; kissing, rubbing our bodies against each other, me softly pushing myself off to drift back and forth on top of him and he occasionally raising his upper body or hips to let me slide on my own. I'm enjoying the extensive body contact immensely and am surprised at how smoothly I'm able to move despite my scar tissue. Neither of us says a word the whole time, the only sounds our excited breathing, the occasional soft moan and our awkward laughter throughout. As we get more and more passionate in our movements, I can feel him pressing his loins up against mine. Our slip-and-slide fest, while certainly enjoyable, isn't the most efficient way to stimulate our most sensitive areas and I'm considering getting off of him and finishing the job by hand. I already found out that I can probably afford to be a bit rougher this time without the risk of hurting him. Just as I prepare to follow up on that plan, another idea flashes through my mind that might excite him more than the usual way we tend to end our intimate moments.

"...H-Hisao...?"

"...H-Hanako...?"

"...could you...do something...?"

"...what...?"

"...s-spread...your...legs...?"

"Huh?"

"...p-please?"

He looks at me with a puzzled expression for a moment but then complies while doing his best not to look too uncomfortable. I move myself up a bit, take hold of his erect member, point it at the ceiling and then move down until it's resting against my crotch. I carefully close my legs, then cross my feet and squeeze my thighs together as tightly as I can. Hisao tenses up and lets out a loud groan in response.

Did that feel good or did I just really hurt him?

"... Hanako..."

Yes?

"...can you... try moving?..."

Whew...

I lean on my arms, pressing myself against his base and with a bit of trial and error find an angle that allows me to enjoy the friction as well. As I start swaying my hips, Hisao wraps his legs around mine and starts caressing my neck and chest with his hands.

This is... pretty good.

This almost feels like we're having intercourse.

Expect I'm the one doing the thrusting.

Hmmmm... really good...

Because I have my back arched I can't see Hisao's face very well, but I can tell by the sounds he's making that he's getting close.

Good thing my inner thighs are still slippery or he'd be groaning in pain right now.

"Ahh...Hanako..."

"Nnnng...Hisao...?"

"S-slow down... hah... slow down a bit..."

I can tell his heart's doing fine right now. From the look of ecstasy on his face, I can tell he's feeling really good and trying his hardest to hold back. I consider slowing down, but then speed up the movement of my hips and try to get as much stimulation for myself out of it as I can.

"Ugh... H-H-Hanako... W-what..."

For a second it seems like he's going to protest, but then he gives in and starts thrusting his hips himself until reaches his climax in a frenzy of frantic grinding.

After Hisao catches his breath, I let go of him, and we sit upright, still in a bit of a daze from our unusual experience together. Now we're sitting on the floor next to the bed, Hisao leaning back against

it and me sitting in front of him and gently leaning back against his chest. Hisao has one arm wrapped around me and is softly caressing me with the other.

"Hanako... Why did you just...?"

Is he bothered by the fact I just pushed him over the edge?

"You w-were looking like you were f-feeling really good, so I thought it wouldn't be a problem to go on. If your heart was acting up, you wouldn't have asked me to just s-slow down."

"It's not that, it's just..."

I follow his gaze as it rests on the towel I just used to wipe my thighs clean after his ejaculation.

"...what we did just now wasn't exactly safe, even if the odds are very low of you getting... you know... pregnant from this."

Pregnant...

"Ummm... Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

"It's okay. You've been... exercising in order for us to be... intimate, so I w-wanted to do something too. I've been using... p-protection so you wouldn't h-have to and this would feel b-better for you."

"Huh? You mean to say that you're on the pill? Since when?"

"S-since Hokkaido."

"Wow... I didn't imagine you making the effort to get them."

"I h-had... help."

That is to say, Lilly obtained them for me. I realize I'm probably not allowed to get a hold of them that way, but Lilly was the only person I dared to approach. Thankfully, she was a really good sport and willfully bought my blatantly transparent excuse about troubles with my menstruation without asking any further questions.

"But why didn't you tell me?"

"I w-wanted to tell you when I was... r-ready for it."

"I understand. That probably wasn't today, was it? I saw your frightened face earlier."

"I d-don't... really know."

"It's okay. This night has been really wonderful so far. I'd hate to see it ruined because we end up doing something that causes me to hurt you."

Maybe that's part of the problem. I had a really good time just now, and tonight's been very good on the whole. How am I supposed to relax in the first place if he's implying the evening will be ruined if I can't enjoy it enough? And if I can't relax, it'll only become more likely that I won't be able to enjoy it. It's like a vicious circle.

"Umm... That's... a problem..."

"Huh?"

"You'll f-feel bad when I can't relax and e-enjoy it... S-so I can't relax b-because I don't want you to feel bad."

"I see. That makes sense. So I can't relax if you can't relax, and you can't relax because I can't relax. It's like a feedback loop."

"Y-yes..."

"What do you suggest?"

"I... d-don't think a little discomfort is enough to ruin this wonderful night. I'm... not going to break."

"Then let's give it a try. Well, once I'm up to it again, that is. In the meantime..."

He places his legs in front of mine, preventing me from closing them. Then he takes a bit of lotion and starts fondling me with both hands while kissing the left side of my neck and earlobe. I gasp and giggle at his attentions.

"H-hey..."

"...let's get you warmed up a little."

Our earlier actions already got me 'warmed up' quite a bit, but I'm not going to refuse a chance to be pampered by him a bit more. I sit back and let out a little cry as his left hand sneaks down and starts fingering me. For a while he keeps quiet, content to just listen to my heavy breathing. Then he moves his lips to my ear and softly whispers to me.

"Hanako, I want you to try and relax as much as you can."

"...s-sure... ahhhh..."

I can feel how his right hand slowly moves down as well.

"W-what are you... hmm... g-going to doWHAAAA!"

Before I realize what's happening, his right hand has reached my lady bits and he's slowly pushing one of his fingers inside me. I let out a yelp and reflexively grab his arm though because we're both still pretty slippery, I can't get enough grip to pull it away. He keeps his finger in place for a second and then slowly pulls out again, causing me to exhale in relief.

"Sorry, did that hurt?"

I don't think it did. It felt really weird and awkward, but it wasn't exactly painful.

"N-no."

Upon hearing my reply he pushes back in...

I try to suppress a gasp, but fail.

"Try to relax your muscles, Hanako."

...and back out. Then back in again...

"Don't hold your breath. Just keep breathing in and out normally."

...and out. I nod weakly and try to focus on the sensation his other hand instills in me. At first, my body jumps each time he pushes forth his finger, but as he continues with what he called my 'warming up', I slowly manage to relax and enjoy his touch again, even as he slightly speeds up the movement of both hands. Upon seeing that my signals of discomfort are disappearing, he whispers in my ear.

"You're doing well, Hanako. Now...let's try with two..."

"S-s-stop..."

As the sensations of the last contraction die down and Hisao ceases providing the intense stimulation I just endured, I breathe a long sigh of relief. Hisao moves his legs away, wraps his arms around my waist and lets me catch my bearings while kissing my heavily flushed cheek and softly chuckling a bit to himself.

"P-please d-don't laugh at me..."

It wasn't as obvious when we were still keeping the lights off, but being pleased can draw some pretty entertaining reactions out of people. It's really best not to think too hard about how you must have looked to someone else afterwards.

"I recall you laughing to yourself while I was making faces."

I guess I'm not in a position to say anything.

...

I give him a quick kiss back as a quiet admission of guilt and then look at him expectantly.

Now what?

"Can you get onto the bed?"

I unsteadily get to my feet and lie down upon the bed. Hisao takes the pillow we used as a head rest earlier and carefully places it under my hips.

We're still completely covered in seaweed gel. This bed's gonna be a major mess afterwards. Good thing we won't be the ones who'll have to change the sheets.

For a moment we just look each other in the eyes. A mutual look of uncertainty, then one of mutual reassurance.

"Don't be afraid."

"I won't be if you aren't."

02

I close my eyes and he gently spreads my legs, stroking the inside just a little and then I feel the sensation of something just a little larger than his two fingers smoothly sliding into me. For a moment we both take a surprised look at the place where we're joined now, and Hisao makes a few reluctant movements to check for signs of discomfort on my part. When those signs fail to occur, we share a little laugh of relief, and Hisao lowers himself and lies down flatly on top of me. He grabs hold of my shoulders and slides up my body as far as he can until we can look each other in the eyes.

"I'm not too heavy, am I?"

"N-no."

The weight of his body on top of mine makes me pretty much unable to move anything other than my arms and legs, but it's a small price to pay for the extensive body contact we can have this way. I raise my legs, letting them rest on his calves and wrap my arms around him. He slowly starts grinding his pelvis against mine, and I do my best to adapt my movements to his, tilting my hips until the friction starts feeling good. It takes us a bit of effort to find a workable rhythm, my scar tissue occasionally hampering us a bit. Fortunately, since we're still really slippery from before, it's a lot easier than last time.

I lie back and close my eyes, basking in the amazing sensation we're experiencing, wiggling my upper body as much as Hisao's weight allows me to in order to increase the stimulation. This couldn't be more different from the last time our bodies became one. The last time, we were distant, neither of us really knowing what we were feeling, whether we really wanted this and whether the other really wanted this. Our bodies had minimal contact, and we experienced more than a little bit of discomfort, physically and emotionally. Now we're entangled in each other, closer to each other than we ever have been before, and I feel this union is as both an emotional and a physical one.

With each moment, our movements become more instinctual than before, more desperate than before. As I feel my orgasm approaching inevitably, I tighten my arms around him as strongly as I can as if to draw him into myself, and when I lose control and the first convulsion hits my body, I let out an involuntary cry that contains both physical pleasure and emotional joy at the same time.

After our climax, Hisao uses the last of his strength to slide off of me and roll on his back. With some effort, I manage to pull up the covers and press myself close to him before every muscle in my body relaxes and a feeling of bliss washes over me that makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time. Despite already knowing that he came through our act of passion in one piece, I place my hand on his chest as if to acknowledge his heart remained steady.

Hisao's already slipping away into slumber, and I find myself getting sleepier by the second as well, but I still want to say something - something to thank him for the moments we just shared. I softly kiss his cheek in order to get his attention and whisper in his ear.

"Thank you, Hisao. That was a very memorable first time."

"...first...time...Hanako?"

"Yes. First time making love."

03

Chapter 10 (Hisao)

01

"So, no lightheadedness, chest pains or tingling feet this morning? No irregularities during the weekend?"

The nurse casually slurps some coffee while asking me the typical routine questions, to which I respond with the typical routine answers.

"None at all. I set a good pace this morning. The coach was pretty pleased."

"No problems at all? Are you sure?"

"Uhuh. Why would I suddenly get complications? I've been sticking to the schedule, and I haven't had a single flutter since I started training."

"Emi said you tried to skip our check-up this morning."

I roll my eyes. I did indeed try to go straight to my dorm room to shower and get dressed, but Emi wouldn't have any of that.

"I have some homework I have to look over before class, and I figured I could afford to skip this once. This whole thing has become such an automated routine for both of us, I sometimes wonder if it's still necessary."

"I can't blame you for thinking like that, but the moment we start making these sessions optional, we're setting you up for adopting bad habits. I've had this kind of thing with Emi a little while back, and in the end she came down with an infection and had to get around in a wheelchair for a while. And in her case, it wasn't even potentially life-threatening. I can't really afford to take those kinds of risks with you."

I had a feeling my excuse was going to provoke a lecture like that. I learned long ago that the best thing to do is just nod and agree whenever the nurse drops the lame jokes and gets into serious mode.

"Now, if you just take your shirt off and let me check your heart beat, you can go back to your homework in a minute."

I shrug and instead of taking my shirt off, I simply pull it up until my chest scar is completely revealed. The nurse frowns a bit at this deviation from the usual protocol, but then gives in and presses his stethoscope against my chest without further questions.

"Well, I'm not picking up anything out of the ordinary. Although..."

"Yes?"

He shows me a mischievous smile and presses the stethoscope against my chest again.

"You just wanted to go straight back to your dorm because of homework?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong with that?"

The nurse's smile turns slightly wicked as he taps the chest piece of the stethoscope.

"It's just that your heart rate just said something else. You're not exactly a good liar."

"It's nothing related to my heart. Isn't that enough?"

"Fine, fine. Let me check your heart beat one last time and then you can go."

Eager to get it over with, I lift my shirt again, but the nurse shakes his head.

"I'll go with a different angle this time. Your back."

"Huh?"

I consider protesting, but can't make up a valid excuse in time, so I let him lift up the back of my shirt and press the chest piece just left of my spine. He listens for a second, then takes off the stethoscope and gives a satisfied nod.

"Your heart rate sounds steady enough. Must have been the additional exercise that did it."

Either this guy is extremely sharp or he simply has a dirty mind. If there were still any doubts in his mind about the origin of the thin, red marks on my back, my wincing expression probably blew those right out of the water. If his grin were to get any wider, the top of his face would probably fall off.

"So, your girlfriend's a scratcher, eh? It's always the ones you least suspect."

"D-don't you have any shame at all?!"

I turn around and prepare to leave before he comes up with more ways to fluster me. Before I can turn the doorknob, I hear him call out to me.

"Hisao, can I have just one more moment?"

I turn around and the nurse motions me to sit down again.

"Sorry about the joke. You can't deny that the opportunity was too good to ignore. If I upset you, we can talk tomorrow."

So he's not gonna drop it. I might as well get it over with now. With an emphasized sigh, I sit down in the chair in front of him.

"You started sleeping with her?"

"If I say no, are you going to take out the stethoscope again?"

He grins an amused grin, then shakes his head.

"You're not very good at keeping a poker face, Hisao. I think I can do without it for now."

"I realize there are regulations here, but it didn't take place on the school grounds."

At least not this time.

"I'm not going to give you a hard time over that. Enforcing those regulations isn't my job. Watching over your health is."

"You're not gonna demand a check-up after every time we..., are you?"

He laughs out loud at this, before winking at me.

"I could, if you'd like me to."

"Not freaking likely."

"Heheh, probably not."

His grin fades and he puts on the stern face again.

"The only thing I'd like to know is if your heart ever acted up during one of those times. I'm sure you are aware of the fact that it's not completely without risks."

"I had a brief moment during our first time. That was before I started working out. It was over after a few seconds."

He briefly nods.

"If you're able to handle your current training regimen, you're probably able to handle that kind of stuff as well, though it might be smart to let your girlfriend take the active role if you start feeling tired and avoid actions that place too much strain on your body at all costs. Just be sure not to ignore the warning signs and stop if you feel something's off, no matter how tempting it may be to continue. Keep the big head in charge at all times."

"My girlfriend's very vigilant about that kind of stuff. She noticed it the first time too. She'd definitely stop me if she suspected something to be wrong. She even thought up a safe word I can use if my chest suddenly starts hurting."

"It's a relief to hear she's looking out for you."

"You're more laid-back about this than I expected."

He chuckles. I suspect this is not the first time he's having this kind of discussion with a student.

"I prefer the term pragmatic. When kids become adolescents and develop a healthy sex drive, they're not gonna pay much attention to a preachy guy in a white coat telling them to stop having fun. Might as well make sure they at least go about it in a responsible way."

His smile disappears for a moment.

"But if something does happen, even if it's a minor red flag, I want you to bring it to my attention immediately. That's not a mere request."

His grin returns as he gives me a playful pat on the shoulder. It's kinda unsettling how quickly this guy can switch back and forth between being immature and authoritative.

"I promise I won't try to embarrass you."

He tries his best to look trustworthy, though I'm not completely sure how well he'd be able to keep that promise.

"Well, that's all. See you tomorrow."

I nod, get up and head for the door. As I'm about to leave, the nurse gives me one more sly look.

"By the way, Hisao... Applying the chest piece to someone's back is part of monitoring the lungs. For the heart, you always put it on the chest. Always. Since it was immediately obvious that you were trying to hide your back, I needed to make up a little excuse. Didn't think you'd fall for it."

He lets out a maniacal laugh before turning back to his computer, leaving me flabbergasted.

02

As I finish setting up the pawns, a delicious smell teases my nostrils.

"Wow, that smells pretty good."

Hanako beams at my words and speeds up unpacking the lunch she's made for the two of us. Hanako making lunch for us both has become a regularly recurring event, and other than one instance where the food she cooked tasted... not really bad but definitely a little weird, I don't really have anything to complain about. I probably should return the favor more often, but I know Hanako enjoys indulging in her domestic side, and I enjoy experiencing this side of her.

"Aren't you going to pour the tea?"

I notice Hanako has finished preparing the tea, but isn't really getting ready to serve it yet.

"I'd like to wait for Lilly if that's okay with you."

"Why don't you have a seat in the meantime?"

She approaches the table, takes a moment to decide and then sits down next to me, putting her hand on top of mine.

"Can I have one little bite, just to sample?"

"Just one then. Could you open your mouth, please?"

I roll my eyes. Does she really enjoy this kind of thing that much?

"I know how to use chopsticks. I've been using them for a large portion of my life."

"Please?"

"Alright then."

I open my mouth slightly and Hanako uses her chopsticks to pick up a piece of chicken and put it into my mouth. When I close my mouth and she withdraws the chopsticks, she has a childish smile on her face.

"It tastes very good. I can't wait to taste the rest."

"When Lilly gets here."

It's nice to have a few moments together. After we came back from our date yesterday, we both had to focus on finishing homework, and due to my running sessions each morning, we can't see each other before class either. After class, I have club activities to tend to, and Hanako's decided to help out the newspaper club for another week. I stroke her hand for a bit before noticing her other hand is fixed on the lower part of her neck. I remember she was in a similar posture for the entire duration of class. I give her an amused smile.

"How's your hickey, Hanako? Is it still visible?"

She flushes profoundly at my question before meekly nodding.

"I-it w-was when I c-checked this m-morning."

Despite her posture, I'm sure the hickey on Hanako's collarbone wouldn't be visible to anyone unless she removed her blouse in front of them. I made sure not to leave it in a place that her school uniform would leave exposed.

"You know, when I suggested giving you one in return for those marks on my back, I was speaking in jest. There was no real need to go through with it."

When we woke up that morning in our hotel room, we first spent our time lazily cuddling in bed and feeding each other the sandwiches we bought for the occasion at the coffee shop the night before. It wasn't until we went to take a bath together in order to wash off the lotion residue that Hanako noticed the red marks on my upper back. She didn't remember leaving them and I didn't remember receiving them, so they must have been made while we were too much into the heat of the moment to notice. Regardless, Hanako immediately started stammering apologies, causing me to jokingly point out I could leave a little mark of my own so we could call it even and drop the matter. I didn't expect her to latch onto that remark as strongly as she did, so in order to settle the matter I gave her a small suction mark on her collarbone. I had the impression that at the time, she didn't exactly hate receiving it, embarrassing as it was.

"It's o-okay. Nobody n-noticed."

My thoughts return to my check-up with that demon of a nurse this morning.

"I wish I could say the same."

"W-w-what!?"

I roll my eyes.

"It might be a good idea to avoid the nurse for a week or so."

"H-he n-noticed?"

I relate my experience in the nurse office to Hanako. When I finish my story, the result is a muffled giggle - except the sound isn't coming from Hanako but from beyond the doorway. We turn towards it and are mortified to see Lilly standing there. Her hand is raised in front of her mouth, but her shaking shoulders make it obvious she's bursting with laughter on the inside. Hanako lets out a soft, desperate whimper and promptly shuts down, covering her face with her cupped hands in embarrassment. I let out a gasp myself but manage to collect myself enough to greet Lilly. Something tells me I won't be able to count on Hanako for the time being.

"You kinda picked an awkward moment to join us, Lilly."

Lilly makes an apologetic gesture while still trying not to laugh out loud.

"It appears that I did. I won't be here for very long however, so perhaps things won't be uncomfortable for too long."

"You're not joining us? Class rep duties again? It's happened pretty often lately."

Lilly simply nods.

"Perhaps I'll be able to make up for it tonight. I came here to invite you to join me in my room this evening. Akira will be coming over and it would be nice to hang out together."

"That sounds like a good idea. We'll be there."

"Wonderful. Until tonight then."

With a polite wave, Lilly walks out of the room, and I turn to Hanako, who's still in the same position as she was when we first noticed Lilly, as if time had stopped around her.

"Ummm... Hanako. She's gone. Let's... just... have our tea now and play a little match."

Hanako, still covering her face, manages to give a nod and stiffly gets up to get the teapot. Fifteen minutes later I score my first easy victory on her in two months.

03

"We could just ask her directly."

"I-I know. But I'm... afraid she'll just smile and dismiss it."

"So now the plan is to ask her sister behind her back?"

"I-I don't really like it either. B-but I'm a bit worried."

After I finished my homework for the day and headed over to Lilly's dorm room, I ran into Hanako who was waiting outside the girl's dorm building and who wanted to take a little walk with me first. And now we're standing near the school gate, waiting for Akira to arrive.

"I realize Lilly's been absent from lunch more often than usual, and we didn't have many get-togethers until last week, but does that really suggest that there's something wrong? She could simply have more than usual class rep duties to tend to."

"I don't think that's the case. I asked one of her classmates today, and he said things weren't any busier than usual in class. Nothing out of the ordinary happened recently that could result in more work for her."

"You asked one of her classmates?"

That's an interesting development. Despite the fact that Hanako has become quite a bit less passive than she used to be while being around me, she still has a tendency to try and avoid interaction with most other people and is still uncomfortable around the people with whom interaction is unavoidable.

"H-he's a member of the newspaper club and c-came over to submit some material to me, s-so I asked him if he thought things were busier than usual in class."

"Were you nervous?"

"I w-was, but him being blind made it a bit easier to talk to him."

If what Hanako's saying is true then Lilly is either using her class representative duties as an excuse to be on her own or something's on her mind that acts as a distraction. Either way, Hanako's hunch might be worth looking into.

"Yo!"

Upon noticing us, Akira greets us with a friendly wave.

"Nice to see you again. It's been a while since we last saw you. Have you been busy?"

"Extremely. And that's probably not gonna change much in the upcoming weeks."

"I hope you at least enjoyed your time off in Scotland then."

"Meh, best thing about it was our folks' beachside home."

As Akira and I are exchanging small talk, I start noticing she's sneaking the occasional glance at Hanako, which is strange since Akira knows Hanako dislikes being stared at. And it wasn't just me who picked it up.

"Ummm... I-is there s-something o-on m-my..."

Hanako gasps before she can finish her sentence, and we have a mutual moment of clarity as we both realize what it is Akira is looking at, or rather, looking for. Hanako's eyes grow wide in an expression that's a mixture of desperation and horror. I myself am mostly just annoyed.

"Look, her blouse is covering it up, so could you stop looking for it already?"

Akira laughs heartily at my reaction.

"Looks like I got busted. Sorry. I wasn't sure of its exact location. Lilly obviously couldn't tell me."

"Lilly told you about this, huh? I hope she didn't merely invite you for a chance to poke fun at us."

She grins.

"She didn't invite me, I invited myself. And no, it wasn't to poke fun at you. Though if it makes you feel better, I've had a few crummy weeks behind me, and that silly little story cheered me up for the day. Besides, it's not a big deal. Take this from someone with experience in attending meetings with one of those things peeking out from under her collar."

While part of me is eager to satisfy my morbid curiosity regarding the 'experience' Akira is talking about, I haven't forgotten the reason we came here in the first place, and I eagerly take advantage of the opening she just gave me.

"Crummy weeks, huh? Is it about something that also involves Lilly?"

"Huh? What makes you think that?"

"We both feel like Lilly's been a bit more distant lately. Like something's on her mind that she doesn't like to talk about. Seeing that you two share so much, we thought maybe you had a clue."

"Really?"

Akira looks pensive for a second, then smiles.

"Why don't you join us? You can ask her yourself."

"We were already invited, so let's go to her place together then."

04

"An arcade center, huh? That's a pretty unusual destination for a date."

Since lunch today got so uncomfortable, we decided to use this opportunity to tell Lilly, and Akira, about our date last weekend. At least the first part. They already knew more about the second half than they needed to know.

"We had a pretty good time. She may not seem like it at first, but Hanako has quite the competitive streak."

"W-we didn't just play competitive games though. We also teamed up in a lot of games. Both are great fun in their own way."

"Did you win that little fellow over there as well?"

Akira has noticed the plush dog sitting in Hanako's lap. Hanako nods enthusiastically.

"Yes, he was lying in one of the crane games. I thought he was adorable, so we made an effort to retrieve him."

"A dog who's half blind. Talk about ironic."

"Hey Lilly, do you like animals? Have you ever had a guide dog in the past?"

Lilly responds to my question with a cheerful smile.

"That issue came up a few years ago, but ultimately, we decided against having one."

"Yeah, keeping the place in order was already enough work for the two of us without having to tend to an animal as well."

"Umm... Well, this one is not a guide dog, but here's very sweet regardless. Would you like to adopt him, Lilly?"

Lilly is visibly surprised by Hanako's offer.

"Really?"

"Sure."

Lilly takes the little dog from Hanako and briefly examines it with her hands in order to determine its appearance.

"My, how cute he is. Thank you very much, Hanako. Does he have a name already?"

"Niji."

"That's a very nice name. I'll be sure to take good care of Niji for you."

"Why are you giving her gifts? It ain't even her birthday yet."

"Hmmm... She has been... seeming... a bit blue lately. I thought she could use some extra company."

"Awww... Isn't that sweet? What do we say now, Sis?"

"Somehow you lecturing Lilly on etiquette, even in jest, feels extremely wrong."

Judging by Lilly's and Hanako's chuckling, I'm not the only one who feels that way.

"Oi, I can speak formally if I have to. I just choose not to in my free time."

A nod from Lilly affirms this. I'm not exactly sure what Akira's profession is, but her suit indicates a job where her usual overly casual language probably wouldn't be deemed as very appropriate. I could ask her, but right now Hanako's gaze towards me tells me she's expecting me to help her capitalize on the opening she just created.

"Lilly, about what Hanako said earlier... I noticed it as well. If something's bugging you, you could tell the plush dog, but remember we're also here for you."

"Thank you, Hisao. I appreciate it."

Looks like she's not gonna take the bait.

"Hey Sis..."

Akira's tone has changed from the light-hearted one she usually uses, and for a moment we can see her carefully contemplating and measuring her words - a trait that until now we thought belonged exclusively to the younger of the Satou siblings.

"...don't you think now would probably be a good time to tell them? I certainly think so myself."

So not only is there something, but Akira has known about it too.

"Before we left Scotland, you told me I had to determine my choice and the right moment to tell others myself."

I can tell that Lilly's not happy with her sister butting in. Her tone is polite as usual, but also a little irritated. Akira is unfazed, however.

"Yeah, but your friends are worried about you, and keeping 'em in the dark doesn't seem like the right thing to do."

"Even so..."

"What's more, I went over to uncle's place yesterday and told Hideaki, who may have told his sister about it. I realize the odds of it happening are slim, but you wouldn't want your friends to learn the news from Shizune, do ya?

That remark makes Lilly visibly cringe. I was quite surprised when Hanako revealed to me that Lilly and Shizune are first cousins. Seeing how Akira herself doesn't seem to be bothered by their hostility, she probably doesn't pay the feud between her sister and her cousin much heed. Still, she mercilessly used it to her own advantage just now.

"...very well then..."

05

Lilly takes some time to determine what she wants to say, occasionally fidgeting with Hanako's puppy as she does.

"As you know, our parents live in the city of Inverness in Scotland. It's the town where the head office of our family's company is located. Father decided to move there six years ago in order to fill the executive position that opened up there, which resulted in Mother moving there as well. Akira and I stayed behind for the sake of her job at the Japanese branch of the company and my education."

"Is education really that much better here in Japan than in Scotland?"

"I'm not really sure, though our family has good ties with Yamaku here. The family's company is among its donors. Anyway, Akira and I were summoned there to visit an aunt of ours who had fallen ill. It was the first time in six years we met with our parents again. While we were there, our father gave Akira a job offer at head office. He talked to some people at the legal department there and recommended her for a position. A position she has decided to accept."

So Akira is migrating. Despite not having siblings myself, I can see how this would affect Lilly's mood. Since her parents moved to Europe years ago already, Akira must have been the closest thing she's had to a parental figure.

"So... You're... leaving? Permanently?"

I can tell Hanako's trying to sound casual, but she doesn't really do a good job at hiding the sadness in her voice. Akira is one of the few people Hanako gets along well with, despite their contrasting personalities, so this news doesn't just mean Lilly loses a sister in a way, but also Hanako losing one of her few friends. Akira gives a grim nod back.

"That's the gist of it. I've already broken up with my boyfriend. There's no way a long-distance relationship between us would work out. If the choice had been completely mine, I would have picked a better time, but sometimes things just happen outside your control, and the best thing you can do is roll with the punches."

"You're kinda making it sound like you didn't have a choice in this at all."

"Don't get me wrong, it's still my own decision. But a side effect of the old man's recommendation was that my current career was pretty likely to hit a dead end if I declined. There were still plenty of steps on the corporate ladder I wanted to take, but in the end my promotion could have taken place under far better circumstances."

"So when exactly are you leaving?"

"Around the time your summer break starts. I've been working hard to try and tie up all the loose ends here over the last few weeks. I'd be lying if I pretended it hasn't been stressful."

Loose ends? Are we a loose end as well? What about Lilly? Hanako, who has been quiet for some time now, suddenly speaks up again.

"I-I'm going to m-miss you, Akira."

"Same here. It was fun hanging out with you guys. It's nice to see my sister has such good friends here."

One thing still is still troubling me. Lilly spoke of a decision earlier. And I can see I'm not the only one who wonders about that.

"L-Lilly, w-what was t-that decision you mentioned b-before about?"

Lilly pauses for a few seconds before speaking, clearly not completely comfortable.

"The truth is, Hanako, that my parents also summoned me back. They want me to move back in with them when Akira transfers..."

06

Despite the fact I'm not really that surprised by Lilly's revelation after she brought up Akira's departure, this news still hits us like a bombshell. Not too long ago Hanako and I were still talking about how it felt like the three of us were like a small family. And now, one member of that family is about to leave for good. Or is she? Taking a sidelong glance at Hanako, I notice she's looking at me with a desperate look in her eyes. She wants to know whether this is final or not, but obviously isn't sure whether she's prepared for the answer. I decide to ask the question for her.

"So, Lilly, will you be leaving too?"

"...I...haven't made my decision yet, Hisao. In fact, I wasn't really planning on breaking this news to you two until I made up my mind. I didn't want this matter to ruin the joy of your newly-found relationship. Especially since I'm still in the process of trying to decide."

"I'd be the last one who'd want to rush you Sis, but that process has been going on for quite some time, and I'm not getting the impression there's much progress. It'd be nice if I knew whether to cancel your ticket or not."

"You have a ticket already?"

"Yeah, proof that the folks are eager to help her make a decision."

"Akira, please..."

"Sorry."

Akira looks at us with a weary smile.

"Well, now you know the gist of it."

"Are you here to help her make a decision as well?"

"Naw, just to catch up on things. It's been a while since we've met face to face. I feel I've already influenced her decision too much as it is."

Upon hearing that, Hanako slowly rises to her feet. I notice she's looking very tired.

"W-we'll give you two some time alone then."

I get up as well, but before we leave there's one more thing I want to address.

"Lilly, speaking of which... We initially thought you were being distant in order to give Hanako and me some space..."

"That was still part of the reason, Hisao. I genuinely wanted you two to spend more time together in order to deepen your relationship and grow closer. And it seems that's exactly what you and Hanako have done. In that regard, I have no regrets... But it is also true that this matter has been on my mind a lot and I've been needing time alone in order to sort things out for myself."

"Just take care not to get stuck in permanent worry-mode. Seeing that we know now, you can count on Hanako and me if you want a listening ear or a shoulder to support you. Both of us would happily sacrifice our 'time together' for your sake at this point."

I take a side-look at Hanako who's nodding fervently, before remembering Lilly can't see that and following it up with a curt but determined 'yes'. Lilly smiles happily at our pledge of support.

"Thank you, Hanako, Hisao. I will make sure to spend more time with you from now on out. Maybe it will indeed help to take my mind off matters. I hope you can forgive me if I don't discuss this subject a lot in front of you."

Come to think of it, I bet it's been the main subject of conversation between herself and Akira as well as her parents ever since she returned to Japan. She's probably really sick and tired of it already.

"T-that's okay, Lilly."

Without much more to discuss, we say our goodbyes to Lilly and Akira. As we leave the room, Hanako gives me a quiet goodnight kiss and enters her room without saying anything. I would have liked to accompany her, but I guess she wants to be alone for a while. I just hope she's not going to bottle up whatever she's feeling right now.

As I put on my pajamas and take my dose of pills for the night, my mind continues wandering on Lilly's revelation and what it means for us and especially for Hanako. Until I came to Yamaku, Lilly was the only friend Hanako had here, possibly the only person Hanako had here or pretty much anywhere else. What kind of effect would the loss of such a person have on Hanako?

After getting into bed, I spend some time staring at the ceiling and trying to digest this evening's events.

Maybe it's still too early to jump to conclusions.

Tap - tap

Lilly said she was still deciding, and I doubt she'd just say that to ease our minds while she's already certain what she's going to do.

Tap - tap - tap

Especially not with Akira sitting nearby.

Tap - tap - tap - tap - tap

It takes another moment before I realize the strange sound is coming from my door. It's as if a dog is scratching it on the other side.

Is that Kenji? It's kinda late for him to try and bug me about something.

Tap - tap - tap

At least he's being more considerate than usual. Usually he bangs on the door with enough force to wake up everyone in the building.

I get out of bed and unlock the door, but before I can prepare a lecture about the importance of someone's daily eight hours of rest, the door flies open and someone zips past me before I can even react.

"Dammit, Kenji, what the fu- Hanako?"

Sure enough, the unexpected visitor who forced herself into my room in such a blunt manner is none other than my girlfriend who's standing in front of me with a nervous expression on her face.

"Umm... D-did I w-wake you up?"

"The noise you made was hardly enough to qualify as knocking. If I had already been asleep there's no way that would have woken me up."

"I-I didn't want to r-risk waking up anyone else."

Good point. Sneaking across campus and into the guys' dorm at night was already a risky move, especially on her part, but causing a ruckus in the middle of the dorm hallway would be a scandal in its own right. Kenji would probably flip if he found a girl knocking on doors here at night. He's already convinced Hanako's burns are the results of a bra-burning gone horribly wrong. He'd probably take her presence here as a sign that the feminist movement was getting ready for nocturnal deportations or something equally outlandish.

"It's okay."

I'd ask her what she came to do here, but I already have a pretty good idea.

"Do you want to stay here for the night? I'm okay with it if you do."

She gives me a faint smile and nods softly.

"T-thanks. I could use some... comfort."

She sits on my bed and starts removing her shoes and stockings. I swallow a lump in my throat. Does she mean THAT kind of comfort? She's not even asking me to turn around.

"H-Hanako, by 'comfort', do you mean COMFORT?"

She unbuttons her blouse and pulls it off in a single move, revealing her...nightgown? Looks like she was wearing it under her school uniform.

"J-just c-comfort."

Looks like I just dodged a bullet there. I try to recall what I've been reading lately. Whatever it was, I'd better avoid it in the future.

"Of course."

07

After Hanako has finished taking off her blouse and skirt and putting them in a neat pile beside my clothes, I turn off the lights and get back into bed. Moments later, I can feel her lying down next to me and snuggling up to me. For several minutes, we just lie there, holding each other, lazily playing footsie and me softly stroking her hair and scalp; something I've lately learned she really likes. On my first impression I didn't really have Hanako pegged for a very physical person. She already tended to get nervous when people came near her, and I expected being touched would probably cause her to flee the scene in a heartbeat. I started having second thoughts about that impression when she got drunk and really clingy with me during her birthday party. And after I started dating her, I discovered that beneath her skittish nature, Hanako's actually quite the snuggle bunny in private - a somewhat ironic thing seeing that part of her body is numb to sensations.

I continue running my hand through her hair until I can feel her relax and lay her head on my chest so she can listen to my heartbeat; another thing she likes to do. I'm not sure if she wants to talk to me about this or simply wants physical comfort. In a way, it's already a good thing she came here instead of pretending nothing's wrong and bottling up things inside.

"Do you want to talk for a bit?"

"Y-yes."

"How do you feel about Lilly's announcement."

"I f-feel sad. My first thought was 'why now?'

"Huh?"

"L-lately I've started to become more motivated to turn my life around. L-like you have. That i-includes my friendship with Lilly. B-but now I wonder if I'll even get the chance for that."

"Maybe you should tell her that. Your word might just tip the scales. I wouldn't be surprised if you were one of the main reasons she's still not sure what to do."

"M-M-ME? What do you mean?"

I take a moment to put my thoughts in order. I don't think I'm wrong about this, but how do I best explain this to Hanako?

"Akira made her choice with her career in mind, but Lilly doesn't seem to have any ambitions of getting a big-shot corporate job. The last time we spoke about figuring out what to do after Yamaku, you mentioned Lilly wanted to study English, didn't you?"

"Yes. She wants to be an English teacher."

"She can study English in Scotland as well. It doesn't matter what she does concerning her education. Heck, her parents might just hire private tutors, seeing that they seem well-off. And she can find a job as a teacher either here or there. Over there, she could also teach Japanese if she liked."

"Uhuh..."

"So what else could determine her choice? There's relatives, I guess. Lilly said it's been six years since she last met her parents before that last trip. I had the impression this evening that Lilly and Akira are estranged from their family. Did Lilly ever mention them to you?"

"N-no. She talks about Akira all the time, but never brings up her parents. I don't think she talks to them very often. She phones her sister every few days, but I've never seen or heard her talk to her parents either."

"How do you think she feels about them? Akira doesn't like them, that's impossible to miss. But Lilly wasn't that blatant with her opinion."

"I'm really not sure. I think she's neutral about them."

"Neutral? Is that even possible?"

"She seemed uncomfortable by Akira's outbursts about their parents, but didn't defend them in any way."

"She's definitely not neutral towards Akira though. And Akira will be migrating. The only other family she has contact with around here seems to be Shizune and that's hardly positive contact. So if she doesn't dislike her parents and the sister she loves is leaving for a country where Lilly herself will have no problems finishing her education, why exactly IS she still trying to make up her mind? Shouldn't the decision be easy?"

"S-she has many friends here too."

"True, but the two of us seem to be the only ones she regularly invites to her room, and we're the ones she took along to her family's summerhouse in Hokkaido. And while I'm sure Lilly considers me a good friend, I think the title of best friend goes unavoidably to you. If there's one person she could be considering staying here for, it has to be you."

Hanako falls silent for a long while, the gentle rubbing of her feet against mine the only indication she hasn't spontaneously fallen asleep. I don't think she disagrees with the logic behind my argument. It's probably her own unsteady sense of self-worth that's denying the possibility someone else could consider her important enough to decline an emigration opportunity for. Still, after a long deliberation, she silently nods.

"So I think if you don't want her to go, you should consider asking her to stay. Or if that prospect makes you uneasy, perhaps I could..."

"NO!"

Her sudden exclamation startles me a bit which in turn startles her as she quickly corrects herself with an embarrassed 'Umm... I mean, p-please don't.'

"Why not? I realize it's not a competition and Lilly's not a prize to be won, but her parents don't seem to mind doing their part to help her reach a decision if Akira is to be believed. You don't have to nag her about it, but making your position clear can't hurt in my opinion."

"B-because... ummm... Because..."

She hesitates for a bit, then mumbles something.

"I can't hear you very well."

"B-because that would r-ruin what our f-friendship is about. Or rather... what I'd l-like our friendship to b-be about."

"Could you explain that to me?"

"S-sometimes I wonder if Lilly thinks of me as a true f-friend or simply as someone who needs looking after. Because despite her always being there for m-me, I haven't been able to do anything for her. Even now, while she was struggling with this s-summons, I couldn't help her."

"But you can now. She wasn't planning to tell us, but we found out and now we can be there for her, right? You can be there for her just like you're here for me."

"M-maybe. But I don't want to ask her to stay for my sake. W-what if she would rather live with her f-family and m-me asking her to stay would make her stay here out of a s-sense of duty towards me? W-what kind of friendship would we have then?"

"In the end, the decision remains with her, Hanako. If we're not going to ask her to consider staying here, the only other thing we can do is cross our fingers and support her choice, no matter what it is."

"A-and provide some distraction when she needs it."

"According to Akira, the departure will be soon. Maybe we should postpone our dates for the time being and focus on hanging out with Lilly."

"H-Hisao...?"

"Yeah?"

"If... the two of us... hang out with Lilly all the time... she'll feel like... the third wheel and might b-back away from us."

"Then maybe it should be just you spending some additional time with her for a while."

"B-But you're my boyfriend."

"I'm not going anywhere. You just hang out with Lilly, and maybe you'll get around to convincing her to stay here, even if you don't end up asking her directly."

"Okay."

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"If I don't go to sleep soon I'll miss my morning jog tomorrow. And Emi cursing like a sailor is a very ugly sight."

"G-goodnight then, Hisao."

"Goodnight, Hanako."

"And Hisao?"

"Yes?"

She gives me a quick kiss.

"Thank you."

08

Chapter 11 (Hanako)

01

"C-could you let me check the directions one more time?"

"I don't think there's any need to hurry. I'm sure they'll have a table for us even if we don't show up exactly on time."

Lilly must have sensed the hint of frustration in my voice. She has a point of course, but I don't want to risk them giving our reserved table to someone else. I take another look at the small map I printed out and try to pinpoint our current location. My orientation skills aren't particularly bad. In fact, they're probably better than my boyfriend's, but walking through an unfamiliar (and CROWDED) part of the city keeping a keen eye on the surroundings while keeping my head down to avoid people's gazes has proven to be tough. The fact that I'm holding onto Lilly, both for her benefit and my own assurance, and the fact that Lilly tends to attract people's attention due to her height and hair color aren't making things easier.

"I...I think I have our location. We n-need to take the s-street we just passed and it should be to the right somewhere."

"Let's go then."

"Welcome to our humble establishment. Do you wish to have a table for two?"

The young man at the door makes a deep bow before noticing Lilly's cane and fidgeting a bit, unsure on how to proceed.

"I arranged the reservation in your name."

I keep my voice barely above a whisper, but Lilly replies with a subtle nod and bows to the man who addressed us.

"Good evening. My name is Lilly Satou. I believe a reservation was made in my name."

"Satou? Ah yes, an e-mail was sent specifically requesting a table in the corner."

"...That's correct. Would that be a problem?"

"Not at all. Please walk this way."

He makes a motion to follow him, then realizes again that Lilly can't see him, and I can see him ponder whether he should take Lilly's arm or not. Lilly seems to pick up on the man's dilemma as she gives him a reassuring smile.

"Please lead the way. My friend will assist me."

"As you wish. Please follow me."

02

As we get seated in what is indeed a relatively quiet corner of the restaurant, I let out a relieved sigh. Lilly smiles proudly at me.

"I think the hardest part is over now. Let's have fun for the rest of the evening."

"Y-yes."

We fall silent, and I spend some time getting my bearings back and taking in the room. When I look at Lilly, I can tell she's doing the same, carefully and structurally taking in and categorizing the various sounds around us. After listening to a few songs that are being played, she smiles.

"Ballroom music. How nice. Was this an informed or an educated guess on your part, Hanako?"

"A little bit of both."

It's true. We found out some time ago that Akira's a stickler for jazz music, but I always believed Lilly's musical taste, like nearly everything else about her, was slightly more traditional. Of course, I ended up sending a text message to Akira to make sure, but she merely confirmed my hunch was correct.

"Hanako, can you describe our surroundings to me, please?"

"Hmmm, okay."

I take a careful look around.

"The room itself is rather large and tall..."

"...there's a spacious dance floor near the center of the room..."

"...the tables for the patrons are in a semi-circle around it..."

"...on the other side is the ensemble playing the music..."

"...the furniture and decorations are a bit old-fashioned, but practical..."

"...lighting is modest. There is some lighting equipment on the ceiling pointing at the dance floor, but it's not being used for this type of music. According to their website, they play different kinds of music on different days..."

I pause for a moment, wondering how detailed Lilly wants me to be. She seems to be satisfied with my description so far.

"Thank you, Hanako."

I take a look at the menu. It's far too extensive to read entirely.

"Would you like me to read the categories on the menu, Lilly? Or should I make a few recommendations myself?"

"Could you tell me what salads they have to offer, Hanako?"

"Ummm, let's see..."

I can't say this place has the cheapest food in the world on offer. It's a good thing Lilly offered to pay for a large share of the costs or my funds would have been completely drained by now.

"Lilly?"

"Yes, Hanako."

"Thanks for footing such a large part of the bill. I... appreciate it."

"Thank you, Hanako, for having spent such a large amount of time with me lately. I've really been enjoying these outings. I... really hope this hasn't come at the cost of your relationship."

"Don't worry, it hasn't. I still spend time with Hisao whenever I can and ummm..."

I hesitate to continue, not wanting to make things too awkward. Lilly, however, completes my sentence with more than a hint of amusement in her voice.

"...you two stay over at the other's place regularly, don't you?"

I giggle shyly.

"Y-yes, but p-please don't tell that to anyone."

"Don't worry about that."

Our food is brought in, and Lilly starts eating in that carefully measured manner of hers, using her chopsticks to feel and probe each piece of food before picking it up and putting it in her mouth.

"It's funny. I never imagined you to outpace me in the boys department. Perhaps someday it'll be me approaching you for relationship advice."

I can't help but chuckle at that before rolling my eyes in a self-deprecating way.

"I-I don't think you'll want to go about things the way I did. It's a miracle everything worked out the way it did."

"A miracle or perhaps merely fate."

"It'd be nice to think so."

Taking a sip of tea, my mind realizes the implication she made before.

"Lilly, you said I outpaced you. Does that mean you've never had a boyfriend before?"

"Does that surprise you?"

It does indeed. Lilly's one of the most popular girls in school, and it's a miracle nobody ever set up a fan club at Yamaku dedicated to her.

"You've never received any confessions?"

"I did. And not all of them from boys. Puberty can be a funny thing, particularly at an all-girls school."

HOLY CRAP!

"And you turned them all down?"

"I suppose I am... very particular... about the people I get close to."

I guess she is. I remember Hisao pointed out that he and I are the only people she spends her evenings with. I suppose a lot of the people she's on good terms with share a more superficial bond with her.

"But you did let me get close... and Hisao, who's a boy."

"I did."

"Lilly... Did you... like... Hisao?"

"That question brings back memories."

It does. A few days after the festival, I asked Lilly what she thought of Hisao. But she ended up reversing the question, and I ended up admitting I had a crush on him. That was something out of the ordinary for me... I'm not someone who quickly takes a liking to other people, and yet I developed feelings for a person whom I had known for only a little more than a week. I've never been able to completely explain it. He was kind to me, of course, but there was something else that probably played a larger role. Even before I came to know that he faced a few circumstances similar to my own and that we shared several hobbies, there was something about him that felt familiar... comfortable. Like a kindred spirit.

"Y-you never really answered back then."

"You are asking me if I've ever considered Hisao potential boyfriend material?"

"Y-yes. You... said you are particular about who you let close. If I hadn't admitted I liked Hisao, would you have... approached him at some point?"

"I will admit he is the type I could see myself falling for, so to speak. Maybe if circumstances had been different..."

"You mean, if it hadn't been for me..."

Lilly makes a gesture to indicate she wants to say something, and her expression becomes a bit more stern than usual.

"Hanako, I feel it's important to make a few things clear before you draw your own conclusions. I merely said I could have fallen for Hisao under the right circumstances. But those circumstances haven't taken place. I am not in love with your boyfriend, nor has that ever been the case. The two of us have never been rivals in love."

"I don't really understand."

Lilly lets out a chuckle.

"As you can probably imagine, I am not one to fall in love with someone at first sight. In order for me to fall in love with someone, I have to come to know and like him over time, he must show an interest in me, and I must be open to the possibility of a relationship myself."

"And that wasn't the case?"

"I've come to know and like him, but it quickly became clear to me he was more interested in you than in me, so I did not allow myself to be open to the possibility. Thus, I did not fall in love with him."

That sounds so rational. I still feel Lilly dismissed the opportunity prematurely because she wanted me to have a chance at love. And she didn't stop there.

"L-Lilly... I... I feel my relationship with Hisao would... never have happened without your efforts. And I never really thanked you for that."

"That isn't true, Hanako. The two of you fell in love on your own accord and started a relationship through your own choices and efforts."

"But he never even would have spent enough time near me to start liking me if it hadn't been for you. You're the one who was so nice to him and had him join our lunch breaks, and you're the one who started inviting him to our tea parties in the evening, and you got him involved in shopping for my presents and took us along for that night on the town, and he told me you were also the one who convinced him to keep having faith in me after I locked myself up in my room, and..."

I suddenly realize I've started to ramble, so I cut myself off and take a deep breath.

"Lilly, is there... anything I can do for you in return? Anything at all?"

Lilly smiles at my offer, but shakes her head.

"It's okay, Hanako. I don't need anything. If my actions led to something good, that in itself is enough of a reward. Besides, getting a relationship started is one thing, but maintaining it is another, and so far, I can tell you've been doing a very good job. I've heard Hisao has been looking into brochures for different universities. The last time I asked him what he wanted to do after Yamaku, he said he didn't know. Now he seems to have a clear idea on what to do after graduation. I think your support played a large role in that."

"I... did encourage him as much as I could. But I think Mutou deserves a lot of credit too."

"Is Hisao still enjoying those one-on-one discussion sessions with Mutou?"

"I believe so, though they're not one-on-one anymore since last week."

"More people joined?"

"Yes, Hisao convinced his hall-mate to give the science club a try. He's the person from your class who worked with us on the main banner for the festival."

"Kenji Setou? Fascinating. His science marks aren't bad, but I never knew he had a special interest in the subject. Then again, I don't really know him very well. He rarely speaks in class."

"I don't know him well either, but apparently he's rather talkative in private. He's kind of a friend to Hisao, I think, but Hisao usually asks me to wait outside earshot range when Kenji comes up to talk, so I don't know what they talk about together. 'Guy talk' is what Hisao calls it."

"I wonder how Hisao managed to convince him."

"Ummm... I... might know. While Hisao was talking to Kenji, I tried listening in a bit. I couldn't hear very well, but suddenly Kenji raised his voice and said something like 'Alright! If it's really an all-guys club, I'd be crazy not to join.' Or something similar."

That news made Lilly grin.

"Hmmm... I had no idea Kenji was into men. You learn something new and interesting every day."

"When I asked Hisao about it, he got really awkward and just asked me to forget I ever heard that."

"Hisao's not uncomfortable with homosexuality, is he? I always thought he was too easy-going to be offended by that."

"I don't think so. Maybe it's just Kenji. He likes to get really close to people when speaking to them, and *giggle* they do have to share a bathroom and shower."

"Do you think Hisao knows about his neighbor in class?"

"Misha? I don't think he does, even though he's pretty good friends with her. He wasn't around when she changed her haircut. He probably thinks she's always had her hair like that. I didn't tell him about it."

"After all this time I still wonder at times what that girl sees in Shizune."

Lilly's reaction feels a bit awkward. For all her lady-like behavior, the subject of Shizune still never fails to get her uncharacteristically worked up.

"T-the two of you haven't always been at odds, have you?"

Lilly shakes her head and smiles a sad smile.

"We haven't. We used to get along in the past, and when Mother and Father left Japan, we even got closer to each other."

"Really?"

"My father and Shizune's father dislike each other, so while my parents were still living in Japan we rarely met with the Hakamichis. But Akira has a great fondness for Shizune's little brother, so after we started living on our own, we'd drop by at their house whenever we had the opportunity to. I'd like to think Shizune and I got along with each other pretty well despite our inability to communicate with one another without Shizune using written notes and Akira acting as a medium or writing letters into each other's hand using our fingers. But when Shizune became student council president and I had to deal with her, things changed very quickly."

"P-power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?"

Lilly laughs heartily for a moment at the silly use of a term like 'absolute power' in combination with the student council presidency, before taking a sip of her drink and continuing.

"I do not think so in this case. I don't think Shizune has ever really changed at all. She's still the exact same person she was half a decade ago. Maybe it is I who have changed."

"You?"

"Shizune has always been ambitious and full of ideas. When we spent time together in the past, she'd often go over her plans for the future in detail, and we enjoyed chattering about them."

"Such as...?"

"Organizing a charity festival, setting up our own orphanage, setting up a school for the disabled similar to Yamaku... taking over the world one city council at a time."

"Pffff...w-what?"

That last part was so absurd I nearly choke on my drink. Judging from Lilly's sheepish smile, she's fully aware of this.

"I am aware that last part was a bit childish. We got a little carried away every now and again. We were only fourteen at the time."

"And when she became student council president, she still had all her ambitions?"

"Yes, but not the means to fulfill them. To most of its members, the student council was like a school club to put a few daily hours in after class and then devote the rest of their time to homework and relaxation. Not every member had Shizune's good grades that allowed her to get by with only a minimum of studying, nor did every member want to spend all their time in the council room until sundown, relying on take-out food each day because the cafeteria and shops closed already. Shizune would consistently dismiss these concerns and charge ahead with her plans without taking others into account. It's been like this since she took over as president, and it will most likely remain that way until she graduates."

"And you took it upon yourself to point out those reservations to her on other people's behalf?"

"Yes, at first I did it because I was the person who knew her best. Eventually, it became somewhat of an unspoken agreement that I'd usually be the one to deal with Shizune if conflicts arose in any way, which often happened seeing that Shizune likes to regard conflicts as challenges to win rather than as situations to resolve through compromise. But at least others could remain on semi-amicable terms with her this way while my relationship with her was already in a broken state anyway. It has remained this way even after I left the student council and limited my activities to class representative duties."

"And she didn't take your objections to her policies very well?"

"Before we enrolled at Yamaku, I used to cheer her on all the time and encourage her to follow her dreams. These days she regards my attempts to convince her to slow down and look before leaping as hypocritical."

Lilly's story has made me think. I don't have exactly great chemistry with Shizune and Misha; Shizune's brashness and Misha's loudness are traits that tend to put me off. But I don't dislike them either. Hisao is on very good terms with both of them, a good thing since he often has to do assignments with them, even if he admits Shizune is sometimes a pain to deal with. Still, even though Hisao tends to butt heads with Shizune on a very regular basis, neither seems to walk away from those conflicts with hard feelings towards the other. It's a pity the same can't true for Lilly and Shizune. Someone who dreams about setting up orphanages can't be a bad person in my book.

"It's... ummm... a s-shame things have gotten so p-personal between you two. Y-you might still get along with each other as long as you weren't f-forced to work on something together."

"It's nice to believe so, but I don't think a lot is bound to change anytime soon. It's a whole lot more likely that the science club will soon overshadow the student council in terms of membership."

Funny she says that, because if my "secret project" succeeds that could be the case soon.

"Ummm... Lilly, can you... k-keep a secret?"

"Of course, Hanako."

"What you said about the science club membership... might happen. At least, I hope it does. For Hisao."

"Does Hisao have recruitment plans then?"

"N-no. But I'm p-planning something that might get him a few new members."

"Really? What are you planning?"

"Ummm... I... approached Mutou last w-week and conducted an interview with h-him. Using the information he gave me, I've written a short article about the club that'll appear in the next issue of the school newspaper. With l-luck, students with interest in the subject will take notice. B-but it's supposed to be a surprise, so you can't tell Hisao about it."

Lilly is silent for a moment before breaking out into a huge smile. I see something on her face that I haven't seen there before. A look of admiration.

"Hanako... What a clever initiative. I never would have thought of that myself. Hisao will love this."

"T-thanks. I really hope so."

"What did the newspaper club say about your idea?"

"Naomi liked the idea. However she said that only club members are allowed to submit articles. So, I officially joined three days ago. Though...Hisao doesn't know that either."

"Congratulations, Hanako. You're turning into quite a reporter."

"D-do you... really... think so, Lilly?"

"I do."

"B-because, I've been thinking. Mutou said... he was pleased to see I was developing m-my interests and s-suggested to think about... doing something with it after graduation and talking to the teacher in charge of the newspaper club about it."

"And will you?"

"M-maybe. I still want to think it through a little more. I mean... I'd never stand in front of a c-camera, but things like writing articles and columns or doing research and fact checking or editing... I think I'd enjoy doing all of those."

"It sounds like you've given it quite some thought already. I think you can take your time and come to a decision with plenty of time to spare. Graduation is still many months away."

"I... I plan to think things over during summer break. Hopefully, by the end, I will have made up my mind. If I decide against it, m-maybe something like technical writer or copywriter would be a good alternative"

"That seems like a very good idea. Do you have any plans for summer break?"

I repress the temptation to tell her that depends on her decision. The truth is I have some plans, but none of them really viable right now.

"N-not really. I've thought about travelling a bit... seeing things. Naomi's mentioned that's what she's going to do during the summer, and I liked the idea as well. But I don't think I can spare the money right now. I want to keep some money aside so Hisao and I can keep going on dates."

I sigh wearily.

"A relationship is a really wonderful thing to have, b-but it's not always cheap."

Lilly merely reacts with a nod and a smile; a sign that I'm not going to get a lot of sympathy from her for no longer being single.

"Hanako?"

"Hmmm?"

"Approaching Mutou for that interview... Was that hard for you to do?"

It was actually. Even though I'm familiar with Mutou and think highly of him as a homeroom teacher, the thought of approaching him for a favor still caused me to have at least one sleepless night. Yet strangely enough, it was also easy in a way.

"It was... really hard, yet also really easy. I just kept reminding myself that I was doing this for Hisao. And it helped. It really helped."

"What if it had concerned a favor for yourself?"

"I wouldn't have been able to do it."

A quick and definite answer, but I know myself well enough to sense that it's true.

"T-they say it's easier to be selfish than to be selfless. If it was for Hisao's sake I... I... I feel like I'd be able to do anything, but..."

That was the worst ad lib ever. Lilly's reaction isn't the amused smile I was expecting though. Instead, she just looks lost in thought. Lost in thought and just a little bit sad.

"...but not for yourself."

"N-no. I guess nobody's perfect."

"I know exactly what you mean."

Our dinner and conversation finished, we hang back and relax, Lilly listening to the music and me watching the patrons on the dance floor. It's gotten a bit crowded there, and I giggle as two couples making a flashy turn at the same time accidentally bump into each other.

"Did something amusing happen?"

"Just... four people having an awkward collision on the dance floor."

Lilly chuckles.

"That brings back memories."

I think I just learned another thing about Lilly. Although I'm hardly surprised to learn Lilly has participated in style dancing before, given the fact she likes the kind of music that's used for the activity. It fits in neatly with the image I already had of her. She's probably pretty good at it too, seeing that even her normal manner of moving already has a certain amount of grace.

"You know how to dance?"

"I do. I had dance courses in middle school."

"Was it hard to learn? I mean, harder for you than... for the rest?"

"I don't think it was. One doesn't need eyesight in order to memorize what body parts to move at what moments. Of course, at least one partner being able to see certainly makes things easier."

"I... think I would have liked to see it. You're probably a very graceful dancer."

Lilly playfully twirls one of her blonde locks around her finger and smiles at me.

"Am I correct when I assume you're asking me for a demonstration, Hanako?"

"T-that's probably... a bit difficult right now. But I would have liked to see you dance."

"Are you serious?"

"O-of course."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Very well then. I hear they're playing a slow waltz right now. That's fortunate, for that's a rather easy one to perform."

"Umm... but, don't you need a partner to..."

Before I can finish my sentence, Lilly gets up and extends her hand to me with a playful expression on her face.

"May I have this dance, Miss Ikezawa?"

WAIT A MINUTE!

I curse myself for not seeing this one coming after such a shamelessly obvious lead-in.

"W-w-wait Lilly, w-w-we're two g-girls, aren't w-we?"

"That's not a problem for me. I know the steps for both the male and the female partner."

She chuckles shortly.

"My middle school was girls-only, so I've had nothing but female dance partners. I'm used to it."

"T-this isn't m-middle school. W-we'll attract a-a-attention."

"Just as one person teaching the other a few dance steps. Most people will have to focus on their partner to avoid tripping."

"B-but... but..."

"You asked for a demonstration, and I think the best way to go about it is to show you up close and teach you a few steps myself. We could go over to the dance floor and see if there are any open spots away from the seated patrons."

I sigh.

"J-just a look then."

I get up, take Lilly's arm and slowly lead her to the area bordering the dance floor. As we circle the area in search of a bit of space, I try to wrap my head around this uncharacteristically forward move. It isn't like Lilly at all to try and push against my boundaries like this. For as long as I've known her, she's been protective, sometimes even over-protective, of me. But tonight, more than ever before, I feel like we've been interacting as equals. We both spoke candidly about ourselves; Lilly of her past and I of my future. This kind of interaction between us wouldn't have been possible two months ago. This kind of outing wouldn't have been possible two months ago. Is Lilly trying to find out how far I will go in defying my own anxieties? Is she... testing me?

"Do you want to give it a try?"

We reach a corner of the dance floor near the ensemble and away from the tables that isn't particularly crowded. My eyes warily skim the crowd, but nobody seems to be paying us any attention.

"V-very quickly then."

Picking out a somewhat secluded spot near the edge, I walk Lilly in place and turn to face her. She's wearing a reassuring smile on her face that's not quite catching on yet.

03

"Could you give me your right hand, Hanako?"

I place my hand in hers, shivering a bit as her fingers briefly touch my scar tissue.

"Now, can you place your left hand on my shoulder?"

I do so, but can't help feeling really weird. A feeling worsened by the fact she's wearing her off-the-shoulder sweater and my hand is touching her bare skin.

"A-and now?"

"Please place your right foot between my feet."

I follow suit and stiffen for a moment as Lilly places her right hand onto my left shoulder blade. I look around nervously, but it doesn't seem like people around us are taking notice of us. Either that or they really don't care.

"Let's begin. Could you take a step back with your left foot, count to two and put your right foot beside it?"

"Umm... Like this? Eek!"

The moment I take a step back, Lilly lifts her right foot, presumably to let me drag her forward a bit and determine the length of my steps, but since I wasn't expecting this lack of resistance, I try to put my foot back and almost lose my balance, which would have resulted in me dragging us both to the floor and her ending up on top of me. That'd be enough reason for me to run out of here and deny this evening ever happened.

"I-I-I'm sorry!"

Lilly doesn't seem to be put off by my blunder and gives me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. Everybody tends to stumble a bit at first. Let's try again. Take a step back as slowly as you can now."

I take another step back, trying to move in slow motion this time. Sure enough, Lilly moves her foot again and fluidly advances to close the distance. I move my other foot back and Lilly follows up, lightly brushing her foot against mine.

"Much better, Hanako. But try to keep the distance between your feet consistent."

"Like this?"

One more step back and this one goes without incidents. Lilly gives me a pleased nod.

"Very good. Now we'll try the reverse. Take a slow step forward with your right foot."

This time Lilly leans slightly back and I'm pulled forward a bit, but before I can lose my balance, she straightens herself out.

This is like some odd balancing game she's playing.

"One more time."

I take another step forward, trying hard not to bump into Lilly by accident. She seems satisfied with the distance and speed of my movement.

"Let's try to go back and forth a few times to see if we can get a movement rhythm down that feels natural for both of us."

"O-okay."

I carefully try to retrace the steps I took earlier. After about half a minute of moving back and forth, Lilly signs for a break.

"Are you up for some variation, Hanako?"

"Ummm...what do you mean?"

"Next, try making a slow sidestep to your right, followed by a sidestep to the left."

"That doesn't sound too difficult."

I move left and right several times, letting Lilly get used to the steps I take. This is much easier than the backwards and forward movement.

"Not too hard, is it?"

"N-no."

"Then let's combine the two to create a counter-clockwise movement."

"W-what?"

"Back, right, forward, left."

"B-back, right..."

I slowly try to adopt the new pattern, struggling at first to memorize the order.

"Forward, left..."

After several minutes, Lilly stops me.

"You have very consistent movement, Hanako. That's a good thing. I think I'll be able to take it from here."

"T-take it from here?"

"The steps I'm taking belong to the leading partner. I needed to get used to your movement patterns a bit, but I think I have the timing down now. Just continue as you did before."

We resume, but this time Lilly starts making more active movements instead of going along with mine, occasionally shifting her weight to correct me. At first, I'm positive we're going to trip and fall, but as

we continue I realize that as long as I don't deviate from the step length I've been going with, our movements are nearly perfectly synchronized.

I can't believe that Lilly got a feeling for my movements that quickly. She really is good at this.

"Left, back, right, forward."

I'm starting to risk the occasional glance away from our feet. Nobody's paying us any attention, thank goodness. I giggle nervously.

"R-right, forward, back..."

"Try to relax your upper body a little bit more, Hanako."

"R-right."

"Left, back..."

"Right, forward..."

"Left..."

"Back..."

This is starting to become fun. When I look up at Lilly, I notice she's wearing a beaming smile. I can't help but smile back, even though she can't see that. Maybe I misjudged her earlier, and she really wanted to merely share some of her experience with me. Lilly is one of those people who'd probably pay to be a teacher. Whenever she gets the opportunity to help someone brush up on something she's knowledgeable about, she's overcome with a childlike eagerness that's actually very endearing. This seems to be one of those opportunities.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Let's try a natural turn next."

04

I patiently wait as Lilly runs through her bag in search of her room keys. Tonight was great fun. The dancing part was maybe a bit much, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't interesting to try. Moreover, I feel that I've gotten to know Lilly a little better tonight.

"Hanako, thank you very much for tonight. I truly had a great time."

Lilly has found her keys and has opened her door, but before entering she turns and addresses me.

"Same here. I also think I've learned a few things about you I didn't know before."

"The same goes for me. You've... really changed lately, Hanako."

"F-for the better?"

"Definitely."

Lilly's smile is warm and genuine, but I don't think it's my imagination that there's a subtle trace of wistfulness in her voice, and that for a moment, no more than a split-second, there's a hint of sadness on her face. But when I blink my eyes, it's gone already, and Lilly's mouth curls into a playful grin.

"I don't think Hisao needs to know everything that took place tonight."

I giggle.

"I agree."

"Good night, Hanako. I'll meet you at school tomorrow."

"Good night, Lilly."

Our farewells behind us, Lilly closes the door, and I take a glance at the door of my own dorm room, check the time on my cell phone and then briskly walk down the hallway.

Chapter 12 (Lilly)

As I close the door, I wait a while to hear if Hanako's door is being opened or not. As expected, I hear the sound of footsteps hurrying down the hall instead. I laugh quietly. It hasn't been the first time Hanako's snuck off like this lately. I really hope she's not going to run into any patrolling staff.

I take off my clothes, put on my pajamas and sit on the edge of my bed. Tonight's been only the most recent of several outings Hanako and I have made lately. It's almost as if she's become my girlfriend instead of Hisao's. Just recently we've had two picnics in the park, a visit to a play in a local theater, a shopping trip and yesterday a visit to a local petting zoo. That last one was particularly memorable for both of us, and I'm positive that if they didn't have closing hours there, I'd still be sitting there holding the 2-months old lamb who took a liking to me (my Scottish heritage may run deeper than I thought) and Hanako'd still be sitting next to me cuddling with the three members of the local rabbit population whose trust she managed to gain. And then there was this night. We made an agreement that I'd pay the majority of the costs. My parents never left us wanting for money, and I presumed Hanako's budget, as a ward of the state, was quite a bit tighter. Hanako would organize the various outings. All in all, I've made some wonderful memories.

"You have... one... new voicemail."

The droning message from my cell phone tugs me back to reality, and I hear a voice that's become slightly more familiar to me since my trip to Europe.

"...Lilly, dear. Are you there? If you get this message before morning, could you call us back?..."

I let out a tired sigh. The problem with wonderful things is that they always end too soon.

01

It takes me a while to place the noise that rudely wakes me from my sleep.

Where am I?

What time is it?

That sound is not my alarm clock, is it?

I think I've heard it before...

Somewhere...

Still tired...

My cell phone?

I groggily crawl out of bed, but just before I can get to my phone, the ringing stops.

Now I'm vexed...

"You have... one... new voicemail."

Voice... mail?

"...Yo, it's me. I expected to get the voicemail. Hehe, still no early riser, eh?"

I let out a pained groan.

"I wanted to talk to you, so maybe you could call me back..."

Not now...

"...eh, scratch that. I'll just wait a minute and try again..."

Minute? What minute?

I can't suppress a cry of surprise when my phone suddenly rings again, barely an inch away from my ear.

"A-Akira..."

"Yo. Got some time to spare?"

I merely let out a loud yawn. Why is she calling this early?

"How was your date yesterday?"

"It wasn't a date. But it was a lot of fun. We went to a nightclub, or a restaurant, or something similar, and they had a large dance floor and people playing ballroom music."

As I describe our outing to Akira, my drowsiness slowly starts to disappear.

"Yeah, I got a text message from her earlier asking me if you liked that kind of music. The idea itself was hers though."

"After some convincing, I managed to teach her a few steps. If I had more time, I could probably have made a decent dancer out of her."

"She let you drag her onto the dance floor? Man, that girl is just full of surprises."

A soft sigh escapes my lips.

"You don't even know half of it."

"Eh?"

"When I first met her, she was barely functioning at all. Instead of living, it seemed like she was just existing. And now, she shows initiatives, has club activities, a love life, even plans for the future. She's opened herself up to new experiences. It all happened... so quickly."

I can hear Akira click her tongue.

"You sound a bit down. Surely you're not longing to go back to the time when she was clinging to you as if you were a life preserver? I mean, she's not your child. She never was."

"I think you misunderstand..."

"Eh, whatever. Anyway, I didn't really call you to ask about your evening, though I wanted to be sure you were fully awake before getting to the main topic."

I'm pretty sure I know what that main topic is about.

"I got a call from Scotland last night. They said they spoke to you."

"That they did."

"And that you made a decision."

"Y-yes."

"So... Are you sure you're going to accompany me to Scotland next week?"

"...Probably as sure as I'm ever going to get on this..."

"When did you decide? Last night?"

"More or less. Although it wasn't decided on a whim, if that is what you're asking."

"Well... As long as it's your decision and your decision alone, I won't argue it."

"...Akira...?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you... break the news to your boyfriend?"

"I don't think you want to handle things my way. I doubt you even could."

"You're not being very helpful."

"I don't have any advice for you, Sis, but I'm confident you'll pull it off. Between the two of us, you were always the diplomatic one."

"I'm not exactly that confident about it myself."

"Let me know how it goes. And remind me to call the school administration to take care of the paperwork regarding the transfer."

02

Part of me probably would have liked to keep this to myself for a little while longer, but I don't think that'd be a good idea. Hanako and Hisao already sensed something was afoot last time, and I don't feel it's fair to keep them in the dark unnecessarily. Even so, I'll be glad when this evening is over. I invited them over to my room during lunch break. They'll probably arrive together.

They'll probably be disappointed in me. Especially Hanako.

Should I try to lift their spirits? Or will that seem hypocritical?

I hate situations like these. But I can't just sneak away in silence and never return.

I'm going to miss you two. Especially you, Hanako.

My thoughts are interrupted by a quiet knock on the door. My invitation to come in is followed by the sounds of the door opening and two people walking in. I notice they're unusually quiet while I pour the tea. I ask them both how things are going at their respective clubs, but from the short answers I get, it appears neither is eager for a lot of small talk. As I search for an opportune way to bring up the obvious subject, Hisao suddenly speaks up.

03

"Lilly, from the hesitant way you invited us here during lunch, we got the impression you wanted to tell us something important. We all know what it is about, so maybe we should just get it out of the way without further ado."

"You're correct, Hisao. It is about the matter of my parents' summons."

"You've made a definite decision then?"

"Yes. I wanted the two of you to know about it before I tell anyone else."

In a way, I've already broken the news to them. Why would I need to tell anyone else I'd be staying here?

"You've decided to answer it."

Not a question, but an observation. I merely nod quietly.

"My family dearly wants me to join them, and Akira will be going there as well. I can still fulfill my dream of becoming a teacher there."

Silence follows. Probably the most painful silence I've ever endured. When Hisao speaks again, his voice is a lot softer than before.

"If that's the choice you've made and that choice makes you happy, then we'll support it although the both of us will miss you terribly."

"I won't be gone forever, Hisao. I can still call you two, and with Akira's help I could exchange things over the internet."

"I'll... miss you, Lilly."

It hurts me to hear the tone in Hanako's voice. The budding confidence that was still very evident in her voice last night seems to have vanished and is once more replaced with the scared, insecure tone that was there when she started speaking to me for the first time. I feel I owe it to Hanako to help her get her confidence back and remind her of how far she's already come.

"Hanako, remember when we first met? When you entered my room for the first time after overhearing my consoling of a friend, you didn't say a single word for the entire night. Even as I poured you tea and talked, you sat silently and simply listened to what I said. It took many quiet meetings like that before you began to open up to me, but as you began to, I felt some of the happiest moments I've ever felt."

I take a sip of my drink, before continuing.

"I didn't become your friend because I pitied you, Hanako. I became your friend because I knew you were hiding not just from me, but from everyone. Your ambitions, personality, interests, tastes... I didn't know any of them and neither did anybody else. As you showed yourself to me, though I began to realize the person that you were and became sure that our meeting was a very special moment."

I feel a small lump in my throat, but go on anyway.

"I believe you are a very beautiful person, Hanako, and I am certain that you will become a strong and confident woman..."

I have more to say, but cut myself off as I realize that what I'm saying isn't accurate. What I'm saying will happen eventually has actually already come to pass.

"No, that's not correct. You already have become a strong and confident woman, Hanako. You have shown you have obtained your own friends and hobbies, your own hopes for after graduation and your own love live from which to draw strength. I want you to devote yourself to them, even after I'm not around anymore, for others will draw strength from you as well. Especially in the last weeks, you have shown how much you have to offer to those around you."

"That's why I think you will be okay, Hanako. Because you are your own self with your own life. You yourself have proven that to me. I've learned many new things about you since I came back to Japan, but the most significant thing I've come to witness is how strong and independent you truly have become."

We remain silent for a long time, but eventually Hanako speaks softly.

"I... I... understand."

"Will you be okay?"

"I will."

I truly believe she will. We spend some time quietly drinking tea, small talk seeming inappropriate after the moments we just had. Eventually, Hisao addresses me.

"So when exactly will you be leaving? And how?"

"On Tuesday the week after this one. Akira will be picking me up here, and we will spend the night at the Hakamichi home where Akira will have the rest of our luggage stored. Our flight will depart on Wednesday."

"So I guess we won't be coming along to the airport to see you off."

"I do not think that will be practical. However, I'd like to save the Monday evening for a little get-together in my room if that's okay. A small seeing-off party as it were."

"That seems like a good idea, Lilly. We'll be there."

"I'm looking forward to it, Hisao. The upcoming week will be very busy for me. I have very limited time to tie up all loose ends and transfer my class representative duties to others."

A busy time indeed. The fact that summer break is approaching makes the upcoming workload even larger. It doesn't seem like I'll be able to relax for a while.

04

"Awww... That's a shame, Lilly. I bet Hanako and Hisao are really sad, aren't they?"

I smile at Misha's reaction to my announced departure. It's easy for many people to forget that Misha is more than merely Shizune's mouthpiece, and this reaction is obviously her own.

"Saying goodbye is never easy, Misha. But I draw relief from the fact that they still have each other. They'll be fine, you'll see."

"Yeah, I'm sure they will."

"I will not pass judgment on your decision to migrate, that is your own choice. But it is my responsibility to see to it that your sudden stepping down does not come at the cost of the functioning of 3-2 as a class."

"That is why I'm here. I have already managed to find a classmate willing to act as my replacement. After my departure, my classmate Aki Sujishi will function as representative of class 3-2. Please give her your full cooperation in the carrying out of her duties."

And please try to treat her with what other people would call common decency.

"I'm pleased to see you've managed to transfer your duties to one of your classmates this quickly. Then again, seeing that you've had quite a bit of practice with that over the years, I shouldn't be too surprised."

She just can't help herself, can she?

"She took the task willingly and with enthusiasm. I wonder how many students in the dictatorship you've got running would take these tasks without you forcing them to."

"Dictatorships are effective. Running a tight ship produces timely results. Do you really think our classmates' future employers will coddle them and tack on a 'pretty please' each time something needs to be done?"

"Your classmates are not paid employees, and your class is not a commercial company nor a police state. People acting out of a sense of duty will always work more efficiently than people ordered to do something."

"I'm afraid you do not have the data to back that up, class rep. If you want a summary of what classes ended up running up against the deadlines most often, I'll be more than happy to procure one for you."

"It's good to hear that you've managed your schedule so well that you can afford to take part in these kinds of petty games."

"My schedule is not the problem right now. Yours is. There are still absence summaries, score charts and rosters to cover. I presume you'll be responsible and fill them all in a few hours before leaving instead of delegating them to your successor?"

"I have reserved the last two days of my stay here for those tasks, so I am sure to have all the latest data. The time I'll be taking is about twice as much as I predict will be needed, so I will be able to take care of the paperwork even if distractions are to be present."

"I need to go take a bathroom break, I'll be back in a few minutes."

It seems Misha has finally had enough of being a vessel to our argument, and I hear her walk briskly towards the exit of the room. I slump my shoulders dejectedly. It's silly, I'm about to leave this school permanently, and Shizune and I are still going at it as if nothing has changed.

"..."

Misha walking out on us has now left Shizune and me simply standing there, our argument cut off, unable to get through to the other to either continue the fight or simply get back to business. I'm not sure about Shizune, but I'm feeling rather embarrassed right now.

We probably had this coming.

I don't think there's much left to discuss anyway. I've already said what needed to be said and the rest was just both of us trying to gain the advantage over the other. I don't like the idea of simply turning my back on Shizune and walking away, but our communicative means are severely limited right now, so I simply bow in her direction, wait a few seconds to give her an opportunity to return the favor and then turn to leave. As I take out my cane, I hear her footsteps walking towards the door, followed by the sound of the door opening. I think that's her way of acknowledging my gesture, so I give a quick nod in her direction and leave the council room.

This is one thing I won't miss about this place.

05

Chapter 13 (Hanako)

01

"Hey, Hanako."

I deliver a quick nod as the president and editor-in-chief of the newspaper club comes barging into the computer room.

"N-Naomi."

Ever since I joined the club as a permanent member, Naomi insisted I'd be on first-name basis with the other members, though I'm still having a hard time getting used to that. It's easier with Naomi, though, since my tasks usually require regular input from her, and the fact that she's my neighbor in class also doesn't hurt. We're familiar enough with one another nowadays for me to occasionally talk to her in class and do the occasional assignment with her and Natsume. One thing that's usually an advantage is that there are hardly any silences, uncomfortable or otherwise, around her. I suppose we could be called semi-friends now, though our contact is a lot more casual than my bond with Hisao and Lilly, and I still have trouble dealing with her occasionally hyperactive moods and bouts of distraction from time to time.

"Hey, how's page four coming along?"

"Almost ready."

"Cool. Get me a print-out when it's finished. I can't wait to check it out."

I don't think she's here just to ask about one of the pages. Either she's bored, which usually causes her to start chattering up whoever happens to be nearby, or there's more she wants to discuss.

"Oh hey, about your article. I read it through just before the weekend."

"Y-yes?"

"I like it. I took a lot of rewording, didn't it? I mean, that text doesn't look like stuff Mutou would say."

"He gets a b-bit technical at times. I tried to make it easier to understand. I had to trim a lot though."

"I could get you some more space if you can use it."

"Oh?"

She sits on my desk and tosses me a wink.

"I've been thinking. Maybe instead of making it a short article, we could turn it into a column. A permanent one. Or semi-permanent until we got a few test runs. We could put it on the columns page, or let it sit on page five. Each issue would cover a different club here at school. The idea would be to give a short overview of each club written in a way to encourage casual readers to check it out. Like you've been doing."

Looks like Naomi's been thinking about this a lot more than I have. All I wanted was to do a little piece on Hisao's club and hopefully get him a new member or two as a little 'I love you'-gesture towards him. Naomi's ambitions, however, seem to reach further.

"In fact, seeing that we'd be benefitting the school by actively encouraging club membership, that'd give me a lot of extra clout to get our budget raised when the time comes to negotiate with the student council about club budgets again."

Quite a bit further.

"In fact, I bet if we offer to cover the student council itself in there, Queen Hakamichi might throw in a personal bonus. I know she'd certainly welcome extra membership."

Naomi scratches her cheek, chuckles and sends me a clownish grin.

"The question remains of course whether the extra membership would welcome HER. If you can write something up that gets Hakamichi additional personnel, I'll personally nominate you for a Pulitzer."

Me... writing?

"Of course, I'm not really in a position to nominate people for that."

Slow down a bit.

"And even if I was, isn't that prize US-exclusive?"

"Err... Where was I?"

"Ummm... M-me writing something up?"

"Right. Seeing that this started with your initiative, it's fair to ask you first if you're interested in being the one in charge of writing it up every issue. I mean, you're a pretty good text writer, I've seen that much in class already. It's a shame if all you do here is data entry and fiddling with the layout. It's also good if the one writing it is always the same person, so the writing style remains consistent."

Me?

"You liked writing that piece. Why not do more with it?"

"...maybe..."

"Not overly enthusiastic, I see."

"...It's not that..."

Naomi gets off the desk, pulls a chair over, turns it around and sits down on it, her elbows resting on the back rest.

"You've been kinda gloomy lately. Well, it's not like you haven't had gloomy periods before, but... This is about Satou, isn't it? Isn't she going away tomorrow?"

"Y-yes. Tomorrow evening..."

Naomi lets out a sad sigh.

"Sometimes you just wish you could freeze time, don't you? Just... keep the good times in your life from ending."

"...yes..."

"In the upcoming half year, I bet a lot of third year students will be thinking that as graduation approaches. With you, it just comes around a little earlier."

"...you too?"

"Well, I don't think after school, I'll have time to play newspaper anymore, that's for sure. Pity too."

That's new to me. I always assumed Naomi was going to go into journalism. If anybody was into the subject, it'd be her.

"Y-you're not going to b-become a journalist?"

"Dunno. Maybe. It might not work. The loose wiring upstairs might cause problems."

Her epilepsy? I admit her case is a pretty severe one, but...

"The episodes itself are one thing. I've heard it's pretty freaky for others. Me, I just go out like a light and wake up feeling like crap for a while without remembering what happened. But it comes with restrictions."

"Restrictions?"

"You know, don't sit in front of a screen for too long, don't get your driver's license, live your life as regularly as possible, no all-nighters... That sort of thing. Going professional... may not work out very well."

Every student has a history. I've just learned part of one more. I wish the situation was different for me right now. With enough on my mind as it is, I really don't know what to say to her. Listening is something I can do well. Comforting is a whole different matter.

"..."

"You know, I hope at least you get to enjoy your little party tonight?"

"Y-you know... about... that?"

"Yeah, your boyfriend said you two were going shopping for that after you're done here. He's waiting for you at the school gate. I couldn't let him in to tell you in person, 'cause I was afraid he'd spot your article lying on my desk."

Why didn't you tell me until now?

She looks pensive for a moment and suddenly snaps her fingers, causing me to flinch.

"Oh right, that's why I came in here. To tell you that. *giggle* I guess I got a little sidetracked, huh?"

OH, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!

02

"Couldn't get away from Naomi, could you?"

Hisao seems amused by my tardiness and the fact I'm clearly winded from my mad dash to the gates. After handing me one of the two shopping bags he's carrying, he bends forward and gives me a quick peck on the cheek while I'm busy catching my breath.

"She... forgot... for a while."

Hisao nods. He doesn't interact with Naomi much, but has heard several stories from me over the last few weeks.

"We'd better get going quickly if we want to finish everything in time."

"Yes."

We leave the school grounds and walk down the road to town. Despite the fact that it's summer, the sky is a bit dark and about as gloomy as my mood. I'd be surprised if we make it through the evening without a major downpour.

"Hanako?"

"S-sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was asking if we should get an additional bag of sweets. She seemed to like that brand last time, and we went through it pretty quickly."

"If you think so."

"Maybe we should take some time off after this week."

"Hmmm?"

"You've been gloomy all week, and frankly I'm been getting a bit worried."

He's worried about me. Almost seems like old times...

No, I shouldn't think like that.

"You know I'm here for you if you need me, right? If you want to talk about something..."

Part of me wants to share the anxiety I've been feeling with Hisao. If I can't even trust him with it, who can I trust? But I'm also afraid he'll just tell me I'm imagining things.

"Erm... Hisao. Do you think the time I spent with Lilly lately was... a good idea?"

"I think so. Why do you ask? Do you regret all those activities? I thought you had a good time yourself."

"I did enjoy them. It's just... they... didn't really... help things."

"Well, if you look at pure end results, they didn't do anything to change Lilly's mind, but we'll never know what the odds of that happening were to begin with. Regardless of that, at least you and Lilly made some wonderful memories together, didn't you? I mean, isn't that kinda the key to enjoying life? Making fond memories because you know nothing lasts truly forever?"

It's not really that.

"I suppose so..."

"Hanako?"

He stops me and faces me. He looks at me for a moment and then gives me a gentle hug.

"I'm not gonna tell you to cheer up, because you have a good reason to feel down. I just hope you'll feel better soon."

"T-thanks."

I close my eyes for a few moments and let the feeling of his embrace sink in, providing some comfort.

"Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

"Parties are for celebrating something, right? B-but, is there really something to celebrate?"

"Her class will be throwing her a surprise party tomorrow. Kenji was complaining about it earlier. We can't really fall behind, can we?"

"We're supposed to be cheerful and smile. Even if we don't feel that way. It feels... fake. Like..."

"Like...?"

"Like... many of my previous b-birthday celebrations. I'm... not very good at pretending."

"Maybe we shouldn't call it a party or a celebration then. It's just... one last opportunity to spend time together. You'd want to make the most out of an occasion such as that, wouldn't you?"

That makes me think for a bit. If I see it as just hanging out together... It's a silly game of words, but it worked with my birthday party.

"So, Hanako, do you think one bag of sweets is enough for an entire evening?"

"Ummm... We can probably get a second one just to be sure."

"Got it."

He ruffles my hair for a bit and is about to let go when he suddenly freezes.

03

"Did you just feel something?"

"Hmmm?"

I look up towards the sky and sure enough a droplet lands on my nose causing me to back out of our embrace and rub it off.

"Oh great, just what we needed. And it's still nearly ten minutes to the store."

"Should we go back?"

"I'm not sure, it's also about ten minutes back to Yamaku and it'll be ten minutes uphill. And we still need to get goods from the store."

"But we might get trapped in town."

"If it continues to rain, we might be able to get an umbrella. Maybe Yuuko can lend us one if she's on duty in the Shanghai."

We continue our way down the road, our pace increased to a brisk walk. My hopes that we'll reach the store relatively dry shrink with every passing minute as the drizzle changes to rain and the rain then turns into a downpour.

"Damnit, we're gonna get soaked and spend the next few days with pneumonia if this keeps up. Hanako, do you think you can manage to sprint the last stretch?"

"S-sprint? That's irresponsible, Hisao. Your heart..."

"Look, I run nearly every morning, and I haven't had a single flutter. I can handle it. Now can you manage to run for a bit?"

"I-I'll try."

Hisao nods and launches into a run that I try my hardest to keep up with. He's in much better shape than I am, that's for sure. Despite the fact Hisao once joked that I could probably outrun Emi Ibarazaki under the right circumstances, I'm not particularly athletic by anyone's standards, except maybe Lilly's. The head nurse was so kind as to spare me the horrors of having to walk in gym shorts and a shirt and have my stiff movement, caused by my scar tissue, laughed at and mocked by classmates, as was the case in middle school. As it is, the question isn't whether I'll fall behind but when.

"You okay?"

I barely have enough breath to manage a reply.

"Y-yes. Don't mind me."

We're reaching the edge of town. Just another minute or two and we can take shelter.

I'm panting heavily and I'm betting that my clothes aren't just soaked with rain right now.

We're running as fast as we can, heads down, hand carrying the shopping bag raised in an attempt to shield ourselves from the ruthless elements. I look at Hisao who's running slightly ahead of me. He's looking back at me over his shoulder, probably about to ask if I'm alright and if I can manage for just a little longer. That's when I suddenly see a silhouette appear in front of him, approaching us at breakneck speed. My eyes grow large and I try to shout a warning.

"WATCH OUT!"

I hear a crashing sound and a scream and instinctively shield my eyes for a second. When I open them again I see Hisao lying on the ground next to a fallen bicycle and another person, a man in his fifties from the look of it. Both are looking pained, the other man cradling his leg and Hisao clutching his chest.

The cyclist is probably a resident here, surprised by the weather and doing the same thing we were doing; trying to find shelter as quickly as he could.

Hisao's clutching his chest.

Hisao doesn't look like he's getting up. Did he get injured?

He's clutching his chest!

I hurry over to him and kneel at his side.

HE'S CLUTCHING HIS CHEST!

04

"NO!"

A single, desperate exclamation escapes my mouth as I realize what's happening to Hisao, and with that realization comes a sharp pain in my own chest as if one of my ribs just snapped and punctured my heart.

This can't be happening!

Hisao's breathing is strained. I want to help him, but I'm completely lost at what to do.

He's going to die!

He raises his head for a moment and looks up at me. I want to reach out to him, but my body won't obey... Its only reaction a frantic trembling.

Why can't I move? Somebody help him! Please!

His eyes close again. The pain in my chest grows so intense that tears are forced out of my eyes, joining the raindrops on my cheeks.

Am I having a heart attack as well?

"Young lady, is your friend alright? I'm sorry I didn't see you two in time. I was in a hurry. That blasted rain."

He's dying. I'm losing him. Like I'm losing Lilly.

I'm overcome by an intense sensation of fear, like ten years ago when Mother scrambled in front of me, and we screamed as the flames got to us.

Like I lost Father. And Mother.

I'm breathing in and out like crazy, yet it feels like all oxygen has suddenly vanished from the air.

"Young lady, your friend looks like he's hurt."

Like I lost everyone.

I feel like I'm suffocating. With each fruitless gasp for breath I'm getting more and more terrified.

Stop! Make this stop! Help me!

"Young lady, I think we should call an ambulance."

I still can't move. I can't breathe, but I can't faint either as if some twisted deity has decided it's more amusing to keep me fully aware as the love of my life is dying in front of me and is keeping me conscious for the sheer cruel fun of it.

"Young lady?"

I can't breathe.

"Young lady, can you hear me?"

Why can't I breathe?

"YOUNG LADY!"

LET ME BREATHE!

Chapter 14 (Hisao)

01

Where am I?

My dorm? My bedroom at home?

My eyelids are unusually heavy and random thoughts zoom by like a passing train. When I manage to open my eyes for a moment, all I can see is a white blur. The only sound I hear is a regular high-pitched sound.

I try to focus my thoughts, but for some reason they keep whirling around in my head.

Did I hit my head or something? What's wrong with me?

I try to force my eyelids open again. This time I see a few silhouettes (two? three?) against the white background. I hear voices, but I can't focus enough to make out the conversation beyond a few loose words.

"...stable...narcosis...worn off yet...rest...tomorrow..."

What's going on?

Despite my best efforts, I can feel myself sinking back into a black hole, the voices dying down to an incomprehensible murmur.

When I open my eyes again, my vision is still blurry, but my mind is clearer than it was before. I rub my eyes, and as my vision starts to focus I notice I'm staring at a white ceiling, one I haven't seen before yet is still disturbingly familiar. As I try to rise, a painful sensation wells up in my chest. I bring my hand to my chest only to find something stuck to it.

"Please don't touch the bandage, Mister Nakai. It'll still take some time for the wound to heal. Let me help you sit upright."

I hear a click and the head of the bed I'm lying in slowly tilts upwards, allowing me to see more of the room I'm in. The room is clean and rather empty, almost artificially so. An EKG monitor next to me emits a steady stream of beeping sounds, and I see an IV-tube leading from a bag containing clear liquid to my arm. The owner of the voice is a middle-aged man in a white coat standing in front of me.

A hospital. Probably the hospital near Yamaku as the landscape outside the window has a familiar look. I'm in a hospital room.

"I see you're awake, Mister Nakai. How are you feeling?"

I open my mouth to reply, but my mouth is too dry to speak clearly and a feeling of nausea boils up, forcing me to close my eyes until it passes. I swallow a few times, open my eyes and make attempt number two.

"What happened to me?"

"You had another episode, Mister Nakai. You had an accident yesterday afternoon. A collision with a cyclist triggered your condition. You were brought here and taken to the operating room soon after."

"I... had another surgery?"

"We performed a keyhole surgery to get an accurate assessment of your condition, but we want to wait a bit and see if you remain stable without any drastic procedures. We're keeping you under close observation and under increased medication for the next few days. If we run into complications while you're here, we'll operate later this week. If no further irregularities take place, we can probably let you go this weekend. So let's hope your luck holds out."

Is this guy joking?

"I can't say I'm feeling particularly lucky right now. I've been working out nearly every morning to avoid something like this. I haven't forgotten my medication for a single day. And despite everything, one moment of bad luck makes me end up here again. If that isn't depressing, I don't know what is."

"I wouldn't call those efforts a waste of time, Mister Nakai. All circumstances concerned, things could have ended a lot worse. If you remain stable, you'll be able to pick up your life again before the week is over."

As the doctor speaks, I try to recollect what happened. He said the accident took place yesterday, so it's Tuesday right now, seemingly afternoon from the look of the sky outside.

It was pouring really hard.

"Of course, you'll have to take it a little easier than usual for a while after you get back."

We were running as fast as we could, keeping our head down against the rain.

"We've been keeping in close contact with Yamaku's head nurse. He'll take over when you leave here."

I was looking over my shoulder.

"Your parents were here earlier, though you were probably still too much under the influence of the anesthetics to have heard them."

Then something hit me and knocked me over.

"They said they'd visit again later this week."

I was lying on the asphalt, my chest hurting, my heartbeat out of control.

"We want you to get plenty of rest for now. You might be ready to receive visitors tomorrow if all goes well."

I must have lost consciousness at some point. The last thing I remember seeing before blacking out...

"You might experience some side-effects from the medication we're giving you."

...was Hanako's terrified face.

"Any further questions, Mister Nakai?"

Hanako?

"Ahem... Mister Nakai."

Hanako!

The sudden change in signal from the EKG monitor catches the attention from the doctor.

"Is something the matter, Mister Nakai?"

Today's Tuesday. Lilly's leaving Yamaku in a matter of hours. Hanako and I were out to buy things for her farewell party we scheduled for last night. What happened to Hanako? Is she alright? Where is she?

"This heart attack came at a very inopportune moment."

The doctor chuckles.

"I hear that more often around here."

"Doctor, can you tell me if someone was brought in together with me? A girl with long dark hair?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I wasn't present when the ambulance brought you in."

"Has someone been here for me other than my parents?"

"No, I can say that much with certainty. I could check with the ambulance staff for you."

"Thanks..."

As the doctor walks out, my thoughts dwell on Hanako again. I'm a little taken aback by the fact that nobody has heard from her. Ever since we started dating, she's been completely devoted to me, and I would have half-expected her to be sitting at my bed when I woke up. And what about Lilly? Does she even know I'm here?

"It turns out you were correct."

The doctor returns, only a few minutes after he left.

"I'm afraid I don't know the details, but there was indeed another person who was taken here together with you. She wasn't injured in any way, though the ambulance staff noted she was acting rather oddly. Eventually someone from Yamaku arrived to pick her up."

I appreciate the fact he took the time to check, but I wish he could be more specific about Hanako. 'Oddly' is a very vague term, and to some people even Hanako's usual behavior would probably qualify as odd. It doesn't really do much to relieve my anxiety. I take a look at the chair near the bed that holds my school uniform.

"Doctor, could you please hand me my cell phone? It should be in one of the pockets of my pants."

"I'm afraid the use of cell phones is prohibited in the building. They can interfere with some of the equipment we use. You can use the phone on your nightstand if you wish to make a call."

"I'll use that one then. Thank you doctor."

It's a good thing I know Hanako's and Lilly's number by heart. Hopefully, talking to Hanako will put me at ease. And if I can't get back to Yamaku before the weekend, I'll just have to say goodbye to Lilly this way. It's hardly ideal, but at least I can get a hold of her before her plane takes off.

I hope she'll pick up if she's called by a number she doesn't recognize.

I dial Hanako's number and anxiously wait for her to pick up. As far as I know, my condition is stable right now. While we both know from personal experience that that's hardly a guarantee, it at least gives me something to tell her, assuming she doesn't already know. And who was it who picked her up? The nurse?

02

"...H-h-hello?..."

Just when I'm about to give up and speak a message into Hanako's voicemail, I hear a small voice on the other end of the line... soft, hesitant and nervous. I've heard her talk like this only once or twice and that was when she was in a very bad place emotionally. This doesn't sound good.

"Hanako, it's me."

"H-H-Hisao..."

This is odd. I expected her to be relieved, but her voice actually sounds frightened. What's going on?

"I... just woke up. I'm at the hospital and had a keyhole surgery so they could check me up, but they don't want to operate if they don't have to. I'm stable right now. With luck I'll be able to leave here soon. I'm alright. Well, maybe not right now, but I'm gonna be. Promise."

"..."

Again, no relieved answer.

"Hanako?"

"...T-that's g-good... I'm h-happy f-for you, H-Hisao..."

Huh?

"Hanako, can you tell me what happened yesterday? The whole thing's still a bit of a blur to me. I heard you came along with me in the ambulance. Were you alright? And who picked you up there?"

A lot of questions, I know. She probably had one hell of a scare yesterday. I just hope I can get her to talk about it. Get it out of her system.

"..."

Is it my imagination or is her breathing speeding up? She's not... crying, is she? Are things still too recent for her? Should I try to get her mind off things instead?

"Hanako?"

"...Yes?"

"I'm allowed to have visitors from tomorrow on if everything goes well. You know, I wouldn't mind having one of your home-made dishes. Beats the hospital food by a mile."

I hear a gasp on the other end of the line.

Hanako?

"...I...can't..."

"You can't do what?"

"...I... can't... be... your... girlfriend... anymore..."

03

"HANAKO?"

"...I'm... sorry, Hisao..."

I physically reel in shock upon hearing Hanako's announcement. When I lift the receiver to my ear again, the only thing I hear is the tone indicating the connection was broken off. I immediately press the recall button, but this time, I merely hear the beep of the voicemail. (Hanako never recorded a message) She must have turned off the phone.

This can't be real.

Did Hanako really just break up with me?

But why?

This is crazy.

Or is it?

Hanako lost both of her parents at young age. They died right in front of her. I wouldn't be surprised if she still has nightmares about that every now and then.

Yesterday, I also nearly died in front of her. I wouldn't be surprised if this thing had a greater impact on her than it had on most other people. And if yesterday taught me anything, it's that no matter how hard I try, I can't make any guarantees it won't happen again.

Can I expect Hanako to stay with someone who might rip her old wounds open again and again?

As my mind is still making somersaults in an attempt to digest this unexpected turn of events, my fingers are already pressing the buttons in order to call another number. I don't expect Lilly to be able to help, seeing that she's set to leave Yamaku in a matter of hours, but maybe she has some advice for me.

"Good afternoon. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Lilly, it's me."

"Hisao! Thank God. You and Hanako never showed up yesterday. I got worried and called the nurse's office, who said you had an accident. I've been worried sick. What has happened?"

Lilly's familiar worrying tone is strangely reassuring right now. Although it also suggests she hasn't spoken to Hanako yet.

"The short version is: we went shopping for last night, got surprised by the rainstorm and collided with someone in our rush to reach the store. That shock triggered my arrhythmia, and I had to be taken to

the hospital. I only woke up an hour ago. Hopefully I'll be allowed to leave before the weekend's over. Right now, I'm stable."

"You were shopping for my farewell party..."

"Don't be like that. It was just a stupid accident that could have taken place at any time. It's nobody's fault."

"I understand."

"Could you let Shizune and Misha know about this in case they don't already know? I get that you two don't get along, but I doubt Shizune will pick a fight with you under these circumstances."

"I will. Are you already allowed to have visitors at the hospital?"

"Not yet. Hopefully tomorrow. But that won't do you much good, will it?"

"I called Akira yesterday, and she's currently trying to postpone our departure. I... I really don't feel comfortable leaving with things as they are now. I hope to hear soon if she has succeeded."

"That's good. I could really use your advice right now."

"Of course."

"Have you spoken with Hanako since yesterday afternoon?"

"I have not. It's possible I heard her bedroom door last night, but it was already very late. Her door has been locked ever since. If she's in there, she's not responding to knocks."

"So you have no idea what's wrong with her either?"

"Wrong?"

"I just got off the phone with her. She acted... shell-shocked. She... She said she couldn't be with me anymore."

"W-what? What does that mean?"

"Lilly... I think Hanako just broke up with me."

"N-no..."

Lilly's exclamation of disbelief barely reaches above the level of a whisper. I don't think I've ever heard the usually calm Lilly so thoroughly unsettled before.

"H-Hisao, why would she do that?"

"Only she would know for sure, but I suspect that me having a heart attack right in front of her hit her very hard. She already lost both of her parents. Being faced with the loss of yet another person who was important to her..."

"But... she loved you dearly. I can't believe she would just give that up. Maybe... Maybe I can get her to talk to you."

"I doubt it's gonna be that easy."

"Maybe she merely said this in the spur of the moment. Perhaps I'll be able to get through to her. I have to try."

Neither of us feeling really up to the usual ritual of small talk, we hang up and my thoughts once again dwell on Hanako.

"I can't be your girlfriend anymore."

What does that mean?

Not: 'I don't want to', but 'I can't'.

It really feels like she feels compelled by the circumstances. It might not be a spur of the moment as Lilly suggested.

This had quite an impact on Lilly as well. She didn't sound as calm and in control as she usually does.

I can't blame her though. She's scheduled to leave Yamaku this evening. If Akira is unable to cancel the trip, Lily will be leaving Japan in the middle of a big mess. Knowing her motherly nature, that'll seriously burden her.

I feel so powerless. I should be there at Yamaku confronting Hanako. Comforting her. Instead, I'm being trapped in here for at least several more days.

I slam my fist hard onto the side of the bed. The increased frequency of beeps from my heart monitor draws my attention.

I'm getting too worked up right now. I'm stuck here, and nothing I can do will change that.

The best thing I can do is focus on my recovery right now. If I stay on edge all the time, the doctors may decide to keep me here longer. If the upcoming weekend is the earliest time I can leave here then that's what I should aim for.

I'll just ask for some sleeping pills or something to get more rest.

04

The evening and the rest of the next day are completely uneventful, so I just try to get as much rest as I can. Having just finished my evening meal, I lie back and close my eyes.

It's been a day since I've called Hanako and Lilly, and I haven't heard a reply from either.

Is Lilly still in Japan, or is she flying to Scotland right now?

Dozing off a bit, I can vaguely hear a sound approaching me. I'm not sure if it's my imagination or not. A doctor wouldn't walk with such loud pronounced steps. Suddenly I feel something on my face. I open my eyes, but there's still nothing but darkness.

"Guess who, Hicchan!"

"Misha, what are you doing in my dream?"

"Wahaha~, it isn't a dream! I'm right here!"

The hands covering my face are pulled back, and my eyes fall upon a head full of pink hair and a brown shirt with 'Bush Cheney 2004' on the front hovering over me and blocking pretty much my entire view.

"Hey there, Hicchan! How are you feeling?"

"Slightly better than yesterday. Are you here on your own?"

"No. I brought company."

She moves to the side a bit, and I'm surprised to see not just Shizune entering the doorway, but Lilly as well, her hand resting on Shizune's shoulder for navigation. So it seems Akira managed to extend their stay in Japan after all. Shizune has an irritated expression on her face, Lilly's pace obviously far too slow for her liking, but she doesn't pull away. It's an interesting sight, seeing that Shizune and Lilly usually can't stand each other.

"Misha, did you walk on ahead?"

"Ahahaha. How did you know?"

I merely roll my eyes and focus on Shizune who has reached my bed as well and gives me curt nod as a greeting, the modest smile on her face indicating she's happy to see me.

"Good to see you, Hicchan. You certainly gave us a scare."

"Nice to see you too, Shizune. And thanks for dropping by."

"Not a problem. We made sure to bring you a few things you may appreciate during your stay here."

Shizune gestures to Misha who grabs the bag lying at her feet and drops it on the bed. Inside are my own pajamas, toothbrush and several books I got from the library last week.

I guess it would appear ungrateful to ask Shizune how the heck they managed to get into my room.

"Thanks guys. This'll make the rest of my time a lot easier to sit out."

I then notice a small envelope near the bottom of the bag. There's no post mark or stamp on it; only my own name written with what appeared to be shoddy or shaky handwriting. Curiously, I look at Shizune.

"What's in the envelope?"

"I don't know. We found it in the student council's mailbox. We don't know who left it there."

05

Intrigued, I open the envelope, but when I feel what's inside I feel my blood curdle, and both Misha and Lilly cringe when the beeping of my EKG monitor suddenly spikes.

"H-Hicchan, what's in there?"

I take the object from the envelope and carefully hold it in the palm of my hand.

"I-it's Hanako's hairclip. I... I gave it to her when we started dating."

That revelation is enough to kill the atmosphere in the room on the spot. For a moment, everyone merely stares at the floor, unsure of what to say. Shizune is the first one to recollect herself, and she starts signing, giving Misha a gentle shove in order to shake her out of the dazed state she was just in before repeating herself.

"R-right. Umm...Hicchan. We went to the nurse's office today to see if we could find out some more for you, and um... Do you remember that incident in science class some time ago?"

I do. Hanako, Shizune, Misha and I were working on an assignment together when Shizune and Misha started grilling me for information about my activities during the weekend and made me reveal Lilly and I were buying something for Hanako's upcoming birthday. That triggered a panic attack with Hanako, and although we were able to get her out of the class with a minimum of attention from the rest, the whole experience was very unsettling.

"How could I forget about that?"

"It seems something similar happened on Monday. It was... pretty bad, apparently. That's all the nurse would tell us, and he only told us because we said it was for your sake."

So things are even worse than I thought. My accident two days ago didn't just give Hanako a scare, it gave her a panic attack. Was that what the doctor was talking about when he said she was behaving strangely? This at least explains why she sounded the way she did when I phoned her. It was very much like the last time Lilly and I visited her shortly after that occurrence in class. I turn to Lilly, who has been standing some distance away from the bed the whole time and who has been strangely quiet during my interaction with the student council duo.

"So, Lilly, I suppose this means you weren't able to talk to Hanako after all."

Lilly doesn't immediately respond, and I notice how Shizune and Misha both give her an uncomfortable look. Lilly, in turn, turns her head in Misha and Shizune's direction and shoots them a pleading look back. After fiddling with her glasses for a second, Shizune nods and makes a flurry of gestures in Misha's direction.

"Ummm... Hicchan, I think we'll leave the two of you alone for a while. We'll be in the cafeteria downstairs. When you're done, you can give them a call and ask them to notify us."

Without waiting for a reply, Shizune and Misha get up, give me a quick nod and then walk out of my room with quick determined steps, leaving me alone in the room with Lilly. This looks rather ominous. Do they know something I don't?

"Err...you'd better sit down. There's a chair a few steps away from my bed on the right side."

"Thank you."

Lilly takes out her cane and carefully approaches while waving it in front of her until she finds the chair I mentioned. As she walks towards me, I take a moment to look her over.

"You're... not looking so good."

I'm actually being polite. She's looking far worse than I've ever seen her before, and the only reason I didn't notice it sooner was because she was standing some distance away from the bed and Shizune and Misha were hogging my attention. Her posture is different than usual. I don't think I've seen her slump her shoulders before, but she certainly does now. When I look closer, I also notice bags under her eyes as if she's completely skipped sleep last night.

"Lilly, what's going on?"

"Hisao, I... did speak with Hanako yesterday."

Her voice sounds softer than usual, almost a whisper.

"Judging by the envelope she left, I don't get the impression it was a spur-of-the-moment thing."

Lilly sadly shakes her head.

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"After your phone call, I went over to her room. The door was locked of course and she didn't react to my knocking at first, but I kept trying and eventually she opened the door for me."

"She told me I shouldn't have visited her. She said she wanted to see me off with a smile and she didn't want our last moments together to be like this. I told her that I asked Akira to postpone our departure, and with luck I could be here for her for a little while longer. I expected her to be happy or at least relieved, but she didn't react at all to this news."

"Go on."

"I asked if she wanted to go and visit you here together with me, just in case Akira would fail to move the departure date. I was pretty sure the doctors would have made an exception for us. But she wouldn't. She told me that she wasn't your girlfriend any longer. That she couldn't be your girlfriend any longer. I asked her why, but she wouldn't tell me. Then I asked her what happened the day before, but she wouldn't tell me that either. Instead, she asked me to leave."

Lilly sighs deeply.

"I...I should have left. But at that time I didn't. I couldn't. I kept reminding her of all the wonderful times you two had together. I kept trying to find out what caused her to act the way she did. I kept trying to convince her to go and see you. I thought... I thought if she would just go and see you, she'd change her mind. She kept telling me to leave her alone. I-I must have pressured her too much, because suddenly she... she..."

Lilly swallows, and for a moment I think she's going to break down. Then she continues, her pain evident in every word she says.

"She... lashed out at me. She screamed at me to leave her alone. She said I was only here to make myself feel better. I said I was here because I wanted to support her. Because she is my best friend.

Then she snapped that I had never been interested in her as a friend. That I had only been interested in fixing her. That she was nothing but a project to me. And then she told me to go away... and to never come back. I... I was terrified of her at that moment. I turned around and fled the room. I haven't been back since. I don't think I could even if the door wasn't locked."

Unable to keep her emotions in check any longer Lilly stands up and holds her face in her hands before bursting into tears.

"I'm sorry, Hisao...I-I've messed up everything."

I can barely believe what I'm hearing. Hanako screaming at someone else, at Lilly of all people, is almost impossible for me to imagine. She's such a meek and subdued girl she usually has trouble even raising her voice. But the sight of the sobbing Lilly in front of me leaves me very little doubt that this is what has happened.

"Lilly..."

I sit upright, gently wrap my arms around her and hold her as she cries, her carefully crafted lady exterior completely shattered.

"I-I could hear her last night, Hisao. I... I could hear her cry on the other side of the wall. And I couldn't do anything to help her."

"We'll find a way, Lilly."

At least, I hope so. I'm not so sure myself. Are there any other ways to approach Hanako now that she's pushed both me and Lilly away? Is this really how our little family was meant to end? Is this how our relationship was meant to end? Was the whole thing doomed from the start? Were things never meant to last beyond my first episode?

Lilly sniffles, obviously not convinced.

"I...I disappointed you, didn't I Hisao?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

Truth be told, I wouldn't have expected Lilly's attempt to talk Hanako out of her depression to backfire like this. For as long as I've known her, Lilly has always been a steady pillar of support for both Hanako and me. Whenever I was lost at what to do, Lilly would always nudge me in the right direction in that calm, confident and motherly manner of hers. But that was before this whole Scotland business reared its head. I had no doubt this thing has been on her mind constantly. Did her own worries throw off her judgment? That seems to be the case.

"I-I feel I failed both of you."

"You've always been there to support us, Lilly. And you've been doing a great job. But you're only human."

Her flood of tears slowly subsiding, Lilly lets go of me and sits down again next to my bed, taking out a fancy embroidered handkerchief to dry her tears.

"I probably shouldn't have pressured her the way I did."

"The last time Hanako locked herself away, I was the one who was dying to drag her out and you were the one who told me it was probably best to back down and let Hanako sort things out on her own. That advice might very well have prevented our relationship from failing before it even started. So I can't help but feel there's some irony in the way things played out. It seems... a little unlike you."

Lilly gives me a tired smile, obviously aware of what I just pointed out.

"I'm used to pacing my life in such a way that I can always carefully consider the situation before acting. It's how I've always done things. I'm afraid I function very badly under pressure. I admit I have acted rashly. It's just that I... At the time I didn't even know if Akira would succeed in extending our stay here. I thought that maybe I only had a few hours left here before I'd be forced to leave, and I couldn't bear the thought of leaving the two of you in the middle of a situation I share some responsibility for myself. I would have felt like abandoning you."

"Just because we were on our way to buy stuff for your seeing-off party doesn't mean you are responsible for what happened."

"That's not what troubled me. Hisao, what do you think triggered Hanako's panic attack this Monday?"

"The most realistic assumption I can come up with is probably the prospect of losing one more person dear to her."

"One more person? Or perhaps two more?"

I take a moment to consider Lilly's suggestion. When I had my heart attack in front of Hanako, she was already busy grappling with the fact she was about to lose Lilly. I have to admit the theory of Lilly's rapidly approaching departure playing at least a role in this sounds very plausible.

"And unlike your heart attack, me going away has been a conscious choice on my part. But I've never meant to hurt her, Hisao. I've never meant to hurt anyone."

"Hey, nobody could have predicted this."

She sadly shakes her head.

"In the end, I felt responsible for this situation and felt it as my duty to help sort it out. There may be some truth in Hanako's point about my actions merely serving to ease my own conscience."

"That may be so, but I think I would have acted exactly the same in your situation. And I'm willing to bet all my limbs on it that the same is true for Hanako."

06

We stay quiet for a long time, neither of us really knowing what more to say. Eventually, I see a doctor passing by in the hallway, looking into my room and checking his watch.

"Apparently the staff here thinks you're wearing out your welcome. Hopefully you can come back some time tomorrow."

"I will."

I take the receiver from the phone on my nightstand, call the cafeteria's number and ask them to call a girl with crazy pink drill hair and a girl with glasses using sign language and direct them to my room. As

I finish, I notice Lilly has sought out the sink near one corner of the room and is busy washing the tears off her face and tidying herself up as best as she can. I cannot help but chuckle. Even under these circumstances, Lilly still won't be caught dead facing Shizune looking anything less than a hundred percent presentable. Some things will probably never change.

"Lilly, you should probably try to get a good night's rest."

"You too, Hisao. I will make an effort on my part, although I cannot guarantee anything."

"You can use my dorm room for tonight if you like. The keys are still in the pockets of my uniform."

Lilly considers it for a moment, but then adamantly shakes her head.

"Refused."

"It'd at least eliminate the temptation of listening in on Hanako."

For a moment, Lilly's depressed mood vanishes as she flashes me a playful grin.

"I appreciate the gesture Hisao, but only one girl in the world has any business sneaking into that dorm room of yours and sleeping in your bed."

She firmly taps the floor ahead of her with her cane as if to further emphasize her point.

"And that girl is Hanako."

07

Chapter 15 (Hisao)

01

Upon finishing the last page of the book I've been reading since morning, I close it with a decisive snap. I'm thankful to Shizune and Misha for bringing along my books. Time passes a lot more quickly while I'm absorbed in one of them. With luck, I'll be allowed to leave the hospital tomorrow around noon. My heart, after the initial episode four days ago, has decided to abstain from causing me further trouble, though that seems like a small comfort.

Yesterday was pretty eventful with my parents dropping by at noon and Lilly, Shizune, Misha and Akira visiting in the evening. For some time, it seemed like nothing was out of the ordinary, with Akira playfully mentioning how interesting it was to see Lilly and Shizune made peace with one another, to which Shizune replied that 'striking a wounded adversary' was simply against her moral code; a provocation which Lilly then used to refute Akira's suggestion. Both eventually got upset at my observation that the two of them were really too proud for their own good sometimes, a remark that amused Misha and Akira to no end. After Lilly and I were left alone again though, it quickly became clear she had simply been doing her best to keep up appearances, a trait of hers that both tends to impress and unnerve me.

It turned out that not much had changed. Lilly was still in a very depressed mood although she took my word for it when I assured her that Hanako hadn't been secretly resenting her all along as she had come to believe over the last two days. I also learned that Akira has only been able to postpone their departure to Scotland for one week, and she won't be able to hold things off any longer.

In addition to the rift between Hanako and Lilly, I also have my own relation with Hanako to worry about.

Can our relationship still be mended? Is it fair to expect her to deal with events like last Monday after all she's been through already?

If that's not possible, can we still be friends? We've been through many highs and lows together. Would ordinary friendship even be possible? I don't want her to be just a friend to me.

Is she going to avoid me from now on? It seems an impossible task, seeing that we're in the same class, but Hanako has been keeping up a wall between herself and the rest of the class since she started attending here. She could pull it off if she wanted to.

Lilly, Shizune and Misha are probably going to visit again, but neither Lilly nor I have a clear idea on how to get through to Hanako.

As I mull over these things, I notice a familiar figure slowly walking through the hallway. She stops near the door and looks to be in deep thought for a moment.

"Lilly? Hey, Lilly!"

Having picked up my voice, Lilly turns in my direction for a moment to acknowledge my greeting and then turns around to talk to someone who was apparently standing behind her. After a few seconds, she turns back to me and carefully navigates herself to my bed.

"Are you here all on your own? Aren't Shizune and Misha with you?"

Lilly shakes her head as she retracts her cane, sits down in the chair near my bed and puts it into her bag. As she does so, I notice something else in there; the plush puppy Hanako gave her. Has she been carrying that thing around with her all week?

"Not this time. I started feeling bad to make them accompany me and then sit most of the time in the cafeteria while we talk here, so I decided to come alone this time."

"So the person you were talking to was a nurse you asked for directions?"

Lilly smiles proudly.

"Not quite. It was a staff member from Yamaku who came up to me and offered me a ride here while I was waiting for the bus. Upon getting here, we made a little bet to see if I could find your room myself without any assistance."

"Wow, you made your way here just from memory? Your sense of direction is a lot better than mine, that's for sure."

"The last hallway threw me off a bit. I might have lost if you hadn't called out to me. Thanks to you, I was able to earn us both a free drink. Apparently they sell some good tea down here."

"I don't think the doctors will be thrilled with me drinking caffeine right now."

"I feared that as well, Mister Nakai, so I bought you some fresh orange juice instead. It's the healthiest drink they had."

When I look up to greet Lilly's mysterious benefactor, I notice a familiar face. It's been a while since I've last seen her, but the old lady walking into the room carrying a tray with three drinks on it is wearing the same violet shawl and black skirt as she was when the nurse took me to see her on that day Lilly and Akira arrived back in Japan.

"Miss Takawa!"

"Good evening, Mister Nakai. It grieves me that we meet again under such trying circumstances, but I'm nevertheless most pleased to see you again."

Ever the polite one, she makes a bow and places the tray on my nightstand before putting one of the tea cups into Lilly's outstretched hands and making another bow. She then does the same with my cup of juice.

"Please enjoy."

Lilly, recognizing the old lady's gesture as a make-shift tea party, makes a bow of her own with an appreciative smile on her face.

"Thank you for the trouble."

I'm still trying to wrap my head around the old lady's sudden appearance. Is she here with news from Hanako?

"I suppose your visit here is not a coincidence?"

The old lady takes another careful sip before responding.

"Yes and no. It was a coincidence I saw Miss Satou on my way home sitting there at the bus stop and deciding she was looking so troubled that the least thing I could do was give her a ride. But then I decided that since I was here anyway, I might as well drop by and see how you are faring."

Lilly turns to me with a curious expression on her face.

"I take it you have met this person before?"

"Only once. Miss Takawa is Hanako's therapist."

That news certainly surprises Lilly, for her hands shake for a moment, and she nearly drops her cup. Looks like Miss Takawa doesn't have the habit of mentioning her patients in her introductions to others.

"Ah... Excuse me. I had no idea. I'm afraid Hanako never mentioned a name to me."

"That's alright. I usually tell my clients that therapy sessions are among the least interesting things to talk about with their friends."

In other words, she discourages the practice.

"I take it that you are aware of what has happened to Hanako and me this Monday?"

"That's correct. The head nurse notified me as soon as he received the news."

"Would you also happen to be the person who picked her up after the ambulance brought her here?"

"Yes, that was me. Miss Ikezawa was still in shock when she arrived here, and I decided that a hospital bed was not an ideal place for her to calm down, so I took her to my office and let her rest there until we heard the news that your condition had stabilized at which point I took her back to her dorm room."

"Have you spoken to her since then?"

"I'm afraid I haven't. I informed her that I could supply her with a sleeping pill or anti-depressant for the night if she wanted one and that I'd be available if she wanted to talk, but she hasn't made use of those offers so far."

"Didn't you place her... you know... under supervision?"

The old lady sighs.

"Yamaku is not a mental hospital, Mister Nakai. We can do very little without a client's explicit consent. I can only make exceptions if I have determined that a client is prone to suicidal tendencies."

"So at least Hanako does not have those. Thank goodness."

"Indeed, or I highly doubt any of us would have even had the opportunity to make her acquaintance in the first place."

That's a pretty morbid thing to say. Both Lilly and I shudder at the same time.

"Miss Takawa, we're not really sure what happened to Hanako. Can you tell me what a panic attack is like? Hanako had one last Monday, didn't she?"

Miss Takawa looks lost in thought for a second.

03

"Yes, the most severe one since she enrolled here. And it lasted for quite some time too. I can only assume your accident stirred some extremely ugly memories inside her. I cannot speak from personal experience regarding what it's like. The people who've had one themselves described it to me as the most frightening experience of their life. Some compared it to a heart attack of some kind. Chest pain, difficulty breathing, flashing vision and sometimes the sensation of dying. I think, Mister Nakai, you may be one of the few people in school who can somewhat relate to what Miss Ikezawa must have been going through. Try to recall your own experience, except more prolonged and without passing out."

I let out a dejected sigh.

"That bad? No wonder she broke up with me."

The old woman raises a curious eyebrow at that news, but doesn't seem overly shocked.

"Did she break up with you?"

"...I phoned her last Tuesday and she said she couldn't be my girlfriend anymore. Then she hung up. But she seems to be serious about it."

"I see. And how about you, Mister Nakai? Are you planning to break up with her?"

"Huh?"

"Because if you're not, you could perhaps try to change her mind."

"What am I supposed to say? Ask someone who lost her parents in such a tragic manner to put up with someone who might die on her at any moment?"

"Why not? She has known about your condition all along, hasn't she? And it hasn't stopped her from pursuing a relationship with you before. You could remind her that you're still here. Nothing permanent was lost."

"Nothing except all the progress she has made since we met. Before that heart attack ruined things, she was organizing stuff, joining a club, going on dates, trying new things... and now she seems to be back to hiding away in her room and avoiding everyone and everything. If she had been with someone who wasn't suffering from this condition, maybe she could have..."

"AHEM!"

For a moment I'm startled by the sound of Miss Takawa loudly scraping her throat and setting down her tea cup with a loud CLING. As I look upon her face, I can tell she's glaring knives at me, though I'm not sure why.

"Maybe she could have a chance to recover fully is what you were going to say, Mister Nakai?"

"Ummm... Well..."

"Did you really believe that a few months of dating you was all it would take for Miss Ikezawa's trauma to disappear just like that? Or a few months of dating anybody for that matter? Were you counting on that when you started going out with her? Do you even know why I'm treating her?"

Her voice is barely raised, yet I feel as if the sudden authoritative tone in her voice and her stern gaze are pinning me against a wall. She keeps up her gaze for a few more seconds, then softens her expression, takes another sip and reverts back to her grandmotherly tone.

"Perhaps I should explain a few things. What I'd like you to understand is that what happened last Monday had nothing to do with her self-confidence, which has indeed improved a bit lately. I've worked with war veterans who were usually strong and confident men, yet they too had breakdowns in situations where their post traumatic stress was triggered."

She pauses for a second, puts her cup on the tray and absentmindedly fiddles with her shawl for a bit.

"If you can manage to convince her to pick things up where you left off, you may find that much of the recent progress she has made has remained intact. It might take her a little while to sort things out, but she'll get back on her feet eventually. That's because I have found that Miss Ikezawa has a resilience that even many seemingly stronger people do not have."

I can attest to that. She's been through hell after the fire that scarred her, but she still managed to keep going. It's one of the things I admire about her.

"Finally, take note that emotional trauma takes a long time to recover from. It takes time, therapy and support. One cannot always judge this recovery process by short-term results as you've been doing. What's important is that progress is made in the long run. Many people who are recovering from trauma

have relapses every now and again. It's not necessarily a problem as long as they eventually take more steps forward than backwards. It's important that you understand that about her, but it's equally important that Miss Ikezawa understands that about herself. I could help her with that, but it might be good if you can remind her of that as well."

"Long-term thinking, huh?"

"That's right. Do not believe you have failed her and give up if something happens that causes her to temporarily regress. Some people can do well for years and then suddenly relapse unexpectedly. Just support her to the best of your ability until she can get back on her feet again. I do not wish to deny the good influence you've had on her, just don't look upon yourself as a miracle worker, or even as someone whose responsibility it is to assure her recovery."

"I haven't really been doing a great job supporting her this week."

"To the best of your ability may not be as much as you like, just like she may not always be able to support you as much as she likes. It's up to you two to decide whether you're willing to settle for the support you still CAN give each other. Does the fact she couldn't be by your side throughout this ordeal mean she cannot do anything for you anymore?"

"Of course not."

"She might feel the same. You could ask her."

"You think she didn't mean it when she said she didn't want to be my girlfriend anymore?"

"I recall you saying she said something different."

"It comes down to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"I don't believe it does, but that's up to you to find out for sure."

My gaze wanders between Lilly and Miss Takawa who both have an expectant expression on their face. Are they expecting me to take action right here and now? I take a deep breath.

"I guess I could reach out to her like you're suggesting."

I turn to the old lady who's doing her best to give me the most encouraging look she can muster.

"I don't suppose you have any helpful tips? You're the expert here."

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you there. Relationship therapy isn't my field. The real expert in the room would be you, Mister Nakai."

"Me?"

"Certainly. When it comes to winning Miss Ikezawa's heart, you're the world's leading expert. You are aware of the fact that you are her first boyfriend, aren't you? I think you'll do fine. Just be as sincere to her as you were to me when you told me why you liked her so much."

"You still remember that?"

"I was hoping that you'd be able to remember it as well during the times when your relationship with her is being tested."

I remember it alright. And between then and now I've found several additional reasons to be attached to Hanako.

The problem isn't the fact I wouldn't like her anymore. The issue is the fact that I hurt her and scared her off even though it wasn't something I did on purpose.

But Miss Takawa has a point as well. Hanako knew of my heart condition all along and yet she allowed herself to get close to me.

I have to talk to her.

As I reach for the phone and pick up the receiver, Miss Takawa gets up from her chair.

"Would you like Miss Satou and me to excuse ourselves?"

"It's fine. I'm not really expecting her to pick up."

I dial Hanako's number and wait, my heart racing. One look at Lilly tells me she's probably as tense as I am. After hearing the tone several times, the short beep of her voicemail sounds. Looks like Hanako has her phone turned on, but simply won't pick up. That's fine though. I think I know what I want to say.

"...Hanako? It's me. I don't think that this is a situation either of us wants. I'm not angry with you. I... just want to pick up where we left off, if possible. I'll be back at Yamaku around noon tomorrow. If you could... wait for me at the gate to... welcome me back... that'd make me really happy. I hope to see you tomorrow. Bye..."

I hang up, still feeling apprehensive. No turning back now. The rest is up to Hanako. I can only hope she'll bother to listen to her voicemail. As my attention shifts back to my two visitors, I am greeted by two smiling faces.

04

"My, my... That certainly would have won me over if I were forty years younger."

"Hisao... I'm sure she'll be there tomorrow. I know she still loves you. Please try not to worry too much about this."

Looks like Lilly's maternal instincts are resurfacing. Somehow this is the most reassuring thing I've seen all week.

"If it is alright with you, I'll be taking my leave, Mister Nakai. I'm sure you'll need all the rest you can get. After that message you really can't afford the doctors to keep you here, now can you?"

"Thanks for the advice, Miss Takawa. I'm sure you'll find out soon whether things worked out or not."

"I'd appreciate it if you could keep me informed, Mister Nakai. If you manage to reconcile with Miss Ikezawa, I may have a small gift for her that I'd like to present to you - nothing serious, just something I just thought of."

"You're making me curious."

"All the more reason to try and sort things out as soon as you can, isn't it?"

Miss Takawa takes the tray, puts our empty cups on top of it and then turns to Lilly.

"Miss Satou, I can drop you off at school if you wish. It's only a small detour for me and visiting hours are probably about to end."

Lilly gets up, makes a polite bow at the old woman and smiles.

"May I have the pleasure of treating you to a cup of tea first, Miss Takawa?"

"I humbly accept. Please lead the way, Miss Satou."

As Lilly and Miss Takawa say their goodbyes and leave the room, I can't help but think that these two would probably get along pretty well.

05

Only thirty more minutes.

I pace around the hallway restlessly. After finishing breakfast this morning, the doctor came by, performed a few minor check-ups and informed me that we'd be having a short meeting in his office at twelve o' clock and that I was free to go back to Yamaku afterwards.

At least I don't need to stay here any longer.

I wonder if Hanako has even listened to my message.

Is she going to come out of her room today?

What the hell am I supposed to tell her?

I've packed my things, brushed my teeth, took a shower and checked the bus schedule at least five times.

Isn't this talk just a formality?

Why couldn't he just tell me what he needed to this morning and let me go back?

"Nakai."

I turn around as I hear my name and rush over to the doctor as he emerges from his office.

"Come in, please."

I follow him into his office and sit down, but instead of giving me the expected 'be careful in the future'-talk, the doctor merely stands there and checks his watch.

What is he waiting for?

"Excuse me, aren't we ready to begin yet?"

"You sound like you are in a hurry."

"I am. Very much."

"I'm afraid that you'll have to hold back for a while. If you exhaust yourself at this point, you may be in for another stay here."

"I understand."

"I was merely waiting for... Ah... Good morning."

I turn around and watch two more people enter the room.

"Mom? Dad?"

I just sit there with my mouth open. I don't recall them saying they'd be here to pick me up when they visited two days ago.

"Hello, son. We're not late, are we?"

"No, you're just in time. I've only called in your son a minute ago."

"I apologize. We live rather far away from here."

My parents sit down next to me, and the doctor starts off with the predictable talk.

That collision could have ended a lot worse than it did. I was lucky an ambulance was nearby. Of course I am warned to be more careful in the future.

It turns out this hospital has a special arrangement with Yamaku. The ambulance personnel got instant access to my medical history by scanning in my student ID. Good thing I was carrying it and I was still wearing my school uniform.

At least I get praised by the doctor for keeping up with my medication and improving my physical condition. It's probably the reason I didn't need heavier surgery.

I'll have to take it easy for a little while, but I'll be allowed to start engaging in light exercise in a few days.

I'll be put on some additional medication for a while. The nurse has been informed and will take it from here on out.

My parents visited me shortly after my surgery, but I was still recovering from the narcosis at that time and wasn't even aware of their presence. They came by again two days ago. Apparently they talked to the doctor afterwards, and he timed this meeting so they could make it here.

I wish they had let me in on this.

"Take care, Mister Nakai. And good luck with school."

"Ah? Oh, thank you."

As we leave the doctor's office, my father addresses me.

"We were expecting you to be a little bit more pleasantly surprised. We had to get up pretty early to make it here in time."

"Sorry, I really do appreciate you coming here."

"You were so tired two days ago we haven't really been able to talk much."

I was partially pretending to be more tired than I really was. That may have been rude, but I was too distracted by the matter with Hanako to be very sociable with them, and I didn't want them to worry even more about me.

"Hopefully we can catch up a bit in the upcoming days. We barely know what's going on in your life anymore."

"Huh? I don't understand."

"We were planning to take you with us and let you rest at home for a few days."

WHAT? NO!

"I'm sorry, Hisao. We had no idea one of your friends was going to move away in the upcoming days. You should have let us know."

"It's... okay, Mom."

We've arrived at the grounds of Yamaku and are now wandering along the path to the boys' dormitories.

"I was already surprised. At first you hated the idea of going here, and now you just couldn't wait to get back."

"I guess I found my place here, Dad."

"You sure did. What's in that plastic bag you're carrying with you?"

"Ah, nothing important."

As we reach the dorm entrance, we're greeted by an ear-shattering "HICCHAN! WELCOME BACK!" that could only originate from one person in Japan.

In front of the dorm are Shizune, Misha and Lilly. Shizune cheerfully makes a small saluting gesture, Misha excitedly jumps up and down and Lilly calmly stands next to them.

"Are these your friends, Hicchan?"

"Are these your parents, Hicchan?"

"Erm... Mom, Dad. These are indeed my friends. The person in the middle is Shizune Hakamichi, our class representative and student council president. The one on the right is Shiina Mikado, my neighbor in class. We usually just call her Misha. The girl on the left is Lilly Satou who attends the class next to ours and often shares lunch with me."

Shizune, Misha and Lilly make polite bows towards my parents, Lilly's slightly more graceful and Misha's slightly more energetic than the rest.

"I'm sorry, Hisao. I tried to get your neighbor Kenji to join us as well, but he seemed preoccupied and wouldn't come out of his room."

"That's okay, Lilly."

"Hey Hicchan. Maybe I missed something here, but... why isn't Hanako with you?"

06

The fake smile I have been wearing since we reached Yamaku is wiped off my face in an instant.

"I... haven't seen Hanako anywhere, Misha."

"WHAT???"

Chapter 16 (Hanako)

01

I'm worthless.

As I sit on the ground, knees drawn up to my chin and my hat almost pushed over my eyes, that thought keeps returning to me over and over.

I'm worthless.

The period after Hisao made me his girlfriend has been the happiest time of my life. The person I was in love with loved me as well, and we started a relationship. We were both going through a difficult time and made a pledge to support each other in each other's times of need.

I'm worthless.

Due to my success in winning Hisao's heart, I started reconsidering my previously held belief that I was a useless person to others. I started believing I was only as useless to people as I allowed myself to be. I started making active efforts to become a better girlfriend to Hisao, a better best friend to Lilly and a better club member to Naomi and the others.

I'm worthless.

I started enjoying the small things in life. The girl-talk with Lilly, the brainstorming sessions over headlines and captions at the club, the tranquil days in Hokkaido and the occasional lovey-dovey exchanges with Hisao. Each of them brought a smile to my face when I recalled them before falling asleep in the evening.

I'm worthless.

My body, despite being scarred and disfigured, was still capable of making Hisao feel good. And despite part of my body being numb, he was able to return the favor as well.

I'm worthless.

I stopped trying to survive from day to day and started considering my options for the future. If only things could have stayed like this for a little while longer.

I'm worthless.

The person I considered my best friend announced she might be leaving the country and it seemed my efforts to sway her had the opposite effect. Then, last Monday, everything came crashing down. Once more, I became an emotional mess hiding away from the world.

I'm worthless.

Yesterday, a small glimmer of hope appeared. Hisao contacted me and wanted me to be there when he returned. To welcome him back. I took a sleeping pill that evening, the first one since Monday, in the hopes of getting rid of the bags under my eyes that accumulated this week. Maybe we'd be able to reconcile if we could just pretend nothing had happened for just a little while. But I messed up once more and disappointed him again, and now he was no doubt being welcomed by everyone else. Lilly, Shizune, Misha... maybe even Kenji. Everyone except me.

I wonder how long I can still stay here. There's no school right now, so the building is nearly deserted. Students are hanging out at their dorms, in the gardens or near the track. I don't think anyone will have much reason to hang out on the roof today, seeing that the sky is cloudy just like last Monday.

I wonder how long I should stay here.

Are people going to discover I'm not in my...

I tense as I hear a sound coming from the stairway. Someone is coming up to the roof.

I could hide near the far corner that's not visible from the doorway. But that's not much use if someone wants to hang out here. I wonder who it could be.

A teacher maybe?

Emi Ibarazaki? Hisao said she likes to eat on the roof sometimes. That'd be bad. She's on pretty good terms with Hisao since they started doing morning runs together. She'd probably tell him I'm here.

Emi's artist friend? The one without arms? She likes to stare at the sky here, even when it's cloudy. That'd be okay, I think.

I move back a little so a person would have to move beyond the doorway to see me.

The door slowly opens and several seconds pass...

Then someone steps forward and closes the door behind him. The moment I catch sight of his sweater vest, I freeze like a deer in the headlights.

Hisao!

It's really him. How did he know I was here? My first reflex is to look at the door. But before I can even seriously consider making a break for it, his gaze follows mine, and he looks back at me with a sad expression.

Please don't look at me like that.

"You're not going to run away from me, are you Hanako?"

I don't respond, but after a moment I slowly shake my head.

"You weren't in the library or the tea room and Lilly didn't hear you in your own room either, so I started checking the spots most suitable to avoid people."

Am I really that predictable?

He slowly walks up to me, but stops several meters away from me as if suspecting that getting any closer might trigger an involuntary fleeing response. For a minute or so, we just look at one another, unsure on what to say or do. Then he takes the plastic bag he's carrying in one hand and pulls something out of it.

"A little something I picked up at the gift shop near the hospital's cafeteria."

02

My eyes grow wide as I see what it is. It's a small bouquet of flowers.

You're so kind, Hisao.

Why are you so kind?

He doesn't approach me any further. Instead, he just holds out the bouquet the way you'd hold out a dandelion leaf to a skittish rabbit. After a moment of hesitation, I get up and slowly take a step forward. And then another one.

They look beautiful.

I don't deserve these.

And another one.

I should have been the one giving you these.

And another one.

An expectant smile appears on his face. I slowly stretch out my hand, grab the bouquet and gently take it from him when he loosens his own grip on it. I hold the flowers to my chest, smelling the really nice odor coming from them. I'm not really sure how to proceed. I'd really like to thank him, but I think I'm too uneasy right now to speak. Part of me is happy for such a sweet gesture, but another part of me reminds me how much this emphasizes my own inadequacy and makes me feel even worse. Again, we're just standing there, looking at each other. After another minute, Hisao slowly starts to speak.

"Hanako, you don't really need to say anything. But will you listen to what I have to say?"

I slowly nod my head. It's the least thing I can do for him, even if I can't do anything else. He takes a deep breath.

"This week has been very hard for both of us. I had a painful reminder this week that I'm still at this school for a reason, no matter how normal I've started feeling over the last period of time."

That's true for me as well. For a while, I was convinced I was able to climb out of that rut I've been in for years and live an ordinary life, before I was dragged back in with a vengeance. It really is depressing.

"The last time I had a heart attack, it redefined me. It changed my outlook on life, on myself and on others. And not at all for the better. I forgot about all the small things in life I used to derive happiness from. I didn't rediscover them until I met someone with whom I could share those things with."

That's... probably true for me, too.

"I have no intention of letting this event become a similar turning point in my life, Hanako. I want to pick up where I left off. I still want to graduate here and study science. I still want to improve my physical condition in order to stretch the limits my arrhythmia imposes on my life. I still want to get a few more members for my club. I still want to make more memories with the people I have here. And preferably, with the girlfriend I have here as well..."

Hisao...

"For all the misery this week has brought, we have plenty of good memories to compensate, Hanako. I know I can't force you of all people, who has lost so much already, to stay with a person who could theoretically die at any moment..."

Wait! What...?

"...I just want you to know how terribly sorry I am to have put you through all of this..."

Wait! No, Hisao, that's not what... Did you think I...?

"...I know I'm being selfish for asking you this, but..."

"You're wrong!"

I blurt out my thoughts. For a second, he seems shocked, not expecting me to interrupt his carefully rehearsed speech like this. Then he gets a puzzled expression on his face.

"Wrong about what?"

"I... I would never think that way about you."

"What way?"

I swallow.

"M-maybe there are p-people in this world who would not allow themselves to get close to you, because they're afraid to l-lose you p-prematurely. But if everybody thought that way, you'd always remain alone. That'd b-be too cruel. You d-don't deserve that. N-not you..."

"You can't deny it's quite a burden."

"I-I know. And I w-was often reminded of it. Each t-time I s-saw you come back from the running track... each t-time I saw you take... or not take... your medication... each t-time... each t-time I got into bed with you, I remembered. B-but... when you b-became my boyfriend, I m-made a choice to accept that burden. Because you accepted mine."

"Then why..."

"B-because..."

I feel the lump in my throat returning. I struggle to get the words I need to say out of my mouth before I get too scared to say them.

"B-because I couldn't do anything for you."

"What do you mean?"

I feel my legs getting weak. I cover my face with my hand and drop to my knees, unable to keep my emotions in check any longer.

"When we started dating, we promised to support each other in times of need. But while you were l-lying there on the street, I couldn't do a thing for you. I saw you looking at m-me... but I couldn't m-move. I couldn't p-phone for an ambulance, I couldn't call for h-help... I couldn't even hold your h-hand to reassure you. I'm worthless."

Despite my best efforts to contain them, tears are flowing down my cheeks, and my shoulders shake as all the guilt and shame that have been eating me up all week long come flowing out of me.

"I t-thought, maybe it was better if I broke up with you, so you could be with someone who could make you happy and also wouldn't f-fail you like I did. What g-good are all the small things like homemade m-meals and games and caresses when I can't even be there for you *sniff* the very moment you need me most?"

I can feel his arms wrap around me and pull me close.

"Hanako, it's... It's okay."

"It's n-not okay. *sniff* W-what do you think would have h-happened *sniff* if we had been alone? You c-could have *sniff* died right in f-front of me while I just s-sat there doing n-nothing."

"Hanako, I..."

"Hisao, I-I'm so sorry."

For a long while he just holds me without saying anything as I sob against his shoulder. I wonder if he's going to try and tell me not to worry about it. Is he going to comfort me by telling me it'll all even out nicely with a couple of lunches and a night between the sheets?

"Hanako?"

"Y-yes?"

"Was that an apology?"

"W-what?"

"Were you apologizing?"

"Y-yes."

"Okay. I'll accept your apology, if you accept mine."

"Yours?"

"I couldn't help you either while you were having a panic attack, Hanako. Even though I promised myself that if what happened that day in science class would ever happen again, I'd be there to calm you down and reassure you. I wasn't able to keep that promise."

"B-but you were having a heart attack at the time. There's no way I could expect..."

"There no way I could expect you to keep your cool in the middle of a panic attack either."

"P-please stop comparing the two."

"Why? Because it's devastating to your argument? We could ask your own therapist for her opinion, but I think if you're really honest we can agree that neither of us was in a position to help the other and that expecting otherwise would have been very unreasonable."

"It's... not that easy."

"Of course not. I'd probably feel awful about it too if I had been in your place, even though it's unreasonable. But I'm not blaming you. If there's blame to be passed around, I feel it's justified that I take my part, which happens to be slightly larger than yours."

"T-that's not true."

"But it is. Your panic attack took place because I got into an accident. That accident took place because I disregarded your advice and acted rashly. If someone is to be blamed, I should be that one."

"It... wasn't really your fault. M-most people wouldn't walk slowly in the middle of a rainstorm."

"That's my point. It was a really small screw-up that happened to have big consequences, but there's no valid reason for either of us to beat ourselves up over this."

"E-even so... I didn't even visit you. I should have been by your bedside..."

"I wasn't able to help you either while you were in your room fighting off a depression."

"Please s-stop doing that!"

"Look, the point is that we both had our own problems to deal with first."

That's kind of depressing.

"So... We're not really t-that good at supporting each other in times of need, are we?"

"We both want to support each other to the best of our ability, and sometimes that's a little bit less than we'd like it to be. But it might still be enough for the other person. I couldn't be there for you while I was in the hospital, but I can be here for you now if you'll still have me."

Without thinking, I give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You're... doing a great job. I just wish I could return the favor."

"You already have."

"How?"

"By waiting for me like I asked you yesterday."

"B-but I wasn't at the gate when you arrived. I couldn't even..."

"But you were waiting for me. Misha said she saw you waiting out there for pretty much the entire morning."

"I... w-was. B-but..."

"Something happened?"

"I saw you... in the distance. Together with... two other people. I thought those were probably your p-parents. I... was a-fraid to face them after n-neglecting you the entire w-week and I *sigh* got scared and ran off."

I hang my head in shame, but he doesn't seem bothered by it.

"They were my parents alright. But what you did was probably for the best. This talk would have been really awkward with other people present. The important thing is that you were there and waited for me."

"Hisao, why was m-me waiting there so important to you?"

"One of the disheartening things about my first stay in the hospital, Hanako, was that by the time I was finally released, everyone except my parents had already moved on. And I was already aware of that while I was still lying there. I was thinking... If there was just one other person who was out there waiting for me... anticipating my return... I could have easily made it through the whole thing, even without visitors."

I know what you mean, Hisao. I know exactly what you mean. That really would have helped me too when I was in the hospital for so long.

I think I know what to do now. I gently break his embrace and take his hands in mine.

"Hisao... then... then I will be that person for you. If you... were to get into the hospital again, even if I can't visit you, I'll be waiting for you no matter how long you have to stay there. I promise."

Despite the fact my face is all red from crying, I do my best to smile at him. Hisao doesn't say anything, but I can tell by his smile how much my words mean to him. I let go of him, gently take his face in my hands and give him a short, sweet kiss on the lips.

"Welcome back, Hisao. I've missed you."

Again, he doesn't respond, but I see a small tear from one of his eyes. He then brings one hand up to my face, softly brushes my hair lock aside and then presses his other hand to the side of my head until I hear a familiar click.

My hairclip. He's kept it with him.

He doesn't ask me to be his girlfriend again. I don't bring it up either. We don't need words for this moment. Instead, he simply presses his lips on mine, and we kiss again, longingly, passionately this time, throwing off the weights that have been on our shoulders the whole week.

03

I'm not sure how long we've been sitting here. An hour? An hour and a half? We've barely spoken a word the entire time. He's just been sitting here on the ground, leaning against the wall and I'm sitting on his lap, my head against his chest while he's stroking my hair.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"Your parents, are they still here?"

"I asked Lilly, Shizune and Misha to keep them occupied while I searched for you. I think if they wanted to leave, they would have called me on my cell phone."

"They live pretty far away from here, don't they?"

"Yeah, I've seen them more often this week than I have in the last few months."

"Do you get along with them?"

"We're not extremely close since they work long days, so I was often home alone until late in the evening."

"But they still took time to visit you this week."

"Yeah, they even wanted to take me home to get some rest after picking me up from the hospital. You should have seen me freak out when they told me that."

I giggle at that mental image.

"But they meant well."

"I guess I should spend some time with them before they leave, shouldn't I?"

"Yes. I won't be going anywhere."

Hisao takes out his cell phone, and I see him call Lilly's number. He waits a few seconds, and then I vaguely hear a voice on the other side.

"Hey Lilly, it's me."

"Yeah, I found her. And we reconciled."

"Yeah, me too. Me too."

"Where are you now? Are you guys still giving my parents a tour of the school?"

"The Shanghai? Why'd you go there?"

"Shizune was bored, and she convinced them to take you there? I see."

"Actually, could you ask them to stay there? I want to spend some private time with them, and the Shanghai is more comfortable than my dorm room. I'll come down there in a minute."

"No, I'll be okay. You can probably stay for twenty more minutes or so. I could..."

"You still have some shopping to do? That's fine too. Say, Lilly, could you...Hello?"

"Well, certainly not Misha."

"Misha, could you give Lilly her phone back?"

"Sure, sure, I'll treat you guys for your trouble. No need to try and guilt trip me into it."

"No, I'm not gonna foot your entire bill."

"Okay, three things. One: that has nothing to do with the matter at hand, two: I was only six at the time and three: why the hell is she telling you about that?"

"Misha, put Lilly on the damn phone already! Hello?"

With an annoyed face, Hisao snaps the phone back shut. I chuckle at the scene that just unfolded in front of me.

"Trouble?"

"Just Shizune and Lilly extracting every embarrassing piece of information there is to know about my childhood from my mom. I'd better get down there before Shizune procures enough blackmail material to put me on the student council's volunteer list for the rest of the year."

I get off his lap, and we both walk down the stairs to the entrance of the school building.

"I'd better be off now."

"You're going to walk all the way to the Shanghai? Is that okay?"

"I've been lying in bed for nearly a week. I really need to stretch my legs a bit. I'll be fine. I'm going to take my time, the whole way's downhill, and I'll be sure to take a short rest half-way through. Promise."

"How about your way back?"

"Mom and Dad went there by car. They'll drive me back to school afterwards."

"Ummm... Can I walk along with you a bit?"

"Fine with me. Be sure to drop those flowers off in your room first."

"Y-yes. Meet at the gates?"

"See you there."

04

Hisao laughs as I walk past the school gate.

"Nice umbrella you've got there."

"T-thanks."

"Did you want to come along just in case those clouds above us decide to drop a rainstorm down on me?"

"N-not really. I mean... Not just that."

We head down the road and true to his word, Hisao adopts a pace that's barely distinguishable from Lilly's. After ten minutes, we sit down on a rock near the side of the road.

"Ummm... H-Hisao?"

"Yes, Hanako?"

"There's...probably something you should know. About... me and Lilly."

"Lilly said you two had a fight."

"...it wasn't really a fight..."

That's not a lie. It was far too one-sided to be a fight. Lilly was uncharacteristically persistent that day. Eventually I completely lost it and just tore into her. I'll never forget the hurt and frightened look on her face that moment. All I wanted was for her to leave me be. I never wanted to hurt her. I immediately regretted lashing out at her, but I couldn't find the words to stop her from leaving the room, and she couldn't see the pained expression on my face.

"Are you planning to talk to her?"

"I don't think she ever wants to talk to me again."

I told her never to come back after all. How horrible can a person be?

"Don't say that. Lilly feels horrible about what happened. She blames herself much more than she blames you."

"She does?"

"Yeah. This week's been hell for all three of us."

"..."

Hisao gets up, and we prepare to walk the rest of the way down, but after a few minutes he suddenly turns around and looks me straight in the eye.

"Hanako?"

"Y-yes?"

"You don't hate Lilly, do you? I mean, she can be a little bit overbearing at times, but she means well. I remember you telling me she was a very special person to you and that you loved her a lot."

"I-I don't h-hate her. I just... wish things were different between us."

"Different?"

"...it's complicated..."

"I see."

"D-do we have to talk about this now? I'm still feeling a bit drained."

"We can talk about it later."

Ten minutes later we stand in front of the Shanghai. Hisao dropped Lilly another quick phone call. Officially to ask her to get him some things from the store, although I'm pretty sure the real reason was to find out about her location so she and I don't accidentally run into each other.

For a few moments I think back on the day. The best I was hoping for this morning was an awkward greeting with Hisao followed up by an involuntary game of hide and seek. Instead, we managed to put this week's events behind us, and we've successfully averted the first crisis in our relationship. It was a very rough ride, but I also feel a bit proud. Maybe our relationship is more resilient than I thought at first.

One thing that stands out in my recollection of today are my words to Hisao. Now I think back about it, my promise to wait for him if he gets hospitalized again sounded a lot like a long-term commitment.

And now he's about to enter the Shanghai, there's another decision for me to make. He's not saying anything, but I bet the same matter is on his mind as well.

Can I do this?

"Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

05

"What do you t-think of me?"

"I love you, Hanako."

"I l-love you too, Hisao."

I extend my left hand, and he takes it with a smile.

"I... I won't be staying l-long."

"That's okay, Hanako. This means a lot to me."

He gently leads me inside, and we walk towards the spot where we usually sit. Ahead, I can see a middle-aged couple; the same people who got out of the car with Hisao at noon. The man has a few facial features that look familiar to me. They wave at Hisao as we approach, and then their eyes fall on me. I can tell that they're staring, and I also know what they're staring at. My knees start shaking a bit, so I squeeze Hisao's hand a little harder and try to focus all my attention on him in an attempt to block their gaze and my growing anxiety from my mind. As we reach the table, I try to read Hisao's expression. He's a bit nervous as well, but also wears a proud smile as he opens his mouth to speak.

"Mom, Dad... There's one more person here at Yamaku I'd like you to meet."

Taking off my hat, I bow as deeply as I can and then take a deep breath.

"G-good afternoon. My n-n-name is H-Hanako Ikezawa. I'm Hisao's g-g-girlfriend."

06

Chapter 17 (Lilly)

01

One more day.

As I operate the Brailler in the student council room, my thoughts occasionally drift to last week's events. Hisao was released from the hospital last Saturday and was dropped off at Yamaku by his parents. Hanako had been waiting for him at the gates all morning, but she was afraid to approach him with his parents being present and ran off. Hisao asked Shizune, Misha and me to give his mother and father a tour of the school while he went to do something important. The message was clear; 'keep them occupied for as long as necessary while I search for Hanako.'

I was heartened and relieved when I received a phone call from Hisao that he hadn't merely succeeded in finding Hanako, but he also managed to reconcile with her. According to Hisao, Hanako was still in the process of recovering from the stress of last week, but he had no doubts that they were going to pick up where they left off. It appears that their relationship is very much like Hanako herself - easy to crack, but impossible to break.

Unfortunately, my own relation with Hanako seems a different matter altogether. We're still avoiding each other, and tomorrow evening Akira will arrive here to pick me up. Hisao has assured me that he's been trying to bring the matter up with Hanako, but time seems to be against us. I'd be lying if I denied that the whole situation has left me more than a little bit on edge. When I informed Hanako and Hisao about the fact I'd be leaving, I believed Hanako and I could remain in contact with each other. There's no doubt in my mind, however, that if things don't improve between us before I take my plane, there won't be any more contact. We'll simply go our own way, and that'll be the end of it. I'm not afraid to admit that the idea of Hanako's angry cry to go away and never come back remaining the last words I'll ever hear from her frightens me more than anything else.

"Class rep, or perhaps I should say former class rep; you're working really slowly. It wouldn't be fair of me to hold the delay of last week against you, considering the circumstances, but if you don't want to be remembered as the black sheep among the class representatives, you'd better make sure to have everything wrapped up before you leave. That's not going to happen at the rate you're working now."

I let out a frustrated sigh before I can stop myself. Last week has been strange for Shizune and me. During our student council days, I always had the impression that Shizune only concerned herself with other people when it benefitted her own goals in some way or another, but that impression had come under fire when I witnessed Shizune's actions last week. Both Shizune and Misha probably realized that the matter between Hisao and Hanako wasn't their business to get involved in, so they went out of their way to help Hisao in whatever small ways they could, and Shizune didn't seem to have any problems with the fact that a temporary truce between us was part of that. While leading Hisao's parents around, both of us took turns explaining different things to them and talking about various aspects of life at Yamaku, and I was surprised that for once, we worked together well. However, when she learned that Hisao and Hanako reconciled, she immediately closed off that particular chapter, and when I showed up at the student council room this afternoon, she wasted no time in complaining about me not showing up sooner as if nothing had happened.

"I can assure you I will have all paperwork done before the deadline of tomorrow. That should be all that matters. Or are you now concerned with other things besides cold, hard results all of a sudden?"

And here I am taking the bait again. I'm not sure why I can't take Shizune's provocations with a grain of salt like Hisao seems able to do without any significant effort. Perhaps the fact that we're family makes it more difficult to back down.

"If you have a secret plan to speed up the process, I'll be more than happy to witness it, though I won't hold out hope that you're going to surprise me."

"People can still surprise each other on occasion, Shizune. I must admit I was somewhat surprised by the efforts you made to help Hisao and Hanako through last week. Your actions were most certainly appreciated."

"I'm offended by the fact you were surprised. Hisao and Hanako are still members of my class. Just because I run my class in a different way than you do, doesn't mean I can't do my part to help my classmates when emergencies take place. I may be a dictator in your eyes, but I like to think of myself as a responsible one."

Despite Shizune's retort being very much an accusation, I smile a little bit. I have to admit she did act responsibly. It seems Hisao wasn't exaggerating when he said he considered Shizune and Misha friends despite their occasional pushiness.

"I realize you don't value my opinion very much, but I don't think it would hurt if your classmates were to witness that responsible streak a little more often. It might make them more willing to voluntarily lend you a hand on occasion without having to be pressured into it."

"The approach you suggest is overrated. People will always get to tasks more quickly if you direct them properly. My goal isn't to win a popularity contest, but to keep my class functioning smoothly."

Without saying another word, I open my bag and take several large envelopes out of them. Taking a moment to pile them up neatly, I hold out my hand and let go of them when I feel Misha taking them from me.

"Hey, what's in the envelopes, Lilly?"

"The envelopes contain all the remaining paperwork that still had to be done before the start of summer break. It turned out that while I was occupied with Hisao and Hanako last week, several of my classmates took it upon themselves to fill out all the remaining forms for me on their own in an attempt to make things easier for me and presumably also as a gesture of support and appreciation. They did this without me even having to ask them. All that remained for me to do was to type up a small summary. Do you not agree with me that no class is running more smoothly than a class where the representative can afford to take an unexpected leave of absence, and things still get done on a timely basis?"

There's a moment of silence in the room, beyond the sound of a shocked gasp. I allow myself to send a sweet, but triumphant smile in Shizune's general direction. A few seconds later, the room shakes with Misha's thunderous laughter.

"WAHAHAHA~ HAHAHAHAHA~, looks like she's got you there, Shicchan!"

I put away the Brailler as Misha's laughter slowly dies down. Of course, my classmates' action was a surprise to me as well rather than anything planned, but I must admit getting a small victory over Shizune feels surprisingly good to me. Maybe we really are more alike than either of us cares to admit.

"Looks like you did manage to surprise me today, class rep. I admit defeat this time. But that doesn't mean I will ever agree with your methods."

I let out a tired smile.

"I had hoped that after last week, we'd be able to get along slightly better. But perhaps our differences really are too great."

"Last week was a different matter. There's no reason we cannot both help out a mutual friend without antipathy, but that doesn't mean we will ever be able to work together on something productively."

"I understand. I accept the fact that there are things that neither of us will budge on. I may not think highly of your methods as a student council president, but I think I can still appreciate you as a cousin, Shizune. I hope that will allow us to shake hands and part without any hard feelings tomorrow."

"I suppose the fact that you're a bad class rep doesn't really take away from the fact we've also had a few good memories in the past. We could probably learn to appreciate each other as family and not follow too far in our fathers' footsteps. Though I object to the handshake. I'm afraid nothing but a hug will do."

"Oh my..."

I find myself flustered for a second, then break out into an amused grin.

"Misha, please translate properly."

"WAHAHAHAHAHA~! Awww, you noticed?"

"What did she really say?"

"I only added the last part. She's okay with the handshake."

I stick out my hand and moments later another hand grasps mine. The handshake is short and formal, but also polite and sincere.

With the paperwork finished prematurely, I accept Misha's offer to have some juice as we take a moment to sit back, and I realize it's been a long time since I was able to feel at ease in this room.

"So, I suppose with student council duties, you haven't been able to give your plans for that charity festival much thought."

"That one is only on temporary hold. I'm taking full advantage of the fact I can use the festivals here as a learning experience and become familiar with all the organizational aspects. When I get around to organizing my own festival, no beginner's mistakes will be accepted. And those orphanage plans are not off the table either, though I suspect that'll take a little longer."

I grin playfully.

"How about taking over the world one city council at a time?"

"WAHAHAHAHAHA~! Really, Shicchan?"

"You'll be safe in Inverness for the time being. But not forever."

02

"Am I interrupting?"

"Hicchan! Hey there."

"I'd like to talk to Lilly."

"I'll be right with you, Hisao."

I make a short bow, grab my belongings and follow Hisao out of the room.

"I noticed a distinct lack of passive aggressiveness in there."

I smile awkwardly. I noticed the habit of occasionally teasing me about my feud with Shizune has rubbed off from Akira onto Hisao.

"We may be able to part amicably when I take my leave tomorrow. It may be difficult to imagine now, but we also have several positive memories of each other."

"That's a hopeful sign. If you can get your difficulties with Shizune sorted out, reconciling with Hanako should be a piece of cake in comparison."

I'm not so sure myself. While I may have had trouble getting along with Shizune, I've never had difficulty understanding her thought process. Hanako's thought process, however, has never been something I felt was very tangible to me.

"I don't think the two are comparable."

"Are you up for it?"

"Does she want to talk to me?"

"I managed to convince her to hear you out. She doesn't really want things to end on such a sordid note either."

"Thank you, Hisao."

He remains silent for a second and then places his hand on my shoulder.

"Lilly, I'm not really sure how this is going to play out. I have tried to avoid taking sides here, and I refrained from prying, so I don't know what she's thinking. We had a talk like this one ourselves while you were in Scotland. Eventually we came out of it as a couple, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't one of the most difficult and painful experiences I've ever been through."

"I don't think I have much to lose, Hisao."

"That may be the problem. Back then, the mutual fear of losing the other was a strong motivator in getting us both to open up. That motivator won't be present here. All I can suggest is to be as open and honest with her as you can. Hanako's a lot more perceptive than she usually lets on, but her self-esteem tends to color the conclusions she draws and usually not for the better."

"Where is she now?"

"In my dorm room. We thought it was best to use neutral territory so both of you can walk away whenever you like."

"And where will you be then?"

"I'm going to see Miss Takawa. She said she had something for me if I managed to make up with Hanako. She got me curious, that's for sure. I think I'm also going to hang out with Kenji. That way, he won't find out about you guys using my room."

"Hisao?"

"Yeah?"

I feel my hand up to his shoulder and then place a soft kiss on his cheek.

"W-what was that for?"

I smile at him.

"Everything."

Decisively, I take out my cane and make my way to the boys' dormitory.

03

I feel a faint sense of apprehension as I slowly open the door of Hisao's room and step inside. There's no greeting, but I can hear someone's breathing nearby.

"Hanako?"

"Y-you can sit on the bed. It's right in front of you."

The position of Hanako's voice suggests she's sitting, presumably in the desk chair, on the other side of the room. It feels strange for me to sit on Hisao's bed. Why doesn't Hanako sit down here? Does she want to avoid the possibility of me sitting down next to her? I uneasily take a seat and fold up my cane. What should we do now? I suppose I'd better make the first move.

"Hanako, I'd like to apologize for my actions last Tuesday. I once argued the importance of giving someone space, but when push came to shove I forgot about that myself."

"I-I'm s-sorry too f-for saying those horrible things to you. I... felt really bad about it afterwards."

"But you were correct. I felt partially responsible for what happened to you that Monday, and I felt like simply leaving Yamaku and boarding the plane as if nothing happened would be like abandoning you and Hisao in a time of need. I was so focused on finding a way to help you that I didn't stop to think of whether it really was the right time to help. Hanako, I truly regret what I did. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"It's... okay. You were probably w-worried about me."

"I was. More worried than I probably should have been. In the end, you and Hisao got back together just fine without anyone else's help."

"Lilly... I want to see you off without hard feelings. So if you're... not angry with me then I won't be a-angry with you."

"Thank you, Hanako. I'm not angry with you. I wasn't even angry to begin with. Just sad. I was afraid you hated me."

"I don't hate you."

"I'm very relieved to hear that."

"Would you like to go to your room and have s-something to drink, Lilly?"

I'm starting to get a little suspicious. Now that I told her I'm not angry with her, Hanako seems really eager to get it over with. Is she sincere in her answers? She said she wants to see me off without hard

feelings. But hard feelings on her part or mine? Is she simply saying what she thinks I want to hear? I think if I let her walk away, we will indeed part on friendly terms, but it might be merely an act.

"Hanako, could you tell me one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"What did you mean when you said I was only interested in fixing you?"

"I-I w-wasn't thinking s-straight when I s-said that."

That doesn't sound convincing. Hanako can hide some things fairly well, but her anxiety isn't one of them.

"I think you were. You were spot-on about me imposing on you to soothe my own anxiety. I believe there was also a reason behind your other words. I... I really want to know what it is."

"W-why don't you believe me?"

"Because you would never want to hurt me. And maybe the reason you said what you said is something that would hurt."

"B-but..."

"But Hanako, I would never want to hurt you either. If I did something to hurt you in one way or another, I want to know what it is, so I can take responsibility for it. Please, Hanako... I promise you I will not think badly of you, no matter what you say. But please don't deny me the chance to take responsibility for my actions."

"But w-what if it's all just in my imagination?"

"Then I will do my best to reassure you, and we'll both walk out of this room feeling better."

Hanako falls silent, obviously weighing my words. Her reaction alone was enough of an indication that her accusation wasn't merely thrown out at random. I can only hope she trusts me enough to tell me what was really bothering her.

"You w-won't hate me if I'm w-wrong?"

"I could never hate you, Hanako."

I'm not sure if she's completely convinced, but she seems willing to give me the benefit of the doubt as she takes a deep breath.

"I've always been... really thankful... that you became my friend. You became... a very important p-person in my life. But sometimes, I w-worried... whether we were really f-friends or not."

"Why?"

"Because you were always there for m-me when I n-needed support. You were always doing things for m-me. But I could never do things for you. Or f-for myself. All you did was g-give and give. And all I did w-was take and take. It was like... I was just someone you needed to t-take c-care of. Like you w-were

a m-mother taking care of a n-needy child. But that's not what I w-wanted us to b-be. That's never what I w-wanted us to be."

I knew our relationship appeared like this. Akira has even joked about it in the past, about Hanako being 'my Hanako'. What I hadn't realized was how unhappy Hanako herself was with the dynamic of our relationship. How many times have I made her feel worse about herself by showering her with affection and comfort? I'm afraid to ask.

"Hanako, I apologize. I admit I have the tendency to mother the people dearest to me. Akira has often scolded me when I mothered her, despite her being seven years older. It is... my way of showing affection. I never... realized I could hurt others that way."

Hanako doesn't respond though and continues her story.

"But when Hisao became my b-boyfriend, I started to s-see things differently. I realized... I was only useless if I allowed myself to be. I realized... I could become stronger and change if I w-worked hard at it. I could become a better girlfriend for Hisao. And I could become a better friend to you. I w-wanted to become r-real friends with you. B-but then, you announced you were maybe leaving the c-country."

And by doing so, I'm taking that opportunity to develop our friendship away from her, am I not?

"We didn't really know w-why you hadn't made up your mind yet. Seeing that your parents and s-sister would all be there. Hisao suggested that maybe I w-was one of the reasons you were still doubting."

That's actually true. Hanako was on my mind a lot whenever I was weighing my options.

"I didn't w-want to ask you to stay for m-my sake. I wanted you to do what made you h-happiest. When I started s-spending more time with you, I started thinking. M-maybe if I could b-become a better friend to you... If I could s-show you how m-much our friendship still h-had to offer... maybe you would be more tempted to stay."

Except I ultimately ended up deciding to leave Japan despite Hanako's best efforts... No, not despite...

"Lilly, that n-night before you told us you were going to Scotland, I t-told you about my p-plans for the future and m-more than ever I felt like we were on equal footing... but you seemed s-sad when you noted how much I had changed. Did you... make the d-decision to go when you felt I was no longer r-reliant on you?"

How did she...?

It appears Hanako has been watching my face closely, because my reaction to her question causes her to gasp and her tone becomes strained with a very subtle hint of anger.

"I... I k-knew it. My efforts only served to make you more d-determined to go."

"Hanako..."

"If had remained as f-fragile as I w-was, you w-would have decided to s-stay in a heartbeat. But now..."

So that's how she sees things. And my pep-talk about her independence and my decision to stay for a little while after her breakdown only reinforced her views.

"Hanako, please listen..."

"All I w-wanted was your f-friendship!"

"But you are..."

"Is t-taking c-care of me r-really that much more f-fun than going out as f-friends?!"

"NO, IT'S NOT!"

I get up forcefully as I say these words, and I hear the chair Hanako's sitting on scrape across the floor as if my sudden reaction made her flinch. It's not my habit to raise my voice. I was always taught that it's not something a proper lady is ever supposed to do, and I hate the idea of intimidating my meek friend, but I know that if Hanako is given the chance to get up and run out of the room now, I'll never be able to catch her, and she'll spend the rest of the next two days avoiding me. I have to keep control of the conversation if I don't want this to end badly.

"Hanako, please listen to me. You really are my friend. Nothing less. I don't think of you as a child."

"..."

"You are my friend, Hanako. My best friend. You are a very special person to me."

"I am?"

"You are. Please believe me."

"I believe you, Lilly."

She doesn't. I can tell by her voice that she doesn't. She's back to telling me what she thinks I want to hear. She's made up her mind about me, and now she's just looking to end the conversation.

"Hanako..."

Part of what she suggested is true, but her conclusions are off. But how do I tell her that?

Hisao said to be as open and sincere as possible. I might still be able to change her mind.

Hanako will probably see me as a weak person, but that's better than what she's probably thinking of me now.

"There's some truth in what you said. I won't deny that. But there's something I want to tell you that's relevant to this matter. You always were a good listener. Will you listen now? You can walk away afterwards and never speak to me again if you wish, but please hear me out until the end."

"...O-okay."

"Hanako, do you know why my parents are living in Scotland and Akira and I are living in Japan?"

"You said your f-father received an important j-job, and you stayed here for your education."

"That's true. But it's also true, Hanako, that I didn't stay in Japan because I wanted to."

"You didn't?"

"Had I been given a choice, I probably would have gone with them. But the decision was made for me."

"But w-why?"

"Quality of education. That's what they said. I was to live with my grandparents until at least the end of middle school. But my grandparents' health wasn't very good, so Akira volunteered to be my guardian instead, and we've lived in our parents' old house for a while. It wasn't an easy time. Akira had long hours at her job, and I tried to combine school work with chores around the house. But we managed."

"Akira doesn't like your p-parents very much, does she? She c-came across as very bitter."

"Akira believes the real reason our parents left me in Japan was not for educational reasons, but because they had difficulty dealing with a blind daughter."

"WHAT?"

"I'm not so certain myself, but it is what she believes."

"Lilly, what d-do you believe?"

"I don't really know, Hanako. I remember my parents as always being very pleasant and friendly. I have difficulty believing what Akira thinks about them. Perhaps I don't even want to believe her. Still, I can't deny contact has been very sparse. When Akira and I went to Scotland at the start of July, it was the first time we met in six years. Phone contact has always been very meager as well."

"What w-was it like, m-meeting them again after so long?"

"It was strange. I wasn't really sure how to act around them anymore. They left when I was twelve. I'm a different person now than I was six years ago. For a long time, I believed that when they'd come back to Japan, we could simply pick up where we left off. That was probably very naïve. I think all four of us sensed it while we were staying at our parents' mansion. Things were... pleasant, but distant. We truly have grown apart as a family."

"But they still w-wanted you to live with them d-despite that?"

"Maybe because of that. Akira said they're feeling guilty and are trying to make up for it now. They told us they wanted the four of us to make a new start as a family."

"But... when you told us about the s-summons, you were still doubting. You didn't think it would w-work?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. Maybe not. I don't think Akira will be visiting there very often. As for me... I've found that I... have a lot of trouble letting go of the life I have here. Despite Mother and Father not being present, I've been... happy here."

"Lilly... I think that what you're s-saying is that d-deep down you don't really want to go."

"It's very strange. I... do want us to be a family again. It's been my biggest wish for years. And yet when I thought of moving, there was always a nagging feeling that it would be wrong in some way. It's a strange contradiction."

"Not r-really. Your f-family was broken up because of the actions of your p-parents. And yet you are the one expected to make s-sacrifices in order to repair it. That's... not very f-fair."

"That's... also how I felt, when my parents took me aside and asked why I was so hesitant. But I... couldn't tell them. I was afraid to... well... come across as a bad daughter."

"What did you tell them then?"

"I told them... I told them that I was hesitating because there were people at Yamaku who were relying on me to be there for them and that I wanted to keep supporting them. I... used you and Hisao as an excuse because I was afraid to confront my parents on a sensitive issue."

"But Hisao and I started getting our lives in order, so eventually that justification wasn't true anymore."

"But I still couldn't face up to my family, so I eventually just gave in. I would never wish you to give up your true self for any reason, Hanako. Especially not to cater to my own flaws. That time we've spent doing all sorts of fun things together was the highlight of our friendship to me. I will never forget them or you for as long as I live. So please don't think I think of you as..."

"I... I understand, Lilly. There's no need to say more. T-thank you for telling me all this."

04

Hanako's voice is different now. The anxious undertone is gone now, and she sounds relieved and sincere. The next moment, I hear her get up and approach the bed. Then she sits down next to me.

"Lilly, I... have a lot of p-problems doing things for myself and s-speaking up. I have trouble being 'selfish', just l-like you. So I understand this is hard, but... I think you're making a very b-big mistake."

It appears that within a matter of seconds Hanako has completely dismissed the original topic of our conversation and is now getting ready to dismantle my decision to migrate.

"Why do you think that, Hanako?"

"Because it s-sounds like you won't be happy there. Your p-parents want to grow closer to you, but if you're not h-happy there, it'll all be an act. You'll eventually start to resent them."

That's the reason Akira said she couldn't give up her career to stay with her boyfriend.

"And if you'd keep b-bottling up that unhappiness, it will c-come out eventually. And you will end up really h-hurting someone you care about. L-like I did."

"That's... a bit of a worst-case scenario. And besides... I've made a promise already."

"W-won't you even c-consider telling your parents the truth? If they c-care about you, you giving up your happiness w-will really hurt them."

"How can I... tell my parents that I reject their reconciliation offer? What kind of daughter would do that?"

"I... think... you c-can still reconcile... in other w-ways. And m-maybe someday you'll be close enough to them that moving to Scotland WILL m-make you happy. Now is just... not the time."

"Hanako, I've never heard you this persistent before."

"I think... if I l-let you go like this, I w-won't be able to live with myself. Also, I r-really want you to s-stay here with us. It w-would make me... really happy."

Judging by the determination in her voice, she really isn't going to give up. To be honest, if the roles were reversed, I'd probably be doing the same thing. I replay Hanako's words in my head.

'I wanted to become real friends with you.'

I've always thought of our relationship as give-and-take myself.

But the things Hanako did for me were small things. Picking articles while shopping. Navigation in an unknown area.

Things that only required eyesight, not devoted friendship. Not the kind of friendship she wanted to give me so desperately.

I don't like letting other people share my burdens, but I've always encouraged Hanako to share hers with me.

If I had been more willing to rely on Hanako for emotional support, like I'm doing now, she probably would have trusted me more.

"Hanako... What's the time right now?"

"Nearly four o' clock in the afternoon."

That means it's eight o' clock in the morning in Scotland right now.

I take out my phone and dial the number, trying to press the buttons as quickly as I can.

Try not to think about this too much, Lilly. If you start pondering, you'll probably lose heart.

I hear a quick string of beeps as I finish inputting the number and the call is made.

Just try to go with your instincts.

"Good morning, Satou speaking."

"M-Mother, good morning."

"Lilly! How nice of you to call. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine, Mother. How are you?"

"Very well. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again later this week."

Oh no!

"Mother, a-about that... I... I have to tell you something."

"What is it dear?"

"I... I'd like to stay here... in Japan."

"Oh dear, is your friend still in the hospital?"

"N-no, that's not it. He's back already. He's doing pretty well now. What I meant to say is... I... I've changed my mind... about... moving."

The silence on the other end of the line is painful. Is she going to be angry? Disappointed? Sad?

"Mother?"

"Lilly, why? Are there still people relying on you like you told us earlier?"

"Well... yes, but the truth is... I've also come to rely on them. More than I ever thought I'd be doing."

"I don't understand."

"I've been happy so far, living in Japan. I have a school I feel at home at, plans for the future and many friends whose company I greatly enjoy. I'm... not really ready to give all of that up."

"Not even for the sake of our family?"

There it is. The same question that broke through my defense last time. I was really hoping she wouldn't ask me that.

I open my mouth to reply several times, but find I am lost for words each time. I don't want to be held responsible if we can't get together as a family. If it had been up to me, our family wouldn't have split up in the first place.

"Mother, I..."

A sense of desperation is welling up inside of me. Why do I have to choose between my life here and my family? I'm tired of having to choose between loved ones. I don't want to have to do that anymore. Not now, not ever again.

"(Lilly...)"

I suddenly become aware of Hanako again, who's still sitting next to me on the bed and who has suddenly taken my left hand in hers, squeezing it gently.

It's a gesture. A gesture of support. A sign that she's rooting for me. She must have read my expression.

Hanako's quiet intervention calms my nerves a bit.

Don't blurt things out. Think first.

There was something Hanako said earlier. What was it?

I take a few seconds to gather my thoughts, give Hanako's hand a quick squeeze in response and then take a deep breath.

"Mother, it's true that we have become estranged from each other. But I'm not sure if me giving up my life here to live with you and Father will fix the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"While I was making preparations for our trip at the start of July, I realized I wasn't even sure how to act around my family anymore. I... didn't really know a lot of things about you anymore. We've interacted so little over the last six years. We've never visited, and we barely spoke. We didn't grow apart because of the distance, Mother. We grew apart because we stopped communicating with each other."

"That's... probably true. I'm sorry..."

"I want to make a new start as well, Mother. But I don't feel I need to give up what I have here to do that. We could... call each other two or three times a week. A few minutes is all it will take to let each other know what's been going on in our lives. Maybe I can come over again during summer and winter break. Or you could stop by at Yamaku when you have the opportunity and see where I've been attending for the last years. I would welcome you here."

"You... have really thought this through, haven't you?"

"I haven't. But it is how I feel."

05

"If you really want to stay there, we can't really force you to come here against your will. That will only make things worse. Just... remember you're always welcome here."

"That makes me very happy, Mother."

"So, when can we see each other again?"

"See each other?"

"I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

It may not be very ladylike, but I still can't resist chuckling at mother's reaction upon stepping on what she probably felt was a landmine.

"Very soon, I promise. We can discuss the specifics the next time we talk."

"Perhaps the day after tomorrow?"

"I will call when I've received word that Akira is on her way."

Mother remains quiet for a moment.

"Lilly, will you be okay without your sister around?"

"I will be fine, Mother. I have a very good friend here who is like a sister to me in all but blood. If I need help with something, I can always count on her to be there."

"Very well. Then... please take care of yourself, dear."

"Thank you Mother. You too."

As I hang up, I suddenly feel extremely tired. The reality of the situation is still in the process of setting in and my mind is struggling to wrap itself around the enormity of the change my life has just undergone within the last hour. Through the daze, I can barely hear Hanako's voice whispering to me.

"Lilly... You... You've done it."

"I'm... staying... here."

"Yes, y-you're really... staying."

Finally letting go of Hanako's hand, I slowly turn in her direction.

"Let's... graduate together, Hanako. And let's make... lots of wonderful *sniff* memories in the meantime."

As I finish these words, all the pent-up stress assaults me at once. I embrace Hanako and break down in tears as everything comes flooding out of me. The anxiety of meeting my family again, the terrible pressure of being forced to make a life-changing decision, the concern after Hisao's accident, the grief and guilt around Hisao's and Hanako's relationship crisis, the fear of having driven Hanako away from me and finally the stress of having to confront Mother with what I truly wanted for myself in life. We stay locked in the embrace for a long time, and as the adrenaline in my system dies down, my quiet sobs are replaced by laughs of relief. Relief that all of this is behind me now. And through it all, I become aware of another sound - a sound I've never heard before. It's the sound of my best friend laughing out loud in joy.

06

"So, you're really sure you're staying here, huh?"

"I am."

Akira lets out a slightly deriding snort that's loud and clear even over the phone.

"W-what is it?"

"That's the first time ever I've heard you sounding decisive about this whole thing. If I didn't know better, I'd say you never really wanted to go in the first place."

"To be very honest..."

"GODDAMN IT, SIS! You really are your own worst enemy at times."

"I t-trust canceling my ticket was not a problem?"

"Don't worry, that went smoothly. It'll be a lonely flight without you, though it's probably good practice for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Word has it that you're planning a vacation in Inverness on a short notice. And three guesses who the folks are probably expecting to pick you up here and drop you off again afterwards."

"They're expecting you to make two trips across the world on my behalf? That seems a bit excessive!"

"Well there's no way they're gonna let you navigate an airport all on your own, and I can't even say I blame them for that."

"If they're going to spend money on two round trips, I think I know a better destination for those tickets."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I happen to have a friend who recently told me she's interested in travelling, but is a bit short on cash due to splitting the costs of her dates with her boyfriend. I'm pretty sure I can convince her and her boyfriend to accompany me. Not only am I certain she'd love the Scottish Highlands, but she has also expressed interest in journalism lately, and I'm sure Mother would have many interesting stories to tell from her experience as a reporter."

"Well, I'll be... Were you planning this all along when you offered to come over again?"

"No, but don't you agree it'd be a good idea? I could use some cooperation in convincing our parents."

"I'll do what I can. I'm sure they won't question the notion of me being too busy to spend four nights on a plane."

"Wonderful. I'll meet you again tomorrow. And please don't be late for your own seeing-off party here."

"Wouldn't miss it. Bye."

At the exact moment I snap my phone shut, I hear a few timid knocks on my door. Hanako probably heard me talking on the phone and decided to wait outside the room. I really hope she wasn't able to overhear our conversation. I want to keep the matter I just discussed with Akira a secret until I can get everything arranged.

"Isn't Hisao with you?"

"Umm... I actually liked to have a bit more time alone with you. He didn't mind."

"I hope he's not going to get jealous of me for receiving so much of your attention."

"He won't. He was very happy too when I told him you're staying here."

"Last afternoon, he said he was going to visit Miss Takawa. She promised him something if he managed to reconcile with you, I believe."

"Actually, it was something for me."

"What was it?"

"N-next week, Yamaku's holding several f-first aid courses for its staff members. Miss Yumi signed herself up for them and lets me go in her place. She called the instructor and he was okay with letting me attend once she explained my situation to him."

"That's wonderful. So you're getting your first aid certificate next week?"

"It's... not a guarantee of anything. Miss Yumi stressed that as well. But even if I can reduce the odds of freezing up during an emergency just a little bit, that will already be a big reassurance for me."

We spend some time drinking tea, sitting next to each other, leaning back against the side of my bed. We talk about Hanako's upcoming training courses, and she manages to get me to tell a few stories about Hisao that his mother shared with Shizune, Misha and me.

"Lilly?"

"Yes?"

"The friend you spoke to your mother about on the phone... Was that... m-me?"

"Hanako, some time ago I experienced, for the first time in six years, the feeling of being part of a family again. But what surprised me about it was that I didn't feel it while Akira and I were visiting Scotland, but while you, Hisao and I were in Hokkaido together."

"I... I was feeling the exact same thing."

Hanako leans against me slightly, and I realize that for possibly the first time since our friendship began, she completely and unconditionally trusts me.

"I'm... looking forward to getting to know you better, Lilly. I'm... really honored I learned about some of your past today."

"I'm eager to get to know you better too, Hanako. And I hope that someday, you'll be able to entrust me with yours as well."

She lets out a weary sigh.

"My past... is not pretty, Lilly. But I think... in time... I can share it with you."

"I will wait for that day, Hanako."

07

"In the meantime, there's something I think I'm... comfortable sharing with you. Something I'd like you to experience."

"Whatever it is, I'll welcome it, Hanako."

I can feel her move aside, and moments later I can hear a familiar snap. It's the sound of the hairclip she's always carrying with her.

She gets closer again. From the location where the sound of her breathing is coming from, I determine she's sitting on her knees right in front of me. If she were to lower herself, she'd be sitting on my lap. This is getting really awkward.

"Ah... Hanako?"

"P-please... don't say anything."

Hanako's breathing is slightly deeper than usual as if she's nervous about something.

Is she planning to kiss me?

Hanako must have guessed my thoughts or read my expression, for she lets out an amused giggle that makes me feel a bit silly, but at least manages to relieve the tension. A few seconds later, I feel her hands gently take hold of mine and tenderly guide them upwards. A strange conflicting feeling suddenly reaches my fingertips, and I gasp as I realize what she's planning to let me do.

My right hand feels the warm sensation of bare skin, extremely soft to the touch. My left hand feels a strange leather-like surface that gently moves as Hanako breathes in and out, but feels almost artificial. Almost in a daze, I run my fingers across the surface, eager to take in every single part, every single detail.

So this is what Hanako actually looks like.

We tried this once, a long time ago, but my hand hadn't even reached her cheek yet when she retreated in a panic, apologizing to me in a voice that sounded like a guilty whimper. There is no panic or tension this time. She seems calm, serene almost.

Despite her scarring, Hanako is remarkably beautiful in her own way. Her long, silky hair and delicate features give her an elegance very few people I know of possess. Again I run my fingers across the sides of her face, committing every single detail to memory. As the visage of my best friend starts to appear in my mind, a tear of joy runs down my cheek.

I've wanted to know for so long.

She must have noticed the effect this has on me, for the corners of her mouth turn slightly upwards, and what appears on her face is the most beautiful smile I've ever witnessed. It's like a child's smile; sweet, innocent and sincere. As I etch that too in my memory, I find it impossible to resist smiling back.

I never knew she could smile like that.

I let my fingers run across her cheeks a third time, determined not to ever forget what I am witnessing, and finally manage to speak.

"So... Hanako... this... this is you..."

She gives a gentle nod, and she replies with a voice that's tranquil and peaceful, her smile never leaving her face.

"This is me. All... of me."

Chapter 17 alt (Hisao)

01

I wonder how Hanako is doing right now.

That thought keeps returning to me as I casually stroll along the running track with my hallmate Kenji in tow. The official excuse is to catch up on what transpired at the science club during my week of absence and fill Kenji in on the reason I was out of commission. But more importantly, my dorm room is being used by Lilly right now to try and patch up her damaged friendship with Hanako, and while I'm not completely sure how much of it can be salvaged in the 24 hours that remain until Lilly's departure to Scotland, I don't want to risk things being ruined by my eccentric neighbor bursting into my room unannounced.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

02

"How can you be so sure that the person who assaulted you wasn't a woman? A feminist or perhaps a lackey hired to take you out."

I wonder how Hanako and Lilly are doing right now.

"It was a guy. A slightly older man on a bicycle. Hana... I mean, people at the scene confirmed it to me later. I don't think he was a feminist."

"The whole thing still smells extremely fishy to me. I mean... Getting body checked in the middle of the street and carried off to who-knows-where... Does that sound normal to you?"

Hanako at least seems relieved that she and I have managed to reconcile after last week's events. I think she's going to need my support after Lilly leaves tomorrow. Despite having pushed Lilly away last week, I have no doubt that Hanako's going to miss her terribly.

"We were in the middle of a downpour, and neither one of us was paying attention. The rainstorm made it kinda hard to see far ahead. It was just a stupid little accident with big consequences."

I sigh inwardly. The idea was to just get an update on what Mutou and Kenji discussed at the science club meetings last week, but it turns out that after my accident, Kenji came to his own conclusions about my absence and shut himself in for the rest of the week. It's still a mystery to me how Kenji can act so ordinary during club meetings and so irrational when we're alone.

"Accident my ass! You were on somebody's hit list, man. It was a coordinated operation. The feminist movement is onto you. I bet that wasn't even a real ambulance that picked you up."

I can't really judge that since I was out like a light at that time, and what I know about that moment is from Hanako's recollection. Since she's still very reluctant to talk about what happened that afternoon, I can't really get into the details.

"It was a pretty real hospital I woke up in though."

"They sent some goons the day after to ransack your room. Or maybe to bug the hell out of it. They're watching you now, man."

That would be Shizune and Misha who asked the dormkeeper for a spare key and got me my possessions and some books to make my stay in the hospital more comfortable. So it turns out that Kenji spotted them. I wonder what he would say if he knew there are two other girls in my dorm room right now. I feel once again that getting Kenji away from the dorm building today has been a very wise move.

"Those were just some girls from my class, picking some stuff up for me."

"You really think I can't tell the difference between students and trained spies? They were dressed like female students for sure, but their mannerisms gave them away."

"How so?"

"They didn't say a single word during the whole operation. They were only communicating in coded gestures, like commandos on a mission."

"Could it be that one of them was a deaf-mute and they were communicating in sign?"

"Maybe. It makes sense to pick a mute person for an infiltration job. When they're captured and interrogated they at least can't blab. Unless you untie their hands first. That's what they're counting on. They're trained for those kinds of situations."

You're completely missing the point.

I fiddle with my cell phone for a bit. I asked Hanako to send me a little text message when they're done. In less than half an hour, I have a talk coming up with Hanako's therapist who asked me to come and see her, if Hanako and I managed to reconcile. She was seeing a client earlier this day though and made it clear she didn't want me to wait outside her office, presumably for the sake of her client's privacy. So until her last appointment is over, at four o' clock apparently, I'm stuck playing along with Kenji's conspiracy theories.

"After they left your room, I knew they'd be coming for me next. I knew they were gonna kidnap me, imprison me somewhere and then send a squad to my room to steal my blueprints and plans for resistance activities. So I locked my door, moved my bed in front of it and got to work on developing a defense mechanism. It's not finished yet, so maybe you can take a look at the designs at the next club meeting."

"Really?"

"It's a very clever contraption. I've hidden my papers in a secret compartment in my desk drawer. To open it, you gotta lift the compartment lid through a hole in the bottom of the drawer using a pen or pencil. If you open the compartment any other way, an electronic circuit is closed that causes the flammable substance inside the contraption to ignite which in turn causes all the incriminating evidence to go up in smoke. I saw it on TV once and thought it was a stroke of genius."

I make a mental note to sabotage that insidious thing (if it even exists) the first chance I get and keep any and all flammable substances far away from Kenji before he accidentally sets the guys' dorm building on fire.

"Sure, I'll help."

"Hey, thanks!"

Kenji seems delighted at my quick offer of assistance, but then suddenly narrows his eyes and takes a step back.

"Something's wrong?"

"You're way too eager to agree all of a sudden. You're usually far more reserved about my plans. This doesn't sound right. Didn't you say they operated on you?"

"Yeah."

"How can I be sure that they didn't install a mind control device while you were out? Maybe you were merely being ordered to agree to help me just now and they'll make you sabotage my device the moment I turn my back."

I'm not quite sure whether to be impressed by Kenji's justified suspicion of me or baffled by the leap of logic he took to explain it.

"They operated on my chest. Doesn't a mind control device usually go in the brain?"

Why am I even arguing with him as if this is a serious conversation topic?

"Hmmm... Maybe not a mind control device then. Probably a tracking device. Definitely a tracking device."

"Why definitely a tracking device?"

"Last Saturday that tall blonde from my class came knocking and told me that you'd be arriving at noon and that they were going to 'welcome you back'. They knew exactly where you were going to be and when. If they were confident enough of the success of their ambush to go and taunt me with it, they had to have placed a device on you somehow that allowed them to pinpoint your location."

It's kinda scary how seamlessly he manages to fit all of last weeks events into one big narrative and still get things completely wrong.

"I'm not sure I want to know but... Since you knew they were setting up an ambush for me, did you do anything to try and thwart them?"

"Sorry man, but I had to set up my own defenses first. In this harsh world, it's every man for himself."

"That's okay. I managed to survive."

"Maybe you were worth more to them alive. With that tracking device inside you, they may be monitoring us right now. Maybe we shouldn't be seen together."

I do my best to suppress a groan and check my watch. It's almost time for my meeting with Miss Takawa. It'll take some time for me to reach the building where the medical staff resides, especially since I'm still forced to take it slowly for a little while, and I think I've heard enough crazy for one day.

"Maybe you should do a perimeter check if that's what worries you. I have an appointment at the nurse's building. I'll have them check me for tracking devices. Why don't you stay behind and make sure I'm not followed? Then you can check your theories for yourself."

"Hey man, that's a great idea. Go ahead and leave. I'll watch your back and then check this place for spies or bugs."

"Sure thing."

As I start making my way to the staff building and see Kenji sneak off into the nearby bushes, I feel a bit guilty about sending him off on a wild goose chase, but after what I've just heard, I can't have him return to the dorms just yet. I can't help but roll my eyes at the irony of it all.

There's a guy out there who believes in mind control devices searching the bushes for spies and cameras right now, and yet I'm the one about to see a therapist.

03

As I reach out to take the bowl of hot tea from the old lady, she gives me a playful smile before putting the bowl in my hands and making a polite bow to indicate it's okay to drink.

"Herbal tea without caffeine. Miss Ikezawa would probably be upset with me if I did anything that might endanger your health. I can't really afford damaging my bond of trust with her."

I take a few careful sips as I look the old woman in front of me over. Last week while I was in the hospital, she dropped by and convinced me to try and reach out to Hanako who shut me out after she broke down a few days earlier. And she asked me to let her know about the outcome.

"When you and Lilly left my hospital room last week, you asked me to come see you if I managed to reconcile with Hanako."

"And since you're here now, I presume you succeeded."

"We're back together again. It turned out I was wrong to think she tried to end our relationship because she couldn't deal with the idea of having a boyfriend who might die on her at any moment."

"Am I correct when I assume that she felt she could no longer uphold your mutual promise of supporting each other in times of need?"

For a second I'm taken aback by the accuracy of her claim. Did she know this the whole time?

"Did Hanako tell you this after you picked her up from the hospital?"

Miss Takawa shakes her head and gives me a sad smile.

"Miss Ikezawa's... mindset is not very different from people who've been in... similar circumstances. I've worked with several of them over the years. Eventually you get a feeling on how they react to certain situations and how they experience them."

"Like boyfriends with heart conditions?"

She chuckles.

"Especially boyfriends with heart conditions."

I take another sip of the hot, but tasty drink and wait for the old lady to continue. I know she didn't merely want to see me to hear the news of our reconciliation. Sensing that I'd like her to get to the point, Miss Takawa scrapes her throat.

"Ahem... whenever a client has a breakdown like Miss Ikezawa had last week, we try to identify the possible causes and do our best to come up with ways to prevent those situations from ever occurring again in the future."

She smiles sheepishly at me for a moment.

"I suppose one way would be to ask you to try and not have any more episodes, but that's probably not a very helpful suggestion."

"I probably could have thought that one up myself."

"So what we should probably focus on is not so much trying to influence your condition, but rather Miss Ikezawa's reaction to it."

"You mean her panic attack?"

"Correct. Her breakdown can be traced to multiple factors. Painful memories resurfacing. Desperation. A feeling of helplessness. Once what was happening to you started sinking in, all those things effectively paralyzed her. And that in turn created a strong sense of guilt afterwards."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"Even though this school has a nursing staff that's on-site 24 hours a day, all employees here such as teachers and other non-medical staff members are still expected to know some basic emergency first responder skills. And every few years they're required to brush up on them. We hire a professional trainer from the nearby hospital a few times a year to instruct our people. The next courses happen to take place the upcoming week. I took them myself last year, but I was thinking it might be a good idea for me to sign up for them again this time..."

"I don't see how that..."

"...and let Miss Ikezawa go in my place."

"What?"

"They're not really meant for students, but I see no practical problems in letting Miss Ikezawa attend. I'll need to consult with the trainer to be sure, of course."

I take a moment to consider the old woman's proposal. Hanako taking first aid classes? I have to admit the idea might have merit. She'd at least no longer feel helpless in a case of emergency. That's assuming she'd remain composed enough to remember whatever it is they'll end up teaching her.

"Do you really think that'll prevent another panic attack from taking place in a situation like last week?"

"No. That's probably unavoidable the way things are right now. The best we can probably hope for is trying to delay it. With luck, and keep in mind there are no guarantees, it'll allow her to keep herself occupied and distracted until the ambulance arrives and it'll prevent her from feeling guilty over any inaction on her part. It would make a massive difference in the aftermath, I believe."

"I think we should take whatever we can get. If Hanako is okay with this, I am too."

"Seeing that this is something that could potentially benefit you in the future, there is no doubt in my mind that Miss Ikezawa will agree to participate in the training."

"Why exactly are you telling me this instead of her?"

"Because if we're going to do this, I might need your signature for something."

"Fair enough."

"Then let's proceed."

Miss Takawa gets up, takes the phone on the table in the corner of the room and makes two phone calls; one to sign herself up for next week's training and another longer one to explain Hanako's situation to the trainer. When she puts down the receiver, she has a satisfied smile on her face.

"The instructor has agreed to let Miss Ikezawa attend in my place and he will do his best to let her get in as much practice as possible."

"That's good to hear. Let's hope she won't get too nervous about attending a class with people she's not familiar with."

"There will only be 7 other people attending from what I've just heard, so it's a relatively small group this time around and there may be a few familiar faces among them."

We finish our tea, and as Miss Takawa takes my bowl from me, she gives me a sincere look.

"The instructor asked me if he could have a look at your medical file before the courses start. Since he's not directly affiliated with Yamaku and this is not an emergency situation, I'm going to need your written consent before I can oblige."

"That's not a problem."

"Good. Let's head down to the administration office and get ourselves a form for you to fill in."

"By the way, do you have any tips on how to act in case she shuts down again?"

"If she does so as a result of you having an episode, I doubt there's much you can do. But if it's something else that causes her to break down, I'd suggest simply holding her."

"Just holding her?"

"Calming her down with words may not help much if she's in a state of irrational stress. Activities such as cuddling cause oxytocin to be released in the brain that will allow her to relax and will lower the sense of stress and fear that she's feeling. In fact, I believe the practice has a benevolent effect on symptoms of post traumatic stress in general, so if she has trouble sleeping or is feeling anxious, this is probably the first thing you should try."

"I certainly don't mind that kind of advice. Anything else?"

Before she can reply, my phone suddenly lets out two loud beeps to indicate a new text message.

"I'm sorry. Can I just...?"

Miss Takawa responds with an affirmative nod and shoots me a curious glance.

"Would that be Miss Ikezawa?"

I take a look at the screen of my phone. It's from Hanako alright. But there's no word on how things turned out. Just a simple "Where are you right now?". I let out a disappointed sigh and send a quick "Nurse staff building, heading for administration office." back.

"I convinced Hanako to give Lilly a chance to smooth things over between them. She and Lilly... Well..."

"I am aware of what happened between Miss Ikezawa and Miss Satou. After we left your room last Friday, Miss Satou offered to treat me to a cup of tea in the hospital's cafeteria, and she took the opportunity to fill me in on her... falling out with Miss Ikezawa and ask me for suggestions. But it's a difficult situation to advise someone on."

She gets up and makes a beckoning motion towards the door to indicate she wants me to follow her downstairs. We leave the office, Miss Takawa locks its door, and we head down the hallway towards the elevator.

"You don't sound particularly optimistic."

"If it hadn't been for Miss Satou's imminent departure, this would have been an ideal opportunity for them to sort out the latent issues in their friendship and come out of it as closer friends. But in order to take those difficult steps, I think they'd need a more inviting prospect than simply a parting on somewhat friendlier terms."

That's pretty much what I've been thinking as well, though I still hold out hope that they can resolve things in some way or another.

"Hanako isn't one to easily trust people. I suspect a part of her has always remained suspicious of Lilly's motives for being so devoted to her."

"Establishing a bond of trust as friends often involves being able to show your vulnerable side to the other person, and I suspect that's not something that comes naturally to Miss Satou."

"She has one alright, but it wasn't until last week that I actually got to see it, and I might have been the only one who witnessed her like that in years. The lengths she goes to to keep up appearances can be pretty unsettling at times."

"It's something we encourage as a society, even in situations where it makes matters more difficult. In addition, Miss Satou has a strong sense of pride. You can tell by the way she behaves and carries herself. And I'm sure it serves her well most of the time. Just... not always."

As we reach the administration area near the building's entrance, the old lady heads up to the desk, exchanges a few words with the girl behind it and is given a form that she signs and then hands over to me before taking a small note for herself.

"By signing this form, you'll give me permission to inform Miss Ikezawa's trainer of the specifics of your condition. That's the short version. You can look it over yourself before putting a signature down there."

I do so, but as expected a lot of the wording on there seems mumbo jumbo to me. I quickly give up on trying to make sense of the whole thing and put my signature on the dotted line near the bottom. I give the form back to Miss Takawa who's still in the process of writing a note to go with the form. As she takes the form from my hands, her gaze suddenly shifts from me to something behind me. I look behind me and see Hanako entering the room, looking somewhat winded. It's been only a few minutes since I sent back that text message. Did she run all the way here?

"Hanako?"

04

Spotting me, Hanako takes a second to catch her breath, then struts over to me and hugs me so tightly I groan in discomfort, her body causing pressure on the wound from the surgery I had last week.

"Ouch! Take it easy. Watch the chest wound!"

Hanako's uncharacteristically bold gesture takes me off guard. The last time she did something like this was after our confession in the park that started our relationship. Does this mean she worked out her differences with Lilly completely? No, it must be something more. Hanako doesn't just look happy, she looks elated. Possibly happier than I've ever seen her before.

"Hanako?"

"Hisao! She's... she's staying! She's r-really staying!"

"Slow down a bit. What are you talking about?"

"Lilly's... staying here. She changed her mind about moving."

"W-what?"

I'm admittedly shocked by this sudden development. Lilly and I have talked a lot over the past week. Mostly about what could still be done to repair her bond with Hanako after the latter lashed out at her. But Lilly's never even once mentioned having seconds thoughts about her decision to leave Japan. And I never suggested to stay here at Yamaku because Hanako has told me in the past that she didn't want Lilly to stay here for her sake alone.

"That's... How? What happened?"

"She... was afraid of d-disappointing her parents. But she n-never really w-wanted to leave herself."

"And you... convinced her to do what she wanted for herself and stay here?"

Hanako doesn't answer and merely stares at the floor, but her smile tells me all I need to know.

"Hanako, you're amazing! You're the best friend Lilly could ever wish for!"

She looks flustered by my exclamation, but I mean every word of it. Of course I'm happy for Hanako, but Lilly has become a close friend to me as well over the last months, and I was very disheartened to see her go myself. Hearing about her decision to stay here after all is a huge relief for me as well. I give Hanako a quick kiss on the cheek to emphasize my approval. Hanako, predictably, blushes profusely and stammers a half-hearted denial.

"N-not r-really... I... um..."

"Miss Hanako?"

The voice of Miss Takawa behind us reminds us there are still other people in the room, and we quickly let go of one another as we turn to face the old woman who's been watching the whole spectacle with an amused smile on her face.

"M-Miss Yumi!"

"That's not what we've been practicing together. I think it's very important that you accept the praise you've earned today. I agree with Mister Nakai that Miss Satou is very lucky to have you."

Her words, spoken in a warm, grandmotherly tone are emphasized by a deep and respectful bow. For a moment, Hanako seems unsure on what to do, fidgeting uncomfortably and unable to look at Miss Takawa directly. Then, after several painfully quiet seconds, she gives a barely visible and meek nod, her gaze still firmly focussed on the floor. The old therapist gives an appreciative nod back and approaches Hanako.

"Congratulations, dear. I'll see you again at the usual time the upcoming weekend. I'm sure we'll have plenty of things to discuss."

After making one more bow for good measure, Miss Takawa takes her leave, and I decide it's better if we get out of here as well after the rather public show we just put on. As we exit the building, I turn to Hanako.

"I have some interesting news for you too, but first I'd really like to hear a few more details on how you reconciled with Lilly."

"Okay."

"Oh... and Hanako?"

"Yes?"

I gently take her hand as we walk along.

"I'm very proud of you."

05

Chapter 18 (Hanako)

01

I nervously pace back and forth in front of the gate, occasionally checking my phone to re-read the message Akira sent me. It said: 'Can we talk for a bit? Front gate.'

Lilly may be staying here, but Akira is still leaving tomorrow. Even though Lilly's decision to remain here has softened the blow a lot, I'm still going to miss Akira. I can't say I'm as close with her as I am with Lilly, and I often felt a bit like a third wheel when Lilly and her sister were hanging out in her room, but nevertheless it was nice to have someone else who'd occasionally talk to me besides Lilly. Even though Lilly is planning to visit Scotland again in the near future, we still decided to hold a small goodbye party for Akira this evening. Lilly, Hisao and I went to town earlier today to shop for a few things - unfortunately neither of us are old enough to buy a few cans of beer for Akira - and we were busy setting things up in Lilly's room when I received Akira's message.

I'm still not completely sure how Akira really feels about Lilly's change of heart. I know how close she and her sister are. Akira practically raised her during the most recent third of her life. Suddenly being half a world apart from her can't be easy.

"Yo!"

I let out an involuntary cry when someone suddenly pats me on the left shoulder from behind.

"A-Akira! Ummm, I mean... Hello Akira."

I must have been pretty distracted by my thoughts for Akira to be able to sneak up on me like that.

"What's with the jumpiness? You knew I was coming, didn't you?"

I merely nod as I look her over. Akira looks slightly more informal right now than she usually does. For one, she's not wearing the jacket and tie she usually has on, and her blouse seems slightly wrinkled too. Akira seems to catch my gaze and smiles.

"Haven't been in the office for a week. I spent most of the time relaxing and hanging out with my little cousin. It was a nice change of pace. Too bad I'll be expected to make up for it when I start at main office in a few days."

"Ummm...Y-you w-wanted to talk?"

Akira gives a cheerful nod and moves over to one of the nearby benches. After sitting down, she reaches into the bag she's been carrying and gets out a can of beer. She chuckles at my dumbfounded stare.

"Didn't think they were gonna sell these to you kids, so I got my own. They should get me through the night. Sit down."

I carefully sit down next to her as she casually opens the can and takes a sip. I don't think she's allowed to drink that on the school grounds, but right now there doesn't seem to be anyone around here but us.

"I bet you're really happy about Lilly staying here. I mean, you looked pretty crushed before when she announced she considered leaving."

I try to gauge Akira's tone for any signs of hostility. I was exhilarated yesterday when Lilly made the decision to stay here, but when I received Akira's message half an hour ago, I was reminded of the fact that I also played a part in separating two sisters who've been extremely close over the last six years.

"I'm s-sorry, Akira."

"Huh? For what?"

"I partially c-convinced Lilly t-to stay h-here. S-so I'm p-partially at fault for you l-losing her."

Akira takes a swig of her beer and smirks.

"Is that why you're so on edge? You thought I was gonna shout at you for helping Lilly reach the conclusion that she'd rather stay here instead of going to Scotland with me?"

Something like that, although the way Akira puts it makes it sound like a pretty unreasonable thing to think.

"Let's get one thing out of the way. I'm gonna miss Lilly, of course, but I'm not upset that she chose to stay here. So stop worrying about that, okay?"

I meekly nod and take a deep breath in an attempt to relax. I feel a bit embarrassed by my occasional habit of assuming the worst about people. Seeing how friendly Akira has always been to me, she certainly deserved the benefit of the doubt.

"Seeing that Sis told me that you two reconciled yesterday, I had a hunch that you were involved in her change of heart somehow. And you pretty much confirmed that just now. So I'm really curious... What exactly happened?"

"Ummm..."

That's a pretty tricky question. I'm not really sure whether Akira got the specifics about my outburst last week that nearly drove Lilly away from me. I'm pretty ashamed about it in hindsight. If Akira is in the dark about the details, I'd like to keep it that way.

"She t-talked to me about your parents. And about them w-wanting to make a new s-start. S-she supported that, but d-didn't want to give up what s-she had here. B-but s-she didn't want to feel responsible f-for keeping you all apart either."

"Giving up everything she has here seems like a very high price for something that might not even happen. A price that I agree isn't even hers to pay. I don't think she's right in blaming herself for our family's failure to come together again. I'm not even sure how viable it was in the first place."

"Lilly s-said she wanted to t-try."

"It's always surprised me how loyal she remains to our parents, for all the good they did us."

I cannot help but take note of how bitter Akira sounds while she's saying it. It makes me wonder about their parents.

"What are t-they l-like?"

"Huh?"

"Hisao said your m-mother s-sounded very friendly on the phone."

Akira doesn't immediately answer. Instead, she looks pensive, and for a moment I can see her eyes stare into the distance.

"I think that if you'd meet them, you'd find them to be pretty friendly and amiable. I don't think it'd be just Lilly's upbringing that causes her to be as loyal to them as she is. But..."

She pauses for a moment and then looks straight at me, causing me to flinch instinctively.

"...sometimes problems in a family are more subtle than people shouting at each other or acting like abusive assholes."

"What do you mean?"

"When we had our first dinner together in six years, Mom asked Lilly if she was still in contact with Kumi. Kumi was Lilly's best friend at the time Mom and Dad left Japan. Lilly merely answered she wasn't."

Akira pauses for a moment and then smiles an impish grin.

"At that point I decided to point something out that Lilly deliberately kept to herself in order to avoid an awkward moment. I mentioned that a few months after Mom and Dad left Japan, Kumi and her family moved to another town, and contact between Lilly and her fizzled out after a few phone calls over the weeks thereafter. Before that evening, maybe Mom and Dad were telling themselves they could pick up where the four of us left off at anytime. But that moment did a pretty good job at highlighting how out of touch we've gotten with one another."

That must have been beyond excruciatingly uncomfortable. I'm really thankful I wasn't there to witness it.

"W-what happened next?"

Akira gives an annoyed shrug.

"There was a painful pause for a second or two, Dad gave me a sharp glare for a moment and then we started talking about the weather. Well, not literally the weather, but a safe subject. I decided not to be the bad guy twice in one evening, so I went along with it. But that tendency to avoid conflicts is pretty telling of how I think our parents plan to get us back together. By encouraging us to pretend they never left us alone in the first place. I don't think it's gonna work like that, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna play along with that."

"Avoiding conflicts?"

"Dad's from a traditional Japanese family, and maintaining peace and harmony through avoidance of conflicts - even ones that shouldn't be avoided - was pretty much the law of life there. But for a family trying to get back together, being good at avoiding uncomfortable subjects is actually a bad thing. I don't even really know what Mom and Dad really think of us. I don't know if this is some sort of official compensation for the past six years or if they really want to be with Lilly."

I take a moment to let Akira's words sink in. Always dodging conflicts is pretty much how, until recently, I often classified Lilly. But yesterday I was forced to reconsider that view. I don't know about Lilly's parents, but Lilly herself has proven yesterday that although she's reluctant to move out of her usual diplomatic comfort zone, she's more than capable of speaking candidly about problems if that's the only way to solve them. Since Akira doesn't seem to be aware of the specifics of Lilly's phone call with her mother, I feel the need to speak up on her behalf.

"Lilly... was very d-direct yesterday while s-speaking with her m-mother. She w-wasn't very comfortable, but she still pulled through."

"What exactly did she say then?"

It's not easy for me to give out the exact details of the conversation, since I've only heard Lilly's half of it myself, but her remarks about the state of her family are still etched in my memory. As I tell Akira

about Lilly's words involving the emotional distance in their family, I can see an expression on her face that's partially amusement, partially surprise, but above all pride in her sister.

"Wow, she really said all that?"

"Yes."

Akira chuckles at her sister's uncharacteristic boldness.

"Man, I'm not that surprised to hear that that's what she's been thinking, but for her to say that out loud and to our parents of all people."

"I t-think she can continue to r-reach out to her parents if she makes the effort."

"It all depends on whether she can continue to be straightforward with them or only when her back is against a wall. And if it's the former, maybe I'll just get lucky, and she'll save some of that straightforwardness for me."

That last part of her sentence comes out as a soft mumble, but it's still loud enough for me to detect it.

"W-what?"

"Sorry, that came out worse than I meant it to. I'm just talking to myself a bit."

"You're not... angry w-with her, are you?"

Akira empties her can and casually tosses it into the nearby wastebin. As she continues, I can sense a touch of gloom in her voice.

"Mostly a tad angry with myself. I never got the impression that Lilly was very enthusiastic about moving, but I've never been able to get her to outright admit that she'd rather stay here either. Seeing that you did manage to get that confession out of her, I kinda feel that you picked up a ball that I dropped. A ball I really shouldn't have dropped. Since my choice probably influenced hers a lot, it was my responsibility to be the one to coax her into that decision she made yesterday. If she'd have entrusted me with how she felt, that's exactly what I would have done. But she didn't, and that kinda stings."

I can't help but feel a little bit surprised at Akira's tone, which is so different from her usual confident-yet-playful attitude. I knew from the fact she practically raised Lilly for years that Akira has a responsible side, but this is one of the first times I've witnessed it myself.

"She d-didn't tell m-me about it until the l-last moment either. So erm..."

I think in fact she only told me because her 'back was against the wall' at the time and she couldn't bear the thought of us parting with me harboring ill feelings towards her. Akira gets the point though, and a teasing smile slowly appears back on her face.

"So I guess a major chewing out is in order here, and I'll be happy to administer it before I leave. But what she did wasn't extremely out of character for her. She's always been reserved about disclosing her own feelings to others or show any signs of vulnerability. Kinda like Dad. And Mom... in her own way. I could have been more - one hell of a lot more - vigilant."

"I... think what's most important is that Lilly ended up d-doing what she wanted for herself. Who m-made it happen, d-doesn't really matter that much."

"You're probably right."

She gets up.

"Sorry to make you listen to all of this."

"That's okay. That's... w-what f-f-friends... are f-for."

I can't manage to make myself look Akira in the eyes as I say this, but Akira merely gives me a soft slap on the shoulder as if to accept and acknowledge what I just said.

02

"Yup, that's what friends are for. You know, I kinda feel bad I'm set to leave the country while you're getting more and more out of your shell. I hope you can keep this up, I really do. I guess I'll find out the next time I drop by here. Which I'm sure I will at some point."

"I'll t-try."

"Good. We should probably head off to Lilly's room. She's likely wondering what's keeping us."

I get up, and Akira reaches for the bag that's been sitting next to the bench, then stops as if she just remembered something.

"Before we go, there's one more thing I think I should say."

"Y-yes?"

Once again, Akira looks me straight in the eye, and when I reflexively look away, she moves a bit to re-establish eyecontact.

"I really appreciate what you did for Lilly the other day. Thanks Hanako. Really."

She finishes her statement with a bow that contains far more grace than I ever suspected Akira of possessing. I fidget nervously. How am I supposed to react to something like that? Hisao, Miss Yumi and now Akira seem to regard me as some sort of hero, but all I did was give Lilly a small peptalk. It was Lilly who did the hard part afterwards.

"Lilly d-deserves most of the c-credit for m-making the phonecall."

"You both ended up doing the right thing at the right time. But I'll be sure to praise her for her part as well."

We start heading towards the girls dorm, and I take advantage of the moment to address something that caught my attention earlier.

"You said... you were going to... d-drop by?"

"Well, I wanna see Lilly from time to time. Hopefully I'll be able to join the occasional business trip to the Japanese branch every now and then."

"That would be nice."

"It's still too early to make promises. In the meantime..."

She playfully gives me a poke with her elbow.

"...you don't mind keeping an eye on my sis while I'm gone, do you?"

"W-W-WHAT?"

My eyes widen in shock as I try to digest Akira's seemingly ludicrous statement. Me keeping an eye on Lilly? Not too long ago Lilly was nothing less than a human crutch for me - my only connection to the rest of the student body and, most likely, to the rest of the world as well. I've been trying to change our relationship lately, and I feel yesterday was a big milestone for both of us, but for Akira to suggest me to suddenly look out for Lilly seems like reality turned upside down.

"I... um.... don't think Lilly needs l-looking after."

Akira seems to have been expecting that reaction and gives a short shrug.

"Most of the time she doesn't. Lilly's a strong person, but she's not infallible. She may be able to handle things herself 99 out of a 100 times, but that one time when she's struggling with something and she's too damn stubborn to call on anyone else, it'll be good to know that there's someone around who has her best interests at heart and to whom she feels close enough to confide things in. I'd say that description fits you to a tee. Probably more than anyone else around here."

"R-really?"

Akira stops walking and gives me a cheerful smile.

"Let me tell you something that happened a little while back. Lilly and I were speaking on the phone, and she noted how much you've changed recently. She liked the change in you, but it was also a bit uncomfortable for her. She didn't want to go back to the times where you were clinging to her as if your life was depending on it, but the fact that the role she was playing in your life was changing so suddenly and rapidly made her feel awkward. *chuckle* I didn't tell her, but I could relate to how she felt. I've been there myself after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Your relationship with Lilly is almost exactly like my relationship with her, except it's one stage behind. Even when we were still living with our folks, I was often the one who had to keep an eye on Lilly, helping her navigate everywhere and occasionally worrying about her. But eventually she started growing more independent, and I was left with the nagging feeling that she was drifting away from me. That was a bit of a rough time for me until I accepted that she wasn't gonna stay my little kiddie sister forever and we should try and become each other's responsibility instead if we didn't want to grow apart. I think in the end we did pretty well, even though part of me will probably always think of her as my younger sister."

That's probably an understatement. On many occasions, Lilly and Akira seem more like best friends than sisters to me, and at times it made me a little envious. I think I would have loved having a sister like Lilly or Akira myself.

"Maybe what happened yesterday was needed to make Lilly realize she has to adapt as well. With luck, the two of you'll soon be at the point where Lilly and I have been for the last couple of years."

I can't help but smile broadly at that suggestion.

"I... really hope so."

Having reached the door to Lilly's dorm room, Akira delivers a few loud taps to announce her presence.

03

"A first aid course?"

We've spent the last two hours hanging out in Lilly's room, eating the cake and sweets we obtained from the store in town this afternoon. Despite it being a supposed farewell party, the mood has been surprisingly relaxed. Akira and Lilly spent most of the time exchanging cheerful banter with Hisao and each other. I, for my part, have been content to just sit and listen to the rest, treasuring the fact that even though Hisao, Lilly and I went through a week from hell, we were able to reconcile and we are able to sit here and spend time together once more, our bonds not just repaired but actually strengthened. Due to the fact that just a week ago I had been convinced that I'd never be able to face Lilly or Hisao again, I've grown to value the time we're spending together even more. Eventually the conversation turned to my upcoming training courses which Akira was keen on learning more about.

"Y-Yes. It's usually for staff members only, but the trainer will make an exception for me."

"Sounds interesting. Or at least useful. Especially around here. How long is it gonna take?"

"Five days."

"For just the basics? That seems kinda long."

"I think they want to reserve a lot of time f-for practice."

"And when will this training be taking place?"

"Next week."

"Well, good luck. Let's hope you'll never be forced to make use of it."

Akira gives Lilly a soft poke in the ribs with her elbow to get her attention.

"Hey Sis, can I have another beer?"

Lilly reaches into Akira's bag, which is lying next to her, takes out a can of beer and hands it to her sister.

"It is a bit of a shame that you didn't bring any of that tasty wine along this time. We could have performed a toast to your promotion."

Akira smirks at her sister's remark as she opens her can with a popping sound.

"A toast, huh? Didn't take you long to get hooked on the grape."

"I will admit I like a glass every once in a while, but hooked is probably a bit of an exaggeration."

That remark causes Hisao and me to exchange amused glances. Both of us remember the occasions when Lilly invited us to share a glass of wine together during our time in the Satou summerhouse, her eagerness pretty apparent even then. Akira doesn't miss our gesture and lets out a soft snicker at her sister's expense.

"Tell you what. We'll save the toasts until you get to Scotland, and I'll take you out for some truly tasty drinks."

This is the first time this evening that Lilly's upcoming trip to Scotland has been brought up. Yesterday, after telling her mother she wanted to stay in Japan, Lilly promised to come over again in an attempt to bridge the divide between herself and her parents that was created over the last six years. Eager to hear more details, Hisao addresses Lilly.

"So, you're really going back there for a little while, huh?"

"Yes. I don't believe things are as black and white as me having to choose between sacrificing my life here or sacrificing the bond with my family. I hope I can do my part to repair the bond I used to have with my parents while I'm there and then maintain it through contact over the phone while I'm attending school here."

"So do you have any idea when you'll be going? Vacation is about to start, and you don't travel to the other end of the world for just a few days, do you? You'd want to stay for at least two weeks."

"Akira has looked into the possibilities, and I'll be leaving on Saturday next week. I intend to stay for three weeks or so."

Three whole weeks. That's pretty much my entire vacation, seeing that I'll be attending those first aid courses during the entire upcoming week. I was really hoping to have some time during the vacation to spend with Lilly myself, but I guess it can't be helped. It's not like she can visit her parents at any time she chooses. I suppose I should be glad she'll be here for the rest of the school year.

"I hope you'll have fun there."

"Thank you Hisao. Do you and Hanako have any plans for the vacation?"

Hisao and I share a quick look, and then we both shake our heads.

"Not really. We've saved enough to go on a few dates, but other than that I don't have any plans."

"Me neither."

Akira gives us a sheepish grin in response.

"We'd let you borrow the keys to the summer home, but unfortunately that place was sold around the time Lilly announced her departure to you guys, sooooo..."

Lilly finishes her sister's sentence as if the two have been practicing the part.

"...we were wondering if you two would consider accompanying me to Scotland for a few weeks instead."

Hisao and I exchange a puzzled glance, both of us trying to figure out if Lilly's serious or not. A round trip to Scotland is way beyond the budget of either of us, and Lilly must know that.

"Err, Lilly... I'm not sure about the exact price of a plane ticket, but I'm positive they'd cost Hanako and me an arm and a leg. Not that we'd be hurting for potential buyers around here, but still..."

Lilly, Akira and I all share a laugh at Hisao's remark, but then Lilly indicates that she likes to say something.

"Intercontinental flights are never particularly cheap, but would you two be willing to come along if the costs were not a concern?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that my family is willing to cover the costs of the flight for the two of you."

WHAT? I take a look at Hisao to see if his reaction is anything like mine, and his shocked expression tells me Lilly's announcement took him completely off guard as well.

"B-but... H-how did you... W-why w-would they...?"

The Satou sisters seem to have a lot of fun taking in our baffled reactions, and it feels like minutes until Akira speaks up, still grinning at the look of shock on Hisao's and my own face.

"Well, you probably knew this already, but our family's pretty well-off financially. Heck, the sale of the summer home alone probably brought in enough money to invite half the school along if we wanted to. So the costs of the tickets aren't that big a deal here. And Lilly's going to need someone to accompany her to make sure she boards the right plane at the right time. We could try and arrange for people from the airline to do that, but it's a hassle and our folks would feel better if she's accompanied by friends instead who accompany her from Yamaku, through London Heathrow all the way to Inverness Airport. Frankly, I would too."

That's a pretty good point. Lilly can get around Yamaku and the nearby town just fine and can even navigate the city with some effort, so I completely forgot about the fact that an airport would still be a daunting obstacle to her.

"I would have liked to stay in Japan for another one and a half week and accompany her myself, but since I've already postponed my departure for a week, I can't afford any more delays. Heck, the folks are probably already out for my blood enough as it is."

Lilly's smile drops for a moment.

"Was Father very upset?"

"You know he has this thing about running a really tight ship. Me suddenly deciding to stay away for a week longer has messed up several people's schedules, and the person who's going to teach me the ropes might have to delay his summer break for a week. If Dad had his way, I'd be over there already. I called my future colleague myself last week to apologize for the inconvenience, and he said it wasn't a problem. Dad will just have to learn that not every inconvenience I cause creates a permanent blemish

on our family's good name, and what he perceived as a major loss of face was actually a minor issue for the people concerned."

Akira shrugs.

"But I WILL be under pressure to make up for lost time once I'm there, and I won't be in a position to take two days out of my schedule to fly over to Japan and pick up Lilly. Not during the impeding takeover."

I can see Lilly perk up at the last part of Akira's statement.

"Hmmm? A takeover? You've never mentioned that before. When did you hear about that?"

"I didn't mention it before because it didn't seem relevant before. I've known about the plans for quite some time even though this doesn't directly concern the Japanese branch of the company. Head office is planning to acquire a business similar to ours located in the United States. They're in the middle of negotiations with that company's board of directors and with possible investors. Things are bound to get pretty hectic for them and for me, it seems. While Mom said she and Dad are going to try their hardest to shuffle their schedule around to spend some time with you, I wouldn't count on getting to hang out with them 24/7 - particularly not with Dad. Some additional company may be desirable from time to time."

Lilly smiles her warmest smile at both of us.

"And no company could be more desirable than present company. For me, it would make the difference between a good vacation and a wonderful vacation. So, what do you think? Will you come to Scotland with me?"

I'm still trying to come to terms with Lilly's completely unexpected proposal. I shoot a quick glance at Hisao who turns to Akira.

"Are you expecting a definite decision from us right now?"

"I know it's sudden, but yeah, that'd be great. If you're not feeling up to it then no harm done, but then I'll have to arrange something else on a short notice. If you are, I'll be able to make all the necessary arrangements while I'm at the airport tomorrow. There's a lot of work piling up on my desk on the other side of the world as we speak, and I'd like to get this thing over and done with before I get there."

I start feeling a bit uneasy by the sudden pressure to make such a big decision here and now, but Hisao turns to me with an excited smile on his face.

"Hey Hanako, what do you say? Want to go on vacation to Scotland together with Lilly and me?"

It sounds like one of us has already decided. This would be the first time for me to travel this far away from home. I've never even been out of the country before, and now we're given the opportunity to literally travel to the other end of the earth, to stay in an unfamiliar place. The Satous' summer home in Hokkaido was also unfamiliar at first, but that was just the three of us. Now we'll be staying with other people, in a country with a completely different culture and a language I don't speak fluently. And before we get there, we'll have to travel through several crowded airports, including one of the busiest airports in the world.

"Um...well..."

But then again, ever since I joined the newspaper club, I've been playing with the thought of studying journalism. I'd never be able to stand in front of a camera or push a microphone in someone's face, but I think I'd like the writing aspect of it. But what would I write about if I'm too nervous to go and explore the world beyond my familiar little room? If I can't even visit an unfamiliar place with my two closest friends by my side, I'd probably be best off seeking another educational road altogether. If anyone can ease my nerves, it's Lilly and Hisao. And I think I'd genuinely enjoy taking a vacation with the two most important people in my life.

"I...I think I'd like that."

The three dazzling smiles I get in return to my answer confirm I made the right decision.

04

Chapter 19 (Hanako)

01

I look from the form in my hand to the room number on the small metal sign next to the door several times to make certain I have the right classroom. I'm nervous enough as it is, and accidentally walking into the wrong room and getting caught in a crossfire of glances would probably kill my resolve to make it through the day outright. Today is the first day of my first aid training, and although Miss Yumi gave me some general information, I have absolutely no idea what to expect. Telling myself that vacation has started and if I got the wrong classroom, it'll probably just be empty, I open the door a bit and carefully peek inside.

The first thing that draws my attention is the fact most of the desks and chairs have been moved to one corner of the room except for a handful of chairs that are positioned in a row near a flip chart, a beamer and several large bags that look remarkably like body bags. The second thing is that there are four people here already. I can see two men I don't recognize talking to each other near the window and two teachers, a fit-looking man whom I recall being a PE teacher and a woman with short hair, sitting on the chairs near the beamer. I tiptoe into the room, trying hard not to attract attention and approach the chair at the far right end of the row. Before I can sit down, the short-haired woman, whom I recognize as Lilly's homeroom teacher and our English teacher, notices me, frowns and walks up to me.

"Good morning Ikezawa. Do you have business with someone here?"

I softly shake my head at her.

"Is there a first aid training here today?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Why?"

"I'm participating too."

The teacher looks puzzled.

"Are you certain about that? These courses are for staff members only."

I meekly nod.

"Miss Takawa said she arranged it."

The woman frowns again, then concludes this probably isn't her business to worry about, sits down again and resumes her conversation with her colleague. I sit down, take a library book out of my bag and try to read a few pages in order to calm my nerves. Two more people enter. One is another person I don't recognize but who is enthusiastically greeted by the two men who were talking near the window. The other is somewhat overweight, has silver-gray hair and wears a colorful tie. He sits down on the chair next to me and greets me with a grin that makes me flinch. Just as I prepare to open my book again and use it to hide behind, a man in his mid thirties comes walking in with what appears to be another bodybag in his arms and a big backpack over his shoulder. He gets to our corner of the classroom, puts the bag and backpack on the floor, checks his watch and then walks up to the door and closes it. He walks over to us again, clears his throat and then makes a polite bow which we return.

"Good morning everyone. I see it's nine o' clock right now, so I suggest we simply start now even though we're still one person short. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Kensuke Nakamura, and I am a first aid trainer employed at the nearby hospital. This is the fourth year I've been giving these courses here. The course planned for this week has been scheduled to take up five days, mostly because I intend to try and give all of you plenty of opportunity for additional practice which is what we'll be concentrating on in the last two days. Those of you who have participated in my training before and are merely brushing up can get by with only attending here until Wednesday."

I wonder how many of this group will remain after the first three days. I suppose private lessons on Thursday and Friday would be too much to hope for.

"Let me start by checking who's in attendance right now. Fujimoto."

"Yes."

"Hamasaki."

"In attendance."

Those names don't ring a bell. They're probably administrative staff.

"Ikezawa, filling in for Takawa."

I quietly raise my left hand to indicate my presence. As I do so, I can see Lilly's homeroom teacher giving me a nod and a smile from the corner of my eye.

"Inaba."

"Yes."

Somebody else working at the administration? He seemed to be friends with the other two I didn't recognize.

"Miyagi."

"Attending."

"Nishihama."

"Yes."

"Nomiya."

"Good to see you again."

"Well, that seems to be everyone for now. Before I start with the first subject, let me lay out the topics we'll be covering in the upcoming days as well as the day-to-day schedule."

Nakamura opens his backpack and takes several ring binders out of it, giving one to each of us. Thumbing through my own, I see a myriad of illustrations, photos and accompanying text. I get a bit queasy when my eye catches a photo of a particularly nasty open wound. Not everything here is material suitable for reading during lunch.

"I'll start by introducing you to my associates and your practice partners for the upcoming days."

The trainer gives a wink and then walks over to the large bags he luggered in here not too long ago. He opens them, and I can see I wasn't really far off the mark when I likened the bags to body bags. Inside each bag is a large practice dummy, about the size of a regular person, each of them fully clothed.

"Unfortunately, I don't have enough of them for each of you to have your own dummy, so we're going to be working in pairs. Or rather one group of three and two pairs."

We're getting to a part that I really hate. Making groups. Ever since elementary school, this has meant that other people make groups, and I'm the leftover that people reluctantly take if it suits them. I see the three people who greeted each other at the beginning of class bunching together, meaning the trio's already a done deal. Next, I see the PE teacher who was talking to Miss Miyagi earlier give her a playful nudge that she responds to with a quick nod. In less than five seconds, the groups seem to have been determined already. And my practice partner, the flamboyant art teacher, approaches me with a smile that feels part jolly and part predatory to me.

"It seems you're stuck with me for the upcoming days. If you have any questions, just ask. I've followed this training several times in the past, so none of these things are new to me. I'm sure we'll work well with one another."

I'm not quite so sure. He's friendly and enthusiastic alright, but something about him makes me extremely uncomfortable. If this wasn't for Hisao's sake, this might have been the moment where I'd have bolted from the room.

"So, you're one of Takawa's wards, aren't you? Is this some sort of alternative therapy she's experimenting with?"

He laughs just a little bit too loudly at his own remark, but I find myself cringing. Of course, everyone in the room who knows Miss Yumi's occupation probably figured out my relationship with her in an instant, but I'm not particularly proud of the fact that I need therapy sessions, and I don't like it when other people bring them up.

Mister Nakamura scrapes his throat and everyone sits down again.

"Very well. Now that we've made pairings, I'd like to give a quick summary of what we'll be doing the upcoming days."

"We're going to start with some general instructions on how to act in an emergency situation and what actions to avoid. We'll also get into the practice of checking for vital signs."

My mind wanders briefly, revisiting that moment when Hisao was lying on the street in front of me and I couldn't move a muscle. Will this whole training make a difference? Will I even remember what's being taught here when faced with the pressure of a real life emergency?

"Next up is one of the most prominent parts: how to perform CPR on someone and how to handle the artificial respiration that's part of it. We'll make sure to get plenty of practice in with the dummies I have here."

I wasn't exactly thinking clearly that time. What if something happens again, and I fail to recall what I'm being taught here? Won't that make me feel like an even bigger failure?

"Tomorrow we'll start with instructions on emergency treatment of wounds. I will talk about how to stop extensive bleeding and how to limit the risk of infections."

He chuckles for a moment.

"I hope nobody's prone to fainting spells when they see blood."

I think I'll be okay.

"After that, we'll move on to emergency treatment of...erm..."

Strangely enough, Nakamura doesn't finish his sentence and seems unsure on how to proceed. As I look at the others I can tell that I'm not the only one who's puzzled as to why he's suddenly stumbling at what should be an easy summary for anyone who's ever given a training before.

"...the emergency treatment of...?"

The trainer seems lost in thought for a moment, then gives a short shrug and proceeds.

"Ahem. After ordinary wound treatment, we'll cover the emergency treatment of burn injuries."

02

I feel a sharp shock slam through my body as if someone just walked up to me and pounded me in the chest with a sledgehammer, and I spring to my feet as if someone just hammered a nail through the bottom of my seat, my eyes widening in shock. No wonder he was lost on how to continue. He was trying to figure out how he's going to spend an hour detailing the various degrees of burn wounds all the while a miserable exhibit A is sitting right in front of him. Of course, my reaction draws the attention of the rest, merely contributing to the sense of panic that starts welling up inside me. As my hands start shaking uncontrollably, I am gripped by one all-consuming thought.

I HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!

Struggling to stay on my feet, I manage to stammer the only thing that pops into my head as I head for the exit...

"I... I... have... to go do something!"

...only to nearly collide with someone who seems to be in as much of a hurry to get into the room as I am to get out of it.

03

"I'M SORRY!"

Taken aback by this person's sudden entrance, I stare in bewilderment as she makes an apologetic bow that's almost deep enough for her nose to touch her toes.

"I found out this morning that I put the keys to the library in the wrong person's pigeon hole, so my replacement for this week couldn't get the library doors open until we tracked down the person who had my keys, and when we found him he told us he just dropped the keys back in my own pigeon hole and..."

For a few seconds the entire room is silent as everyone is trying to digest what just happened, and for a moment I'm too confused to remember I was in the middle of an attempt to flee the room in terror. As the woman in front of me lifts her head, I'm surprised to see a familiar face.

"Y-Yuuko?"

"Hanako? What are you doing here? Isn't there supposed to be a first aid training for Yamaku staff here?"

Suddenly, a panicked expression appears on her face.

"I didn't just barge into the wrong room again, did I? It's happened to me before."

"Umm... N-no."

A soft chuckle from one of the others breaks the awkward silence in the room and a moment later, I can hear our trainer walk up behind me.

"Welcome Shirakawa. Good of you to join us. Please take a seat. I was just giving a brief summary of the topics we'll be covering this week."

Making another apologizing bow to Mister Nakamura, Yuuko nervously walks past me and takes a seat on one of the empty chairs. Instead of walking back to his spot, Mister Nakamura softly addresses me.

04

"Can I have a moment, Ikezawa?"

Without waiting for an answer, he walks out the door and beckons me to follow him. After we're both outside earshot range of the others, he makes an apologizing bow very much like Yuuko's.

"I'm sorry for what just happened before Miss Shirakawa showed up. I suppose this is what people would call an oversight. I wasn't quite sure how to handle it. Miss Takawa explained your situation to me, but didn't share a lot of information about you."

I merely nod my head, not sure how to react to his statement. Apparently Miss Yumi didn't mention to him that I'm a burn victim.

"I can understand why an information session about the subject I just spoke of would be extremely awkward for you to attend. Unfortunately, if I want the certificates we hand out at the end of the training to have any value whatsoever, I will have no choice but to cover the entire program. I cannot ignore that fact."

"I... understand."

I certainly wouldn't want him to pander to my problems by skipping a major portion of his training. Besides, if he were to end up skipping that part, it'd be immediately obvious to everyone but Yuuko why he did it.

"So here's what I'd like to propose. I'm going to shift the order of the lessons so the course about burns is the last thing I'll be covering tomorrow. Before we get there, we'll be taking a short break and that's where you can call it a day. On Thursday or Friday, when only the first-timers remain, I'll take the opportunity to give you a short private lesson about the part that you missed while the rest practices the material we've been covering."

"Is t-that... okay?"

"I think it's a bit early to throw in the towel. Walking away might seem tempting right now, but you might feel bad about it if you ever get involved in a situation where the knowledge I'm looking to impart this week can make a difference."

That's a good point. If I opt out now and Hisao has another episode in my presence in the future, I don't think I'd ever be able to forgive myself.

"O-kay then."

"Good. Let's head back inside and get things back on track."

I follow him back into the classroom and return to my seat. Mister Nakamura doesn't waste any time picking up where he left off.

05

"Getting back to this week's material, the next part we'll be covering will be what to do in cases of exposure to toxic substances. On Wednesday, we'll spend some time on cases involving bone and joint injuries as well as how to act in case someone's choking. Finally, I'll go over a variety of situations involving specific medical conditions such as epileptic seizures, diabetic emergencies and allergic reactions."

That last part sounds rather interesting, seeing that I currently have an epileptic as editor-in-chief.

"Seeing that all eight of you are currently here, we can split into four pairs and we'll have just enough dummies for each group to use one."

I can see one of the people who formed a group of three head towards Yuuko, who turns to Mister Nakamura and raises her hand.

"Teacher, would it be okay with you if I paired up with Ikezawa? We know each other fairly well."

"If she's okay with that, I am too."

I breathe a quiet sigh of relief and quickly nod my head. The art teacher gives an indifferent shrug and then walks over to Yuuko's initial partner. Nakamura takes the practice dummies out of their bags and carries three of them to a different corner of the room and then puts one in the center. As Yuuko and I walk to one corner, I give her a grateful look.

"Umm... thanks."

Yuuko smiles at me.

"When I came in, that person who was going to pair up with me was chuckling at me. Since I'm a bit accident prone, I'd like a partner who isn't going to laugh at me when I screw up."

She gives me a wink.

"Also, Nomiya's nice enough, but he creeps me out a bit, so..."

I give her a small smile. Truth be told, I'm often at a loss on how to handle Yuuko's erratic mood swings, but currently there's no other person in the room I'd rather be paired up with. It feels comforting to know I'll be working with someone who won't judge me for my skittish behavior. I suppose it feels good for her as well to pair up with someone who won't judge her. As we sit down on the floor next to the dummy, Nakamura walks to the center of the classroom.

"Before we start the first part, I'd like to hold a short introduction. What we teach here won't make you a perfect substitute for a doctor or a trained nurse. The goal of first aid in case of an emergency is to stabilize the victim until professional help arrives. Therefore, have your cell phone with you and call the ambulance before tending to the victim or let someone else on the scene make the call. Well-meaning attempts by non-trained civilians to help an injured person, for example by moving the injured person after a traffic accident or removing a puncturing object from a wound, have been known to make matters worse, so if you see someone trying to help in such a way, make sure to stop them quickly and tell them that you've received first-responders training."

He looks around the classroom.

"So, for short. In case of an accident or if anybody collapses in front of you, there are three simple steps. One, always call an ambulance. Two, check for vital signs, and do a quick checkup to see what can be done to stabilize a person's condition. Three, perform the appropriate actions while waiting for the ambulance to arrive, and don't leave an injured person alone."

Beckoning us to watch his actions, he kneels down next to the dummy in the center of the room and places his fingers on its left wrist.

"First thing to do in case of an emergency is to see if the person is still responding and check for vital signs if that's not the case. Specifically the victim's pulse and whether or not he's still breathing. We can check a person's pulse by putting two fingers on this spot right here just beneath the victim's wrist joint. Or we can go for the spot here at the throat."

Pausing for a bit to make sure we all got the point, he then carefully moves the dummy's arm and leg a bit before rolling it on its side.

"If the person has a pulse and is breathing, you'll want to put them in the recovery position like this. This'll make certain the victim can't suffocate on his own tongue or whatever it is he recently ate that might get vomited back out. Always watch the head. And be sure to remove or loosen any pieces of clothing that might hamper breathing."

He gets up and cracks his knuckles.

"Let's practice these actions for a few minutes. I'll walk around and give feedback where necessary. Once everybody's got it right, we'll move on to CPR, which is the interesting part and..."

He takes out a green bag with the picture of a thunderbolt on top of a heart in the middle and the letters SMT in one corner.

"...we'll break up the practice with a demonstration on how to use a defibrillator."

Yuuko and I exchange a glance.

"Do you want to go first?"

I give a quick nod back.

"O-kay."

06

Huff - huff - huff

"Two minutes this time, Shirakawa."

Yuuko looks up at the trainer while rubbing her arms.

"I-is that good or bad?"

"It depends on whether the paramedics have already arrived on the scene or not. Movies like to pretend CPR involves pushing a victim's chest a few times and then they cough and get up good as new. But spontaneous revivals are rare occurrences. In reality, you're supposed to keep going until the ambulance arrives or you're too exhausted to continue."

It's that last part that actually has me terrified. I already know what it felt like to just sit there and be unable to do anything while Hisao was slipping away from me. I don't ever, ever want to find out what it feels like to have some paramedic tell me they could have saved Hisao's life if I would have only lasted one more minute.

"You were doing well, Ikezawa. Though you were probably a little bit too gentle. I don't think those were compressions of 5 centimeters. Try pressing deeper the next time. Remember: if a victim complains about his ribs hurting afterwards, it means you've done something right."

"I-I'll try."

Nakamura gives a friendly nod and then claps his hands in order to get everyone's attention.

"I think that's enough for now, people. You can review the material we've covered today by reading page 4 until page 32 of the binder I gave you. For those of you interested in testing your aptitude on the various subjects, I'll have a few small optional written tests you can take on Thursday and Friday. Let's call it a day for now. No need to worry about the dummies, I'll put them away myself later."

As I get up, I rub my sore arms. Those CPR practice sessions really made me wish I was more athletic. Still, aside from the rough start this morning, I think I learned a lot of valuable things. And Yuuko proved to be a pleasant, although panic-prone, partner. As we leave the classroom, she gives me a comforting smile.

"Will you be here tomorrow too?"

"Y-yes."

Checking the time, I conclude that Hisao's probably still at the science club. I consider going to the library to kill some time, but then decide to drop by the newspaper club first. Seeing that summer break has already started, I don't expect there to be much activity, but I still need to know if I missed anything important. As I slowly open the door to the classroom that's home to our club and peek inside, I can see Naomi Inoue and Natsume Ooe, my two neighbors in class, relaxing and sharing some drinks with a tall, but frail-looking girl with long, brown hair in a simple ponytail and a red-and-white cap on her head whose name is Jun Yamazaki. She's the girl I was initially drafted to replace for a little while as assistant editor.

As I enter, I'm greeted by three friendly waves, Jun's being emphasized by the white orthopedic cast around her hand. Jun, a second year student here, is one of the reasons the computer lab is almost never completely deserted. She's a bit of a whiz kid whose knack for computers far exceeds my own, and she joined the newspaper club for the specific purpose of getting to do the editing jobs. Last week we ended up working together a few times to put the latest issue of the school newspaper together. I'm not completely comfortable around her yet, but due to her skinny build and her usually quiet demeanor, her presence is not exactly threatening either. When I was first invited into the club, I learned that Jun suffers from osteoporosis and is very prone to breaking bones as a result of minor falls that other people would simply shrug off.

"Hey there Hanako. All done for today? How was the training? What did you learn?"

As usual, Naomi's quick to fire off a verbal torrent of questions.

"It was pretty useful. We learned about...ummm...checking someone's pulse and doing CPR."

"Any familiar faces there?"

"Yuuko was there. And ummm...Miyagi. And Fujimoto. And erm... N-Nomiya as well."

Naomi throws me a mischievous wink.

"Soooo... Did you guys have to practice mouth-to-mouth breathing? On each other? Did you see any teachers doing it?"

My eyes grow wide in disturbed shock at the mental image that Naomi's remark conjures up, but it's apparently highly amusing to her, for she bursts into giggles after a short moment of silence.

"N-no... ummm..."

As I struggle to figure out how to respond to Naomi's inane suggestion, I notice how Natsume and Jun both shoot her a dirty glare.

"Will you... please stop... polluting my brain with that kind of stuff?"

Natsume's scolding doesn't really seem to impress Naomi as she giggles at her own joke.

"Oh, come on. I thought it was funny."

Jun turns to me.

"They have big dolls for that kind of thing, don't they?"

I sigh in relief at Jun's attempt to steer the subject in a different direction.

"Y-yes. Practice dummies. We... used them to practice CPR too."

Naomi, apparently deciding to drop the previous subject, gives a quick nod.

"Sounds like your day was more interesting than ours. We ended up sharing the distribution duties with the student council. When we finished printing the last issue and dropped everything off at the council room, we caught Hakamichi in the middle of packing for summer break. She insisted we help out in order to guarantee everyone got a copy in time."

"W-wasn't the printing supposed to take place later this week?"

"According to the official schedule, yeah. Practically speaking, waiting that long would have been really stupid."

"How so?"

Naomi shrugs casually.

"Well, summer break started this week. Right now, lots of students are still busy tying up loose ends and packing their bags, but I'm betting that within a matter of days nearly half of the student body will have gone home for the summer, and this school will be one hell of a lot emptier. Meaning that half our batch would just end up gathering dust. But now we got people a copy just before they're leaving here..."

"...they're likely to take it along, so they have something to read during the trip back home."

Naomi smiles, pleased that I picked up on her train of thought.

"Bingo."

Natsume fiddles with her glasses for a moment.

"I'll be here until Wednesday. Naomi said she and Jun will be heading home the upcoming weekend."

"Yup, so if you need to unwind from the whole changing-bandages-and-compressing-chests thing, you know where to find us."

"Ummm... Thanks."

As I turn to leave the room, Natsume gets up and hands me four copies of the latest edition - three ordinary ones and one with larger font for visually impaired students.

"While we were out there handing out newspapers, Naomi deliberately skipped the science club. She thought you'd want to be the one to hand them the latest issue."

I haven't seen Mutou smile very often. I think he looks a bit strange when he does. And as I hand him one of the newspapers I've brought along, which he very eagerly takes, his expression almost becomes a grin. Feeling a bit unnerved by it, I quickly turn to Hisao who was working on a sophisticated-looking circuit diagram together with Kenji until I came into the room.

"What's got him so excited?"

Hisao, unlike Kenji, has noticed Mutou's expression who's now gleefully thumbing through the paper, and he seems genuinely puzzled by it. In response, I simply hand him his copy.

"It's on p-page 5."

As Hisao starts flipping the pages of his copy, I give Kenji his visually-impaired edition. He takes it with a suspicious look in his eyes that puts me slightly on edge. Hisao, having reached the page that contains my column, looks surprised.

"Club in the spotlight?" Hey, this is about the science club! But what...?"

I smile bashfully.

"M-my first article."

"Huh? I thought you were merely helping out with the editing."

"Ikezawa approached me a little while back for some information about this club for a small article in the next issue of the school newspaper. But it's a lot larger than I thought. You never said it was going to be a column."

"Naomi... liked the g-general idea, so we turned it into a c-column that will cover a new club each issue."

Mutou gives me an approving look.

"This will certainly give our club some much-needed exposure. With luck, we'll get a few new members out of it."

Hisao looks delighted by Mutou's prediction, but I notice that Kenji suddenly looks terrified, and he taps Hisao on the shoulder.

"We gotta talk, man. We can't be taken off guard by this thing. We gotta prepare."

"Not now, Kenji. We'll have plenty of time to talk later. I doubt we'll get any reactions before the end of summer break."

Kenji shrugs and walks out of the room. Though I don't get involved with Kenji a lot, I really can't wrap my head around his behavior. I've asked Hisao about it several times, but he usually just rolls his eyes and urges me not to think too much of it. As the sound of Kenji's footsteps fades away, my attention shifts back to the other people in the room who seem significantly more appreciative of my actions.

"I believe this club is indebted to you, Ikezawa. I obviously can't give you a straight 100% for your next test as a sign of appreciation as that'd be against the regulations, but... hmmmm..."

He thinks for a moment, then snaps his fingers.

"I will be going for some coffee. Nakai?"

"Sir?"

"Please kiss Ikezawa on my behalf."

Wait, what?

Hisao chuckles.

"With pleasure, sir."

07

Mutou walks out of the room and before I can react, Hisao has wrapped one of his arms around me and uses his other hand to gently push my chin up before giving me a tender kiss on the lips. I freeze up for a moment, more than a little bit embarrassed by the fact that we're in a classroom, but I then close my eyes and accept the kiss. Not letting go of me just yet, Hisao pulls me even closer and softly whispers in my ear.

"Hanako?"

"Y-yes?"

"You'll get my own kisses later today."

"O-okay."

"And Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

A happy smile appears on my face as I return Hisao's hug. I hope Mutou is going to stay away for a little while, because I want to enjoy this moment for as long as I can.

08

Chapter 20 (Hanako)

01

My eyes go back and forth between three illustrations of a person lying on the ground, each one in a slightly different position. The idea is to cross off the picture of the optimal recovery position, but picture B and C look really similar except for a slight difference in the angle of the head. Doing my best to recollect the position of the practice dummy during our excercises last Monday, I pick illustration B and move on to the next question.

I'm currently the only person in class right now, except for the trainer. Everyone was present during the first three days, but the day afterwards only Yuuko, a staff member whose name I forgot and I were there, the three of us obviously being the only ones completely new at this. And this day, the last day of the training, it's just me. Mister Nakamura took the opportunity this morning to make good on his promise and give me a private course through the chapter I skipped earlier this week. The chapter about burns and how to act in situations like someone's clothes catching fire or coming into contact

with boiling water. The fact nobody else was in the room was probably the reason I didn't run out, lock myself in my room and hide under my bed. Even so, I felt utterly miserable and ready to start screaming throughout the whole ordeal and was happy Nakamura did his best to go through it as quickly as possible without showing pictures or going into any more detail than absolutely necessary. Now I'm busy taking a few small written tests to see how much of the whole thing stuck in there.

The next question I get to involves the correct procedure to follow when someone has gotten a corrosive substance in his eyes, but before I can take a good look at the corresponding illustrations, I hear a sharp beep coming from the trainer's desk. I get up as fast as I can, run over to a practice dummy in the corner, put my ear to its mouth, then put my fingers on its throat and finally put my hands on its chest before pressing down hard several times.

"Well done. You're doing it faster and more fluidly each time. Just remember to keep pressing down hard. You're not a muscle-bound PE teacher, so it's best not to hold back."

I give a subdued nod at the teacher's praise and get back to my desk to resume work on the test. This rather unusual practice drill was an idea of Mister Nakamura who thought that instead of structured rehearsals, I'd be better off practicing at random intervals so I could learn how to act when taken by surprise. So we agreed that every time he set off his ringtone, I'd run up to one of the dummies and go through the motions until they become a second nature.

Back at my desk, I pick up my pen again and hurry to finish the remaining four questions on my answer sheet. I quietly drop it on Nakamura's desk, which results in a satisfied nod.

"It won't take too long to correct this last one, Ikezawa. Why don't you wait around a bit until I'm finished and we can tie this whole thing up with a nice bow around it?"

"O-kay."

I return to my desk, fiddling with my hair a bit.

"N-no more practice drills?"

"You've done more than enough of them throughout the week already. I think you have the motions down. I doubt doing any more drills will benefit you much. All that's left would be an actual emergency to test you. And I hope you won't ever get into that situation."

I really hope so too. I'm still not too confident in my ability to handle such a situation.

"If it makes you feel better... Panicking is a pretty common reaction to someone suddenly collapsing. It happens to a lot of people."

That doesn't make me feel better at all. If Hisao has a heart attack in front of me and I shut down because of it, it won't matter to me if it's a common reaction or not. It won't make my failure any more acceptable to me.

"By the way, your previous test was 81%. That's a pretty good score. Looks like you've done your homework."

"T-thanks."

"So, do you have any plans for the upcoming three weeks of summer break you have left?"

"I... ummm... am going to S-Scotland together with my b-best friend and my b-boyfriend."

"Sounds fun. Any reason for Scotland specifically? Most tourists from Japan try to visit multiple countries while in Europe."

"M-my best friend's p-parents live there. She's visiting them, and we're a-allowed to come along."

"Well, I hope you'll have fun. By the way, could you check out page 156 of your binder?"

"Huh?"

I curiously turn to the page Nakamura mentioned and suddenly smile.

"Oh!"

Nakamura grins.

"Just in case."

On the page in front of me is a large table containing the emergency phone number of each country, sorted by continent. I quickly take out my cell phone and save the emergency number for the United Kingdom in its memory.

"Thank you."

The trainer takes out a handkerchief, wipes his forehead, then smiles at me.

"You're welcome."

I start to casually browse through the binder, not really reading but mostly keeping myself busy. As I look up, I can see Nakamura is again wiping his forehead. What's going on? It's not that hot here, is it?

02

After a few minutes, I catch him again taking out his handkerchief. He's looking a bit uncomfortable. Is he unwell or something?

"Ummm... A-are you... o-okay?"

He lets out a chuckle in order to dismiss the matter.

"I'm fine. I might be coming down with something. My luck, of course. Right around the start of my own summer break."

He slowly gets up, an uncomfortable expression still on his face.

"I... think I'm going to take a small bathroom break. I'll be right back. Could you open the window in the meantime? Let in some fresh air?"

"S-sure."

03

As I head towards one of the windows, I notice Nakamura is walking a bit hunched over. It gives me an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I turn towards the window and am about to push it open when I hear a soft groan behind me. As I look behind me, I'm shocked to see that Nakamura is lying face-down on the floor, about 10 steps away from the door. I physically reel from a sudden and almost overwhelming sense of dread that spreads through my body.

What's going on? Did he just collapse? What's wrong with him? What am I supposed to do?

"Mister Nakamura?"

My voice barely reaches above a whisper as I struggle to control my breathing.

"Mister Nakamura?!"

Somehow, I'm capable of making it across the room without my shaking legs giving out and I kneel next to him, rolling him onto his back.

"Mister Nakamura!!"

No reaction. What should I do now? Go and get help? But it's already nearly a week into summer break and the building is nearly deserted? What if he dies while I'm away? Why isn't anyone else here?

I guess I can't leave him alone. Doing my best to righten his head, I suddenly remember the first step of the drills I've done. Putting two fingers beneath his jaw, I THINK I can feel a pulse. Of course, it's almost impossible to be sure with my own heart pounding like a jackhammer, but it's a small relief. Putting my ear to his mouth, I can't hear any breathing though. Am I supposed to give him mouth-to-mouth or mouth-to-nose now? I really hate the idea of anyone's face but Hisao's getting close to mine - close enough to peek past my bangs and see the damage. Still, do I have a choice? I suddenly have an idea. I carefully move his head back and open his mouth further, then carefully use my other hand to cover his eyes. As I move my head downward though, Nakamura suddenly exhales loudly, causing me to jump up with a startled cry. As I look on, Nakamura casually gets up, dusts himself off and gives me a concerned look.

04

"Are you alright, Ikezawa? Just sit down and take a few deep breaths. I'm fine. I was just faking it. I was holding my breath on purpose."

Faking it? He was just pretending to...?

I barely manage to stammer what's on my mind.

"W-why?"

After making sure I'm not going to faint, Nakamura walks back to his desk and gives me a sheepish look.

"I figured one more practice drill was in order. Sorry to have frightened you. I wasn't even sure if it was going to work. I'm not exactly a seasoned actor. I'm surprised you didn't merely roll your eyes at me."

I should have known. He was testing me. He wanted to see if I'd call for help or go through the motions I practiced so many times or if I'd just run away or collapse in a shivering heap. I was dangerously close to doing the latter, that much is certain. And then what? Then my first aid certificate would be worth less than the paper it's printed on. I'd know in advance that this whole week had been a waste of time. And I'd end up feeling utterly worthless and more frightened of the prospect of Hisao's heart acting up than ever. For a moment I feel angry with Nakamura for drawing out my weakness with such little effort.

"I just finished your last test and your score is 84%. Very well done."

I nod in response, but don't really say anything. I'm still busy fighting off the adrenaline that's racing through my system. Nakamura frowns, gets up and sits on one of the desks in front of mine.

"I guess what I did was a bit thoughtless, but I thought it was important to get an idea on how you'd react in a real emergency situation... or at least as real as possible. The truth is that Mrs. Takawa asked me to give her my opinion on whether this training would be any use to you in such circumstances, and I thought this would be a good way to see for myself. If you'd have broken down just now, that would have given this week a real downer ending, but at least I could have reported to your therapist that this training wasn't sufficient on its own and that she'd best go and try something else. I figured the last thing you needed was a sense of security that'd prove to be false at the worst possible moment. I hope you can understand and that it helps to make you a little bit more confident about what you've learned here this week."

I can't say I don't understand his motivation, but I'm nevertheless unsettled at how panic-prone I just proved to still be even though it didn't paralyze me this time.

"You hesitated a bit, but you still reacted within an acceptable timespan. So I think you really deserve this."

He takes a fancy piece of paper from behind his back that I can see has my name on it and puts his signature on the dotted line near the bottom before handing it to me.

"Congratulations on successfully finishing the training, Ikezawa."

I take it from him, still a bit shaky but also filled with a modest sense of pride.

"Thank you."

"If you still have any questions for me, now would probably be a good time to ask. If not, I'm going to start packing up the dummies and get ready to head home."

I do have one question.

"Umm.... Were you enacting an actual heart attack just now?"

"A little bit. Unlike what movies would like you to believe, heart attacks are rarely instantaneous. But warning signs may vary from person to person."

"Warning signs?"

"You can find a list of the more common ones on page 34 of your binder. Though if you're currently thinking of your boyfriend, please be aware that what sent him to the hospital last time wasn't a traditional heart attack."

"Ah..."

"Remember that actual heart attacks involve the coronary artery getting clogged, resulting in part of the heart being deprived of oxygen and being damaged as a result. Your boyfriend's arteries are probably fine. His problem is that his heart occasionally starts a dysfunctional rhythm. It's a different problem altogether. That doesn't mean he never experiences any warning signs, but... I think it's best if you try not to worry about those."

Not worry about them? Is he joking?

"Your boyfriend is probably well aware of his condition, and if any warning signs pop up that indicate an approaching episode, I'm willing to bet my life on it that he'll be aware of them long before you start noticing them. Ultimately it's his responsibility to take action and either slow down or warn others. If you sound the alarm each time he looks a little bit unwell, instead of trusting his judgement on it, you'll probably drive him and yourself crazy sooner or later. He's still as susceptible to colds and stomach aches as any other person after all."

That's a pretty good point, though I've never been good at applying the "no worrying" advice to my own life.

"If his heart gets into a dysfunctional rhythm it won't come out of, the best thing you can do is be aware of the location of the nearest AED. I've noticed this school has quite a few of them hanging on the walls. I'm sure the head nurse here can get you a map of their locations."

"And outside of the s-school?"

"I'd like to suggest him getting an AED of his own at some point, but that's easier said than done. The one you've been practicing with this week costs as much as I pay in rent over the course of two months. Still, in the long term, it'd be a good investment."

"A-Anything else?"

He shakes his head and smiles.

"Try not to worry too much, and don't forget to enjoy life. Compared to other heart conditions, people with your boyfriend's condition still tend to live fairly long lives. And new scientific discoveries are made every day."

That cheers me up a little. I give him a tired smile and pick up my bag from my desk.

"T-Thank you...f-for everything."

"Glad to be of service. Have fun in Scotland."

"I w-will."

"E-Excuse me?"

After leaving the classroom, I decided to stop by at the newspaper club for just a few minutes and was greeted by Naomi and Jun who seem to be the only members still around the school grounds. When I entered the room, Naomi greeted me with a series of sounds that sounded like total gibberish to me.

"I said: 'Awrite! Hou's it gaun?' You don't know what that means?"

"S-Should I?"

"It means 'Hi. How are you?' in Scottish. You were supposed to answer with something like 'A'm fine, slainte!'"

Naomi looks very pleased with her performance, but Jun gives me a tired look.

"I looked up some Scottish phrases on the internet for her this morning, and she's been practicing them out loud ever since. Hopefully she'll stop now."

Naomi playfully sticks her tongue out at Jun.

"You're just jealous because my Scottish is better than yours."

Jun just rolls her eyes and Naomi takes the opportunity to continue the conversation.

"You haven't been practicing your Scottish?"

I haven't. Lilly assured me that our English would suffice, so I can probably communicate with the locals if (and only if) I absolutely have to.

"This week was busy for me."

"Oh, right. Still that first aid training, huh? How'd it go?"

"I finished it today."

I produce the certificate I got earlier from my bag and hand it to Naomi and Jun. Naomi looks it over for a second before passing it to Jun. They then smile and break out into a short but sincere applause. Or rather, Naomi's clapping while Jun's mimicking the motion as best as she can.

"Great job. I bet it's a little easier to go on vacation now with that one behind you, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm happy the two didn't overlap."

"Looking forward to it?"

"I am. Do you h-have any vacation plans?"

Jun just shakes her head. Naomi, on the other hand, nods enthusiastically.

"I'm going on a trip across Japan. Natsume's coming too. We'll head north first, stay in Hokkaido for a bit, then head south towards Kyoto."

"That sounds enjoyable too."

"It will be. I'll be sure to take plenty of pictures. We can swap photos afterwards."

That might be a problem. My cell phone has a camera function, but it doesn't have enough capacity to store a large amount of photos, and I don't have an actual photo camera myself.

"I could... buy a g-guidebook while I'm there."

Naomi makes a face as if I just offered her a spoiled sandwich.

"That won't do. You're a member of the newspaper club now. That means you gotta walk the walk. No taking shortcuts."

"Ah... B-but I..."

"Just a sec."

Naomi gets off the desk she's sitting on and sprints into the room we use as our archive. Jun scratches her arm and turns to me.

"Naomi asked me to come along with her, but I need to have this cast removed next week. They're probably going to wrap it in stiff bandages if it's healed sufficiently. I hate these heavy things. They really itch."

"I'm s-sorry to hear that."

"It's okay. I have plenty of video games I still need to finish."

"Tadaah! Check this out!"

Naomi comes running back in, carrying a black bag in her hands. She opens it and fishes a slick-looking camera out of it, along with several small plastic containers with memory cards inside. She then gives me a triumphant grin.

"You don't have a camera yourself, do you? Well, what do you think of this baby? There's at least twelve gigabyte worth of memory cards in here too. You can take enough photos to wallpaper the entire classroom with and still have space to spare."

Wow! Is she really lending me this? That camera looks really expensive.

"F-For m-me?"

Naomi simply gives a cheerful nod.

"I was thinking of taking it myself, but since I'm dropping by at my parents' place before my own trip, I can simply take their camera instead. You can't fly to the other end of the world and not take any pictures. That's journalistic malpractice. And we won't have any of that around here."

"T-Thank you s-so much."

"You're welcome. If you want to thank me, maybe you could take some requests from me."

"Requests?"

"Since you're going to Scotland, are you going to visit that lake? You know, Loch Ness?"

"I hope so. It's only a few kilometers away from Inverness."

"They say there's a monster in there. It would be grand if you could snap a picture."

Jun promptly makes a facepalm gesture with her hand, which looks rather absurd due to the huge cast wrapped around it.

"You know that's an urban legend, don't you?"

Naomi shrugs.

"How about a picture of a Scotsman? You know, in traditional garb."

"I might be able to do that."

"Great. But no phonies. It has to be a true Scotsman."

"Ah... O-kay."

Naomi lets out a pleased giggle.

"Wonderful."

Naomi puts the camera back into its bag and hands it to me. I take it from her and put it into my own bag, being as careful as I can with it. This is a really pleasant surprise. I'm so happy I decided to drop by the club today.

"Now, in case taking those pictures gets your journalistic juices flowing, there's something you can brainstorm about. I've decided what the next club you'll be covering in your column will be."

"Which one is it?"

Naomi makes a face as if I just asked her a very stupid question.

"This one of course. You'll have the advantage of not having to put together a question list for an interview. Just write something up using your own experiences here, and we can take a look at it after the summer break to see if there's anything missing. Try to emulate the style of your previous column for consistency's sake."

"I'll do that."

She winks at me.

"Don't make us look bad."

I smile as I take my bag and get ready to head to my dorm room.

"I'll p-put some extra l-love into it."

Naomi gives me a thumbs-up.

"Attagirl. Well, guid cheerio the nou then."

"Eh?"

"Means goodbye. In Scottish."

"Bye."

As I leave the room, Jun comes after me with a conspiring expression on her face.

"If you DO take a picture of Loch Ness, could you mail it to me?"

She winks.

"I can probably photoshop a monster in there."

06

"I'll let you handle the tickets, Hisao."

Hisao takes the envelope containing our flight tickets from Lilly and carefully puts them away.

"I'll make certain not to lose them, Lilly."

"Good. Have the two of you finished packing all your luggage already?"

"I have. Hanako?"

Fortunately, I have too. Knowing this'd be a busy week, I've already tried to pack whatever I could last weekend.

"Me too."

Lilly gives a satisfied nod. As I look around her room where we've spent the last half hour drinking tea and discussing the final preparations, I notice that Lilly's own suitcase is still only half-full, though I doubt I'd be able to even pack a single thing without being able to see.

"Do you need some help with packing, Lilly?"

"No, thank you, Hanako. I know exactly what items I still have left to pack, and I'll be sure to finish things up soon."

"Okay then."

Lilly lets out a short sigh.

"In other circumstances, we would be celebrating you getting your first aid certificate right now. I feel bad we lack the time for that at the moment."

"It's okay. It's for a good reason after all."

"We will hold a celebration for you once we're in Scotland, Hanako. That is a promise."

"T-Thank you, Lilly."

"I think it's probably best if Hanako and I take our leave now, Lilly. That'll give you time to wrap things up and get some rest."

"That might not be a bad idea, Hisao. Let us assemble in my room tomorrow morning at ten o' clock. That'll leave us enough time to get to the station and take the train to the airport."

"Sounds like a plan. Good night, Lilly."

"Good night, Lilly."

"Good night, Hanako, Hisao. Rest well. Tomorrow will be a very exhausting day for sure."

As I unlock the door to my dorm room and turn around to kiss Hisao goodnight, he puts one arm around me.

"Can I come in for a while?"

"Sure."

We enter the room, and I take a seat on my bed. I feel tired and tense at the same time. Today was stressful and exhausting. First the lesson on burns that hit several sensitive nerves and then the trainer's faked heart attack right in front of me. And tomorrow might even be more nervewracking.

"Wow, your shoulders are still really stiff. I guess that little get-together with Lilly didn't really help?"

Hisao has placed a hand on my shoulder and gives me a worried frown.

"It helped... a little bit."

"Maybe this will help a little bit more."

He sits down behind me and gently starts massaging my shoulders.

"That would be nice."

I let my head hang forward and try to relax as much as possible as Hisao massages the muscles of my neck and shoulders. This is something he's been doing for me since we started dating - a way to take away whatever stress I built up over the day.

"You can... do it a little more forcefully."

"This might make a difference too."

Hisao reaches around and unbuttons my blouse. I let it slide off my shoulders while he rubs his hands together to warm them. Moments later, I feel a warm hand on my bare left shoulder stroking it and then kneading it firmly. Minutes pass without either of us saying anything, but the silence fortunately isn't too uncomfortable. I've told Hisao all I cared to share about today earlier when I visited his room while he was in the process of packing his suitcase. Right now, there simply isn't much to say. After a while, Hisao gets off the bed.

"Hanako, can you lie on your stomach now?"

I comply with his request and feel my hips being pressed down as Hisao straddles me. Then I feel his hands press down on my upper back and make long, firm strokes.

"Hanako, I really appreciate the fact that you've made such a large effort this week on my behalf."

"It...wasn't just for you. It was also for myself."

"Well, regardless, I already feel a bit safer now than I did before."

I don't really share his optimism yet. This afternoon I've just barely managed to hold off a panic attack and that involved someone I hardly even knew. I'm still not very confident in my ability to hold things together if something were to happen to Hisao. Still, I feel a bit of happiness from his words.

"T-Thanks."

"You know, the last time I spoke with her, I asked Miss Takawa for advice on what to do if you got overwhelmed by stress or fear again. Because I don't want to feel helpless either. Like that time you had an episode in science class."

"What did she say?"

Hisao stops the backrub he's been giving me until now and gets off the bed.

"I really liked her advice."

"What was it then?"

He doesn't respond, but I hear a bit of rustling behind me. The moment I turn around, however, I feel a pleasant and warm sensation that elicits a surprised gasp from me.

"Hisao!"

07

It takes me a moment to realize that the rustling sound I heard earlier was Hisao taking off his shirt and while I was turning around to face him, he got back onto the bed and is now lying next to me and hugging me tightly.

"She suggested something like this."

I giggle.

"She suggested taking your shirt off?"

"Hehe, not exactly. She suggested cuddling, though I don't think she'd object to some added intimacy if it helps the cause."

I wouldn't know about that, and I doubt I'll ever find out. My sex life is the one thing I've kept my therapist out of and if possible I'd like it to stay that way.

"Even if she'd... object, I wouldn't."

Hisao laughs softly and then plants his lips on mine. At first, our kisses are gentle, and we're content to just hold on to each other tightly, but soon our kisses become more feverish, and we're rubbing our bodies against each other. Suddenly, Hisao moves his hand down and playfully squeezes my butt which causes me to let out a yelp and reflexively thrust my hips forward, causing my crotch to press against his.

Hisao chuckles at my gasp and stops our makeout session to let his forehead rest against mine and look into my eyes for several seconds before giving me a quick peck on the lips. I know what that gesture means. He's used it several times in the past to get a question across that'd be too embarrassing to ask with words. Do you want to have sleep together? I also know how to give the affirmative response. If I respond with a quick peck back, the way things are now, it'll probably take less than 15 seconds for the last piece of clothing to hit the floor. Yet there's a small sense of anxiety I feel that prevents me from immediately reciprocating his invitation. Maybe it's written on my face or maybe Hisao has noticed the pause.

"...Hanako. Would you... like to...?"

I merely lower my gaze, trying to work out my feelings.

"Ummm..."

"It has been some time."

That's certainly true. Between that night in a hotel where we had intercourse for the first time since the start of our relationship and the moment when Lilly announced her departure, Hisao and I did it several times. While I tried to keep the afternoons and evenings open for Lilly during that time, I made sure to save the nights for Hisao. I learned two things about myself during that period in time. The first was the fact that I actually possess a sex drive. I still prefer the lights to be either dimmed or off altogether and Hisao's always the one taking the initiative, but I've been seeking him out all those times knowing full well that we'd probably end up between the sheets together, and, while we were busy doing the deed, I found myself welcoming the experience.

The second thing I learned, however, was that my sex drive is also rather closely tied to my state of mind. So while I was busy taking Lilly on all sorts of outings, Hisao and I were far from hurting on the physical intimacy front. After Lilly announced her departure however, I quickly found I was unable to get into the mood. And during Hisao's time in the hospital, well, I didn't think I'd even get so much as a kiss out of him anymore ever again. Even though we reconciled nearly two weeks ago, Hisao's been forced to take it slowly ever since, and I obviously haven't been eager to push him past his limits.

"I... I know."

"And you seemed to be in the mood just now."

I was and part of me still is. My mood isn't really the issue. If it hadn't been for the fact Hisao was just released from the hospital a few hours earlier, I would have been happy to have my first experience with make-up sex the very day we reconciled. What weighs upon my heart is his current condition.

"It's n-not that. It's j-just..."

He seems to guess where this is going. Which is not surprising since we've had this kind of discussion before.

"I've worked hard the last one and a half week to get back into shape. I did a light jog this morning without any troubles. My stamina's not at the point where it was prior to my accident just yet, but it's getting there. I'll probably be fine."

"Did you... t-talk to the nurse?"

"Not about this."

I let out a soft but still audible sigh. I can't say I blame him very much. I certainly wouldn't be able to do it. But Hisao's a lot more confident than I am, and he sees the nurse on an almost daily basis. But still...

"Look Hanako, I'm not gonna ask him if he feels I'm physically ready to start sleeping with you again. Because that feels to me like I'm asking him for permission to have sex with my girlfriend. And I bet he'd feel the same way."

"How c-can you b-be sure?"

"Because I know him. I'll have to spend months listening to his immature jokes."

He squeezes his eyes shut and contorts his face into a broad grin like the nurse's.

"Just let me check your heartbeat, Hisao. If you're good, I'll give you a lollipop. Or a night with your girlfriend. Which one would you like best?"

I giggle. There's something bizarre about Hisao's impression.

"I d-don't think..."

"Hisao, guess what? I'm having a sale right now. Get one night between the sheets and you'll get a second one for free. Today only. What do you think?"

I press my hand to my mouth to hold back a laugh.

"That's...hee hee..."

"Yeah, when you're not the one being made fun of."

Realizing we're getting off track, Hisao gives me another peck on the lips and gently presses my chin up so I'm looking right into his eyes again.

"Look Hanako, the nurse isn't going to stick around for the rest of my life, so in the end my own judgement will eventually be the thing I'll have to rely on."

That sounds a lot like what Nakamura told me earlier today... about not worrying about him too much.

"Hisao... I... I've been s-startled once a-already today, b-but if you really think you'll b-be okay, I'll t-trust your judgement."

I can see Hisao think for a moment, weighing the odds of his heart acting up. I'm not really that frightened he'll die on me if we end up doing it, but after today, I don't think I'd take even a flutter very well. Hisao seems to pick up on my thoughts and gives a short nod.

"Okay then, Hanako. We'll put it off for now."

I give him a quick kiss, feeling a bit guilty about getting cold feet, but also a bit relieved.

"Can I stay here tonight?"

"I'd really like that. We can still c-cuddle, if you like."

"That sounds good."

I get off the bed, take off my clothes and then lie down and pull the covers up to my chin. Hisao follows my example, settles down next to me, grabs me in a tight hug and whispers in my ear.

"I really missed this."

"Me too."

We spend some time snuggling up against each other while exchanging sweet kisses. We keep this up for some time until Hisao takes my face in both his hands and presses a quick peck on the tip of my nose.

"You know, I'm the one who has to take it easy, but I can still tend to you, Hanako."

He starts fondling my breasts and runs one finger up and down the front of my panties once.

"Ah..."

Part of me would probably like that, but another part feels guilty about the idea of me having a good time without Hisao. Ever since the first time we started our physical love life, we've done it on a strict give-and-take basis and even when we started having actual intercourse, we always tried to make certain that neither of us was missing out in any way. Hisao seems to guess what I'm thinking.

"Let's face facts, Hanako. You've had a trying day. Heck, you've had a trying week and tomorrow will be another day that'll probably push you way beyond your comfort zone. Why not let me help you unwind a bit - get everything out of your system? I'd say you've earned it. Forget about the equal exchange thing for once."

"Ummm... I-I think I'll b-be fine with c-cuddling."

"You sure?"

I take some time to figure out how to reply.

"I... want m-my first experience s-since we got back together to be a little bit special."

"Special?"

"Taking our t-time, s-sharing the experience, building things up gently and slowly..."

"Like that night in the hotel?"

"Yes, like that."

"You want it to be a bit romantic?"

Something like that. I like romance. At least, I think I do. But since silences between us are still awkward, our dates have centered around doing things that don't leave many silences such as watching a movie or playing video games. Fun, but not the most romantic way to spend time together. I'd argue that the most romantic moments we've shared are when we're together like this and we can communicate our affection for the other through cuddling, kisses and other non-verbal means.

"Yes."

"Okay then."

I snuggle up to him and give him one last kiss.

"Good night, Hisao."

"Good night, Hanako. Sleep well. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

08

Chapter 21 (Hisao)

01

"Hisao, did you remember to bring a written statement from the nurse along regarding your medication?"

"It's kinda late to bring that up, isn't it Lilly? If I hadn't, it'd be too late to get one seeing that we're already past the security gate. Anyway, I did remember to pick one up yesterday and the lady at the baggage check-in said she'd make sure everything would be fine."

"That's a relief. Three weeks worth of medication must be quite a quantity."

"Seriously. Good thing Yamaku has its own apothecary."

This morning, our final preparations went off without a hitch, and neither our bus to the train station nor our train to the airport had any delays. We made sure to arrive at the airport three and a half hours before the departure of our flight, since getting around the airport wasn't going to be a quick process. Baggage check-in went well. That was pretty much where things went south though.

"Do you know what time it is, Hisao?"

Getting around the place proved to be a slow process and our odd formation must have turned several heads. Lilly had to be guided, of course, and I was placed in the role of navigator. With Lilly's hand on one arm and her carry-on luggage in the other, I've been leading our little group through the halls of the airport. Clinging to Lilly's other arm was Hanako, head down and hat lowered to obscure her face as much as possible, doing her best to block out the crowd all around us. The crowd didn't even turn out to be her biggest concern this day.

"We still have about 45 minutes until our plane departs, Lilly."

Having made it through airport security, we're now sitting in the corner of a small coffee shop near the gate, enjoying a drink and a light meal. The small talk between Lilly and myself is partially to kill time and partially to try and ease Hanako's tense mood. That Hanako would have a tough time navigating the airport was something to be expected - the terminal halls are quite a bit more crowded than the average street in the city, especially during this time of year.

"I wonder if we should already head for our gate."

During our trek through the main hall, we were suddenly approached by one of the security officials walking around the place who seemed drawn to Hanako in particular. A very uncomfortable pause took place when he walked up to us and then suddenly backed away for a moment upon noticing Hanako's facial scarring, though Lilly was quick to take control of the situation. When asked by Lilly if there was a problem, the guard explained to us that part of his job was to look out for people who were showing signs of unusually nervous behavior, and Hanako's body language caught his attention. We got a profuse apology afterwards, but the damage had already been done, and whenever I cast a sidelong glance at Hanako, I could see her eyes darting left and right as if watching out for other security officers who might see a potential smuggler or someone with some other form of guilty conscience in her.

"Isn't that way too early?"

Neither Lilly nor I bothered suggesting to Hanako to try and act more casually. She'd be as likely to do that as she'd be to don a bikini in the middle of the terminal. Both of us are aware she's emotionally in a bad place right now, but we also realize that openly worrying about her will only make her feel worse. We've come this far. The only way out is through and we're counting on the assumption that if we can get Hanako to her plane seat without her suffering a breakdown, she'll have plenty of opportunity to catch her bearings during the flight itself.

"International flights often start the boarding process about 20 minutes prior to departure. I'd like to be one of the first in the boarding area. Last time Akira and I got on a plane, we were among the very first people allowed to board. It's a courtesy policy of our airline towards disabled passengers. I see no reason not to take advantage of it. I would..."

Lilly hesitates for a moment.

"Yes?"

"I would also like to get past the security gate before a big line forms there."

This immediately manages to catch, perhaps unsurprisingly, Hanako's attention. She's been quiet the whole time we've been sitting here, but now she looks at Lilly with a look of dread on her face.

"But Lilly, d-didn't w-we already p-pass security?"

"I'm sorry, Hanako. But there will be another security check just before we enter the jet bridge."

Hanako sighs loudly.

When we accepted Lilly's offer to join her on her trip, we were asked if either of us had ever been abroad before. When this didn't turn out to be the case, Akira was quick to point out we'd need to get ourselves a passport in order to accompany her sister. The process of getting a passport in itself wasn't that big of a problem. The whole thing had to be finished on a very short notice, but thankfully getting a passport doesn't take too long a time in this country and Akira gave us plenty of pointers on how to complete the application process as quickly as possible. Hanako, Lilly and I skipped school the day afterwards in an attempt to get all the necessary steps on our part done before the end of the day. Everything went pretty well until it was time to submit the forms and the photos. There was a photo booth nearby, so getting mug shots wasn't a big deal, but we found out that there were some pretty strict guidelines regarding the pictures.

When Hanako realized that she was expected to have a picture taken that showed a full frontal, unobscured closeup of her face, we could tell that she was seriously considering backing out of the whole trip. With a lot of effort, Lilly and I managed to convince her to grit her teeth and go through with the whole thing, though it still took over 10 tries before we managed to take a picture where Hanako was able to force herself into keeping a relatively neutral expression on her face. The expression on her face when she submitted her passport photos to the clerk behind the counter was beyond troubled.

The whole experience made me realize that for Hanako, willingly showing her face to someone was something she considered extremely intimate and she later confided in me that the whole thing very much felt to her like having a nude photo stuck on her passport. Needless to say, the prospect of having to show her passport to yet one more security guard and getting the almost guaranteed shocked look in return is something that makes her more than a little bit anxious. I get up.

"Best thing we can probably do is get it over with quickly."

Hanako nods quietly though it's apparent she's not exactly eager about it. As Lilly also rises to her feet, she puts her hand on Hanako's shoulder.

"Hanako, I realize today has been difficult and confrontational for you, but I'm still really happy that you decided to come along."

For a moment, Hanako allows herself to smile softly.

"T-Thank you, Lilly."

02

"Your seats are on the left all the way in the back. May I help you with the luggage?"

Lilly smiles sweetly at the flight attendant welcoming us aboard.

"Thank you, but my friends and I will manage."

As Lilly predicted, the airline allowed us to board the plane before anyone else in economy class and we were all relieved we had the opportunity to get to our seats before the plane started filling with people. It looks like Akira put some thought into picking our seats. A place in the back meant there'd be fewer people around us and Hanako's scarred side would be facing the wall of the cabin.

We walk down the aisle with me in the lead, Lilly behind me with one hand on my shoulder and Hanako following very close behind us. As we get to our seats, three chairs next to each other in one corner in the back of the plane, I turn around.

"Ladies first."

Lilly smiles, but shows no sign of getting ready to sit down.

"Akira told me once that one's first plane flight is a very special moment, particularly the first takeoff when you see the land below slowly get smaller. I think a place near the window would be wasted on me. I believe the window seat should go to the only person who hasn't flown before. I certainly think she has deserved it."

That's a good point. Not to mention the fact that having both me and Lilly as a buffer between herself and the rest of the people on the plane will probably allow Hanako to relax a little more. I open the storage compartment above the seats and take Hanako's backpack from her.

"That's you, Hanako. Go ahead and take the seat in the back. I'll put your and Lilly's luggage away."

Hanako nods and quickly moves to her assigned seat while I put everyone's bag in the storage bin.

"So I guess the second seat will be mine?"

"Yes. You might still have the opportunity to enjoy the view a bit, assuming Hanako doesn't end up hogging all of it for herself. And better still, you'll get to spend the upcoming 12 hours with one lovely lady on each side. I'm sure many men would envy you."

"How can I say no to such a tempting offer?"

I take my seat next to Hanako as Lilly folds up her cane, puts it in her bag and sits down in the seat to my left. I take a look at my girlfriend. As expected, just before we could board the plane, she received another proverbial gut punch in the form of another security gate we had to pass. I can tell the whole thing has taken its toll on her as she's looking gloomy, exhausted and physically ill. I don't like the fact that we'll have to repeat this hassle again when we arrive in London, but I'm thankful that that moment is still about half a day away. Hopefully Hanako will be able to rest a bit during the flight and be less tense when we arrive at London Heathrow.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Can I have a book?"

This week, Hanako and I paid a visit to the library and made sure to borrow a few books that neither of us has read before, so we could swap them after we're finished with them. Seeing that we'll be spending several weeks in a foreign country, getting new books in Japanese will be all but impossible.

"Sure."

Hanako picks up her handbag and hands me one of our books. I expect her to get one for herself as well, but instead, she takes out a neat-looking photo camera.

"Hey, that's a nice camera."

"It is."

Lilly turns her head in our direction.

"I didn't know you owned one, Hanako. We should remember to register it at customs so you don't have to pay duty on it."

"It's... not really mine. It belongs to the n-newspaper club. Naomi let me borrow it."

"Really? That's really nice of her. Do you get along well with her, Hanako?"

Hanako seems to think a bit on that.

"She... often comes up to talk to me these days, although she... does that with all members of the c-club. Most of the time, she just talks... and I just try to k-keep up with her. But I don't exactly hate spending time with her. I think she means well."

Until Hanako joined the newspaper club, I never really interacted with Naomi even though we're both in the same class. I wouldn't exactly call them a natural combination, seeing how talkative and forward Naomi often is and how quiet and reserved Hanako usually is. On the other hand, the fact that moments with Naomi hardly contain any silences probably does a lot to hide Hanako's social handicap, and shared interests can go a long way in bridging gaps between people.

"Well, let's give her gift meaning by making sure to take lots of photos to remember this trip by. Perhaps we could start right now."

"Now?"

"Could I have your camera for a moment?"

With a puzzled expression on her face, Hanako hands over the camera. I take it from her, get up and beckon a stewardess who's walking down our aisle.

"Excuse me. Would you mind taking a picture of the three of us?"

"Of course not."

As the stewardess readies the camera, I quickly wrap one arm around Hanako's waist, pulling her a little closer, and put my other hand on Lilly's shoulder. I give the stewardess a affirmative nod.

"Smile please!"

The stewardess presses the button, we hear a sharp click, and then she hands the camera back to me. I thank her and return the camera to Hanako.

"Let's take a look."

Hanako presses a button on the side, and I can see a picture of the three of us on the display. It's not perfect... Neither Lilly nor Hanako are completely facing the camera. Lilly was probably still in the process of determining the exact location of the camera, and Hanako was trying to look into the

camera while at the same time trying to keep her scars out of view. Still, aside from those small snags, it's a nice picture and probably the first one ever taken that features all three of us.

"I like it. The first picture of the three of us."

Lilly smiles.

"The first of many, I hope."

"Y-yes."

I open my book and start reading, trying to ignore the steady flow of fellow-travelers filling up the plane. I shoot a sideway glance at Hanako, but she's too occupied with examining the various options on the camera's display screen to pay much attention to the ever-growing crowd. That's probably a good thing. As I turn to page 12 and the flow of people starts slowly drying up, Hanako turns to Lilly.

"Umm... Lilly."

"Yes, Hanako?"

"They have these... special clothes in Scotland, don't they? Like skirts?"

Lilly chuckles.

"Not many Scottish would appreciate you referring to them as skirts. They're called kilts over there."

"Do a lot of p-people wear them over there?"

Lilly shakes her head.

"Think of them as traditional garments, like kimonos, that are worn during special events but are uncommon in everyday life."

I scratch my head.

"Why the sudden interest in traditional local garments? Are you planning on getting one yourself?"

Hanako shyly shakes her head.

"Naomi wanted me to t-take a picture of a Scotsman. She m-meant a person in traditional clothes, I think."

Lilly thinks for a moment.

"The ideal occasion to get pictures would have been the Inverness Highland Games - a traditional sports event held once a year. But unfortunately, that event has been held in July already. I'm positive, however, that there are several tourist attractions in the area where you should be able to get a few shots of Scots in traditional garb. They are part of Scotland's national image after all, and we're in the middle of the tourist season."

I turn to Hanako.

"It's a small price for the opportunity to get a free camera, but it's still an odd request."

"She asked f-for a picture of the Loch Ness monster first, b-but then said a picture of a true Scotsman was fine too. She's a l-little strange sometimes."

"A true Scotsman? Oh my!"

Lilly raises her hand and covers her mouth, but it's not enough to hide a giggle and the broad grin on her face. I must have missed something, but Lilly seems to find Hanako's last remark extremely funny. Looking at Hanako, I can tell she's as confused by Lilly's reaction as I am.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow. Care to enlighten us on what's so amusing?"

Lilly giggles once more, then scrapes her throat and composes herself.

"By tradition, kilts are worn without any underwear underneath. Asking a Scotsman whether he's a true Scotsman or not is the same as asking him if he's naked underneath his kilt."

Upon hearing Lilly's explanation, Hanako lets out a shocked gasp before turning bright red. Looks like Lilly just helped us dodge a bullet here.

"Thanks for saving us a really awkward situation. Hanako, do you think Naomi was serious or do you think she was playing with you?"

"It's d-difficult to t-tell with her sometimes. I t-think she was serious."

"Eh, we'll just take a picture of a Scotsman and tell Naomi it's a true one. Let her prove otherwise."

"Okay."

Before we can continue the discussion, the announcement system above our heads springs to life and we hear a chime followed by a male voice.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to flight OCN007 to London. Thank you for flying with Oceanic Airlines. In a few minutes, we'll receive permission from the control tower to access the runway. In the meantime, please make certain that your seat is in the upright position, and keep your seat belt fastened for as long as the sign above your seat is lit. We're about to show you a short video with safety instructions detailing how to act in an emergency situation."

The displays on the back of the seats in front of us suddenly turn on, and a flight attendant is seen going through the safety regulations like the smoking prohibition and the request to turn off cell phones.

"...please take note of the nearest emergency exit indicated by the signs that are currently lit up. In case of limited visibility, follow the trail of emergency lights on the floor..."

Judging from the seat chart the nearest emergency exit is right behind us although I seriously wonder if I'd be in a condition to even make it there in case of an emergency landing.

"...in the case of the loss of cabin pressure, compartments above your head will open automatically to reveal oxygen masks. Always make sure to put on your own breathing masks before helping others with theirs..."

I wonder if I'm the only one who's a bit put off by how annoyingly cheerful the attendant in the video seems to be while describing a grave emergency situation.

"That d-doesn't h-happen often, d-does it?"

I'm surprised by Hanako unexpectedly chipping in and even grow a little concerned when I notice she's become pale and visibly shivering a bit.

"Hey, are you alright?"

Hanako nods weakly, but looks more than a little bit uncomfortable. While I'm still trying to figure out why Hanako, who hasn't shown any indications of flight anxiety before, is suddenly getting jittery, Lilly calmly answers her question.

"I wouldn't worry, Hanako. These worst-case scenarios are very rare, and air travel on the whole is a lot safer than travelling by car."

Hanako seems to relax a bit. The information video ends, and a few minutes later I can hear the plane's engines starting, and we slowly start moving. We keep moving for about a minute and then suddenly stop again, causing Hanako to give us a puzzled look. Lilly seems to guess her thoughts.

"This is perfectly normal. We'll probably start moving again soon."

Sure enough, after a short while we start moving again, and the plane makes a slow turn. As we stop momentarily, Lilly smiles.

"Here we go. You might experience some light ear pain during the takeoff or landing due to the changing pressure in the cabin. What I did last time was try to yawn a few times or chew some chewing gum. I have some in my handbag if you want it."

03

Just as she finishes, the engines start roaring louder, and we're pressed into our seats as the plane starts accelerating. Faster and faster we go, and then I get a strange feeling in my stomach as our plane leaves the ground. I put my hands on Hanako's shoulders and softly move her aside just a little bit so I can look past her out the window as well. I move my right hand up to her face and use my index finger to gently brush her bangs aside so she can absorb the view with both eyes. And an amazing view it is, just like Lilly said. Tall buildings are turning small like playthings. The countryside turns into big green blanket. And then, just before the pilot informs us we've reached cruising altitude, Hanako and I are faced with a vast ocean of clouds as far as the eye can see. As we sit here, my arm around Hanako and her cheek pressed against mine, I occasionally look at the expression on her face which has turned from silent awe to a beautiful excited smile. Over the course of this day, I've had my doubts from time to time whether this whole trip was a good idea, but that doubt is completely gone now. This experience, this moment we're sharing together, was totally worth it.

04

"Lilly?"

"What is it, Hisao?"

"I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"You didn't. I wasn't even sleeping. I already found out last time that I'm unable to sleep on airplanes."

"I guess that makes two of us. It seems like only Hanako will be getting any sleep for the rest of the day."

"So she's asleep right now? I already suspected as much by the sound of her breathing."

"She is. And what's more, she's currently using my shoulder as a pillow."

"It's not uncomfortable for you, is it?"

"No, far from it. However, I need to take a restroom break and take my medication, but I don't want to wake her up."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I've moved the armrests up. I'd like you to trade places with me for a little while if you don't mind."

"I don't mind. Do you simply want me to move to my right?"

"Just a second... Now."

I gently nudge Hanako upright a bit, then quickly get up as Lilly moves onto my seat before Hanako can slump back. I move away, and Lilly stays still for several seconds without even breathing. Eventually Hanako mumbles something in her sleep before settling down on Lilly's shoulder.

"Looks like we got away with it. I'll be back soon."

"Please don't rush yourself on my account."

I shake my legs, which have started tingling from the long bout of inactivity, back to life and wobble unsteadily towards the lavatory in the back. Opening the door, I'm taken aback for a moment at how cramped the thing is, but then take a deep breath and step inside. I'm pretty glad I'm not a claustrophobe right now. First taking the time to empty my bladder, I then open my backpack and get the usual dosage of pills out. A few hours earlier we had a modest meal (it was okay, though not exactly up to the standards of Lilly's cooking or Hanako's more successful school lunches), and I made sure to order an additional flask of bottled mineral water for this occasion.

I use the water to flush the pills down my throat and yawn a bit. It should probably be night already, but if you look through the windows it's still broad daylight. Since we're flying west, we're essentially keeping up with the sun, making this possibly the longest day of my life. When we get to London, it'll be late in the afternoon. I hope I'm not going to experience jet lag while we're in Scotland.

When I get back to our seats, I see that Lilly made herself a bit more comfortable. She has her right arm wrapped around Hanako and holds Hanako's hand in her left hand. They look very cute together. I reach for Hanako's handbag near her feet, take out the camera and snap a quick picture. As Lilly recognizes the click from the camera she pouts with mock indignation.

"You should ask before taking pictures, Hisao. I probably looked a bit silly in this one."

"Nonsense, some of the best pictures are the ones taken spontaneously. Ready to switch places again?"

Lilly considers for a moment.

05

"Actually, would you mind if I stayed like this a little longer?"

"Not at all."

I take a seat and look at the girls again. Lilly has a peaceful smile on her face. I don't think her request was merely about not wanting to risk waking up Hanako.

"There are blankets in the pockets of the seats in front of us. Would you...?"

"Yes please."

I take the folded blankets and remove the plastic wrapping around them. I softly wrap one of them around Hanako's sleeping form and pass the second one to Lilly, who merely folds it out and covers her lap with it. I sit down in Lilly's original seat and get my own blanket. I doubt I'll get any sleep, but I try to relax nevertheless.

"Hisao, how long is it until we reach our destination?"

I take a look at one of the monitors hanging from the ceiling. The screen shows various bits of information, like the temperature outside, the altitude of the plane and the estimated time of arrival.

"Four and a half more hours. I hope Hanako will have recovered her energy a bit by the time we land."

"I'm relieved she was able to relax. She seemed anxious when we were about to take off. I was afraid she'd turn out to have a fear of flying."

"I've been thinking that over and... I don't think it was the flight itself that got her nervous. In fact, she seemed to love the view. It's the first time I've really seen her smile today. It was probably..."

"Hmmm?"

"Ever since my first heart attack, I've hated hospitals. I dislike the sterile appearance and the overly clean smell. And I've really come to dislike heart monitors as well as anything that sounds like them. It's those beeps that really grate on me. Probably stir up some unpleasant memories. The same is true for Hanako, I think. She's been through a long stay in the hospital herself ten years ago. I was thinking that maybe..."

Lilly seems to get where I'm going.

"The oxygen masks?"

"Exactly."

She sighs.

"Today was certainly confrontational for her."

"Yeah and yesterday wasn't really all that much better, with her being forced to sit through a lecture about burn injuries and her trainer scaring the living daylights out of her by faking a heart attack. I really can't wait for this day to end."

"Hisao, do you know if Hanako has gone on any trips before she came to Yamaku?"

"I asked her that myself a few days ago. You probably know the answer already. She hasn't been on vacation since she lost her family. The orphanage occasionally organized day trips for the children there, but Hanako skipped most of those. The closest thing she's had to a vacation in a decade was that trip to Hokkaido."

Lilly softly squeezes Hanako's hand and strokes her long, dark hair.

"Hisao... Let's both do our best to make this vacation the most memorable and wonderful experience of her life."

I take another look at Lilly and Hanako. Many of the people I know at school hang out in pairs. I know Emi often hangs out with her friend Rin, Naomi from the newspaper club is often seen together with Natsume, her neighbor in class, and I've hardly ever seen Shizune and Misha apart from one another. But none of them seem to have that intimate emotional connection that Lilly and Hanako seem to share, especially now that they've settled their differences.

"You really love Hanako, don't you?"

She gives a deep nod, smiling warmly.

"I feel very fortunate to have her as my best friend."

"I think she's very lucky to have you too. I don't think she could have wished for a better friend."

Lilly gives a self-deprecating sigh.

"I think I merely provided her with company and comfort. It was you who first broke through the barrier she erected around herself and convinced her to start opening up to others, including me. And it's been the people at the newspaper club who made her start thinking about what to do after graduation. In the end, I wasn't really able to help her grow as others have."

Something about what Lilly just said has a very familiar ring. I attempt to hold back a chuckle, but it's still loud enough for Lilly to catch it.

"Did I say something amusing?"

"You're starting to sound a little bit like Hanako."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The whole thing of 'How useful am I to my friends?' and 'Do my friends get as much out of me as I get out of them?' is how Hanako used to think all the time. Probably it's how she still thinks now and then. But I don't think it matters. Maybe it's true that I helped Hanako grow more than you did, and maybe it isn't. Maybe it's true that the newspaper club helped Hanako grow more than you did, and maybe it isn't. But I think that's completely irrelevant. I'd like to think that Hanako goes to the newspaper club because she enjoys the activities. I'd like to think that the reason she hangs out with me is because she

cares about me and feels appreciated and validated by me. That's probably also why she spends time with you. Everything else is just a bonus. I don't think it matters to her. It probably shouldn't matter to us either."

Lilly breaks out into an amused smile.

"You sound so wise, Hisao."

I get the feeling she's poking fun at me, but she still sounds appreciative of my words.

"What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't sell yourself short. You're the first real friend Hanako's ever made in her life. That's got to count for something."

"The first real friend..."

Lilly seems lost in thought for a moment, then shakes her head as if dismissing some unspoken thought.

"I suppose I'd better do my best to prove myself worthy of that honor."

"Just being yourself should be more than enough to pull that off."

Lilly smiles, but there's a sad quality to her expression.

"I'm not completely sure about that. The dilemma I faced concerning my parents' summoning weighed quite heavily on me, and the fact that Akira was involved in the whole situation as well meant that I couldn't go to her for objective advice. By facing that decision all on my own and by opting to keep everyone else out of it, I could argue that I was very much being myself. And it didn't bode particularly well for me."

"I think that trying to address your own problems yourself is only human. We all like to be as independent as possible."

There's also the possibility that, given the way she acts, Lilly was probably raised and educated to behave as traditionally as possible and was taught that burdening others with one's problems is one of the biggest sins one can commit.

"True, but if it had been Hanako who had been in my predicament, I would have encouraged her to let others share the burden. I suppose... I don't always practice what I preach. If I had confided in Hanako sooner, I probably could have saved her a breakdown. And you a heart attack."

"You're forgiven. This time."

Lilly chuckles and then carefully caresses Hanako's hair once more.

"I'd like to return the trust that Hanako has placed in me, Hisao. The next time she extends me a helping hand or a shoulder to lean on, I'll make sure not to turn it down."

I smile at Lilly and softly take her hand which is still holding Hanako's.

"I'm sure she'd be very happy to hear that, Lilly."

06

"Hey Hanako, I think this one is ours. Can you take a look at the other side of the carousel? I'm aching to get out of here."

"O-Okay."

Hanako walks over to the far side of the conveyor belt that has long strings of suitcases going in an endless circle, and we start looking for our baggage. When our plane landed here at Inverness Airport, we made sure to wait until all the other people on the plane got out. When we reached the baggage claim, I expected our suitcases to be the only ones left, but it seemed another flight had already finished unloading as well, and now we're rummaging through a large pile of bags and suitcases in search of our own.

Lilly's suitcase is easy to recognize, containing both a sticker with the Japanese and a sticker with the Scottish flag on it, no doubt put there by Akira during their previous journey here. Hanako's suitcase, however, is as average as they come, and the only way it stands out is that it appears less used than most suitcases on the conveyor.

As I rummage through the contents of the baggage carousel, I let out a loud yawn. It's nearly seven o'clock in the evening right now meaning it'd be about six o'clock in the morning in Japan. All three of us are about ready to faint from exhaustion. Neither Lilly nor I have slept for the last 22 hours or so, and while Hanako did get some sleep in during our flight to London, the sheer amount of stress she's had to deal with, both before and after our international flight, has pretty much negated the advantage she had. London Heathrow was even bigger and busier than the airport we departed from, and both the crowdedness and the process of having to go through customs and security took a harsh toll on her.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Hanako throw me a quick wave. As I look at her, I can see her dragging my suitcase off the conveyor belt. I get over to her side and notice there are two other suitcases at her feet. Either she got lucky or she's still sharper than I am right now.

"You just take your suitcase, and I'll carry mine and Lilly's."

"Are you g-going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine. You just guide Lilly for me."

"Okay."

We head back to Lilly who's sitting on the floor leaning against one of the walls and talking into her cell phone. As we reach her, I clear my throat to get her attention.

"We retrieved all our luggage, Lilly."

Sporting a weary smile, Lilly closes her cell phone and gets up.

"Very good, Hisao. Akira says she's almost at the airport. I asked her to wait for us at the parking space in front of the terminal."

"I can't wait to get out of here. Is there anything we need to do before we leave, Lilly?"

"No, Hisao. We've already dealt with customs in London, so all we need to do now is leave the secure zone and get through the main hall of the terminal building."

I take a quick look around and see a sign on the wall indicating the direction of the exit. I point it out to Hanako, and she takes Lilly's hand and puts it on her shoulder for guidance.

"Then let's get going. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

Lilly smiles wearily and nods.

"Yes, let's go."

As we leave the baggage claim area through some automatic one-way doors, Hanako presses her hat down in preparation of another slow slog through the crowd. It looks like I'm not the only one who can't wait for this long day to end. Thankfully, Inverness airport isn't nearly as large as London's is, so it only takes us a few minutes to get to the main entrance.

We leave the building, and Hanako and I start looking around for Lilly's sister.

"Do you see her anywhere?"

Despite her weariness, I can tell by the tone of Lilly's voice she's extremely eager to meet up with her older sister again, despite the fact it's been less than two weeks since she left Japan.

"I don't see her. Hanako?"

"Maybe she got held up in traffic."

Lilly takes out her cell phone again and presses the recall button.

"Akira? We're at the main entrance right now. Did you already make it here?"

"You did? Hisao and Hanako haven't seen you."

"What? You can see us?"

07

Hanako and I immediately start looking around, and, sure enough, less than 50 meters away from where we're standing we can see a person with blond hair holding a cell phone to her ear with one hand and waving enthusiastically in our direction with the other.

"Nevermind, we spotted her. I guess neither of us thought of the possibility she'd be wearing plain clothes today."

Lilly puts away her phone, and we hurry over to our welcoming committee. Hanako and I politely wait while Lilly steps forward and gives Akira a long and loving hug. Chuckling, Akira breaks off her sister's embrace.

"Damn, you missed me that much? It hasn't even been two weeks."

I have the impression Akira's merely playing cool. She looks quite happy to see her sister again as well.

"I must admit it felt strange knowing that you were all the way on the other end of the world and I couldn't meet up with you whenever I wanted to anymore."

Turning to us, Akira gives me a friendly nod while playfully ruffling Hanako's hair - a slightly odd gesture that nevertheless makes Hanako smile.

"Yo. Guess you were looking for someone in a business suit, huh?"

We both look Akira over. She does look different from the way she usually does. Instead of her striped black suit, she's wearing jeans and a loose-fitting shirt. She also has a pair of sunglasses on her head.

"You look... c-cool, Akira."

I smirk at our welcoming committee.

"No fair coming here in disguise."

Akira laughs heartily at my comment as she opens the trunk of her car and takes Lilly's suitcase from my hands.

"Unlike some people in this family, I can still occasionally get away from my job. And today's weather was too nice for the suit."

She finishes putting Lilly's suitcase away and reaches for Hanako's. Lilly looks disappointed.

"So they really couldn't make it? Even though it's Saturday today?"

Akira shrugs.

"A foreign business delegation came over two days ago, and Dad wants to impress them, so he's showing them the sights this weekend. He and Mom are essentially playing tour guide right now."

Lilly frowns.

"Couldn't he have delegated it to someone else?"

"It's Dad we're talking about, remember? He really, really likes to keep on top of his business. Though I wonder if those people would still have been so impressed if they had known he put off an opportunity to greet his daughter who's been living on the other side of the world."

I put my own suitcase in the trunk, and Akira slams the lid shut slightly louder than necessary.

"Are you guys hungry? I'll treat you."

"I'm not. We've already had dinner on the plane and had another meal at the London airport. Hanako?"

"Me neither."

"I think all three of us are merely very tired right now."

"Fair enough. I'll treat you guys tomorrow then. A good night of sleep will do you a world of good."

Hanako and I get in the back while Lilly gets into the passenger's seat next to Akira.

"Our folks' home lies slightly to the northeast of Inverness. We keep following the shoreline, and we'll reach it in no time. All buckled up?"

Our last ride during that outing to a jazz club in the city near Yamaku showed us Akira's not particularly concerned with the speed limits, so we make sure to strap ourselves in firmly.

"Good. Let's go, guys!"

As we leave the airport behind us, I breathe a sigh of relief. Looks like the hard part of our vacation is over. Now the fun part can begin.

08

Chapter 22 (Hisao)

01

As I open my eyes and gaze at a completely unfamiliar ceiling, I'm unaware where I am for a few moments. The room I've woken up in reminds me more of a hotel room, with its large bed, a small table with two chairs near one corner and a doorway leading to a niche with a sink and a small shower stall inside, than an ordinary bedroom.

The curtains in front of the window facing the bed are still closed, but judging from the amount of light they're letting through, it's definitely not morning anymore. The dim light and the pleasant temperature give the room a cozy feeling.

For as long as I've known her, Lilly has always carried herself with a certain air of nobility, and when she shelled out a whopping 20,000 yen for Hanako's birthday present without a moment of hesitation, it merely confirmed my suspicions that Lilly came from a family that could be categorized as upper class. The fact that her family owned a summer home and didn't seem to mind paying for two intercontinental flight tickets changed my expectations from 'not strapped for cash' to 'rich'. Still, when Akira dropped us off at the Satou family's residence, I was taken aback by the size of the building. I think the word mansion would not be an exaggeration.

The long journey here had left the three of us so extremely exhausted that after Akira bid us farewell, we pretty much went to bed immediately without waiting for Lilly's parents to come home.

I look at the chairs in the corner again. My own clothes are folded over one of them. The other holds Hanako's clothes. I softly turn my head to the right, and I can see my girlfriend lying next to me. She's currently lying on her stomach and seems occupied scribbling words onto a small blocknote in front of her. Since she's not wearing her hair clip, and a lock of hair is obscuring the right side of her face, it appears she hasn't noticed me waking up yet. With the covers on her side of the bed pulled back and with nothing on except her panties and a T-shirt, Hanako is a pleasant sight to wake up to. Taking care not to alert her, I sneak a hand over to the left side of her lower back and playfully tickle the exposed skin there. Hanako responds with a cry of surprise, turns around and quickly pulls the covers up to her chest. She then looks at me and does her best to pout at me which looks more cute than intimidating, and when I smile in amusement, she can't help smiling back.

"Hey there."

"H-Hey. You're finally awake."

The Hanako lying next to me right now seems completely different from the way she was yesterday. While we were in the process of navigating the airports, Hanako seemed continuously in what I came to call 'survival mode'. Hat pressed down, eyes trained on the floor, gaze jumping back and forth as if scanning the ground for landmines and completely focussed on fighting off her anxieties that were

trying to get a hold of her flight reflex. Right now though, she seems at ease, relaxed and there's a small twinkle in her eye as if she's eager to drag me out of bed and start experiencing our vacation for real.

"Finally? What time is it?"

This gets me a sheepish look.

"It's nearly five o' clock in the afternoon."

"Five o' clock in the afternoon already? Ugh, my sleeping patterns must have been more messed up than I thought."

I grin at Hanako embarrassingly.

"I hope you didn't think I died in my sleep or something."

"I... did... check your vital signs a f-few times... just to be s-sure."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Sleeping for nearly 24 hours straight isn't really n-normal."

"I didn't exactly sleep 24 hours. It was more like 8 hours, followed by 10 more. I've been awake for most of the night."

Hanako's expression shows a hint of worry upon hearing this.

"Did j-jetlag hit you that hard?"

"It's probably more than just jetlag in my case. I've been busy switching back to my regular medication over the last few days and due to the trip and the time differences I wasn't able to take my meds according to the usual schedule yesterday. My chemical balance was probably as stable as a chair with a missing leg."

"How about now?"

"I took my meds before going back to sleep. I'll take my next batch after dinner. I'll be okay."

"Did you just sit here all the time while you were awake?"

"At first I did, but then I decided to take a restroom break, and on my way back I ran into Lilly who heard me flush the toilet. Turns out she couldn't sleep either, so she ended up giving me a tour of the house. Seeing that we went to bed almost immediately after getting here, I appreciated the chance to sightsee. Afterwards we spent time hanging out in the living room until we got sleepy again. Which was probably around half past 6 or so."

Hanako looks dejected at this.

"I wish you'd have woken me up. I wanted to hang out too."

"You were looking so cute in your sleep, I couldn't bring myself to wake you. Besides, we both agreed that you're the one with the healthiest sleeping pattern right now."

Hanako considers this for a moment, then nods.

"So ummm... What's the house like? I would have liked a tour myself."

"It's pretty large. Large enough to cause Lilly to have the occasional bit of trouble navigating it. Seems like there are three bedrooms aside from the master bedroom including this one. Lilly slept here during her last trip, but since no other guest room has a king-sized bed, they decided to let us have this one. The living room is really nice. Big fireplace, soft couches. The kitchen is pretty large too. Two fridges, a kitchen island with several stoves and according to Lilly they have a cellar with a wine rack too."

"It seems... very... large for just two people."

"According to Lilly they employ two servants as well as a housekeeper who does the cooking most of the time."

"Wow."

"Did you know Lilly's family was this wealthy?"

Hanako thinks for a bit and then nods.

"Lilly's not very comfortable with it. I got a general idea from some of Akira's stories."

"You're gonna be surprised when you see the study and the bathroom."

"How so?"

"Most of the house is built in western style, but the study and bathroom are in traditional Japanese style. It's a very weird contrast, almost as if the house has a split personality. Lilly said her father still seems to have a strong emotional connection to his home culture."

"Have you m-met Lilly's parents already?"

"No, I haven't. Lilly said they briefly visited her room to welcome her when they came home last night, but when I woke up it was around midnight, and they already went to bed. I don't think they felt like waking us up just to say hello."

"I am a little bit curious about them."

"Just them?"

Getting my point, Hanako smiles excitedly.

"A lot of other t-things too."

"I guess we'd better get out of bed then, huh?"

I reach out and playfully stroke the top of her head. As I do so, I notice her hair is slightly moist. Come to think of it, I recall she was wearing her nightgown when we went to sleep.

"You already took a shower?"

"You should take one too. It's nearly time for dinner already."

She gets out of bed, walks up to the dresser and takes a bath towel out of it. As I get my clothes off the nearby chair, take off my shirt and make my way to the shower stall, she hangs the towel over my shoulders.

"By the way, Hanako, how long have you been up?"

She doesn't respond but instead tugs both ends of the towel gently, drawing my face close to hers, and gives me a light peck on the lips. I suppose she's not gonna tell me, but judging from the position of the bookmark in the book on her nightstand, she's been awake a lot longer than I have been.

I take a quick shower, dry myself off, put my underwear back on and am about to put on the rest of my clothes when a thought suddenly hits me.

Most of my medication is still in my suitcase. If it stays in there, I might end up forgetting about it again just like what was nearly the case when we went to Hokkaido. It'd be really inconvenient if I ended up in the hospital here. I quickly head towards my suitcase in search of my pill collection.

"Hey Hanako, do you mind if I put my medication on the little shelf above the sink so I won't..."

02

"Ah. Good afternoon, Hisao."

My sentence is cut short when I emerge from the doorway, and I find not just Hanako but also Lilly standing there. Well, Lilly's actually still standing in the doorway. How the heck did I miss the sound of her knocking? As she observes me standing there in nothing but my boxers, Hanako's eyes grow wide and she puts her hand in front of her mouth in order to suppress a gasp.

"Lilly!"

Hanako's eyes dart back and forth between Lilly and me. I can tell she's trying to figure out what to say or do but she doesn't seem quite able to think of anything. Obviously Lilly can't see me, though I bet she'll deduce that something's off if both of us just keep standing there without saying a word. I swallow quietly and do my best to sound as casual as possible.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you knock. Did I interrupt you two?"

"Not at all. I merely came to tell you and Hanako that dinner will be served in half an hour. It's been a rather warm day today, and it will apparently remain pleasant for most of the evening, so you can probably afford to change into some light clothing if you haven't done so already."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Will we be eating in the dining room?"

"I've asked if we can have our meal on the patio behind the house. Apparently the view is quite lovely, and some fresh air will do us good after spending an entire day indoors."

"Works for me. Hanako?"

"Sure. I'm getting a bit hungry too."

Lilly smiles broadly.

"Very well. I will see you in thirty minutes then."

"...Right."

Giggling softly, Lilly turns around, feels her way over to the door and leaves the room. I quickly retrieve my pill bottles and start getting dressed. Hanako lets out a loud sigh.

"That w-was...awkward."

"It kinda was. We got away with it though."

"Thank goodness."

03

As Hanako and I make our way to the sliding doors leading outside, we can see someone in the distance standing by the table on the patio. Hanako leans in and whispers to me.

"That's not Lilly's m-mother, is it?"

"Dunno. I don't think so. She has brown hair...Lilly's mom is probably blonde, isn't she?"

"The maid then?"

"Most likely. I wonder if she speaks Japanese."

"I don't think she does."

We walk outside and the woman near the table, who upon closer inspection indeed seems to be wearing a servant's uniform, turns around and makes a deep and polite bow before addressing us.

"Welcome."

"Hey, you speak Japanese! That's a relief. I'm not exactly a fluent English speaker."

My hopes are quickly dashed when she sheepishly shakes her head and starts talking to us in English.

"Whoa there! Hey Hanako, can you tell what she's saying?"

"Umm... She's s-speaking rather quickly, but I think she's s-saying she only knows a few s-standard phrases in Japanese."

"That's a shame. Err... The English say 'How are you?' and 'Fine, thank you.' when they greet each other, don't they?"

"I d-don't think it's p-pronounced that way."

While the two of us are still figuring out how to communicate with the woman in front of us, she suddenly bows again and delivers another greeting, one in English this time. We look behind us and see Lilly standing there. As I listen to her replying to the woman, I notice she appears a little disappointed.

"Lilly! Good timing. What are you telling her?"

"I was telling her it was a shame she gave away my presence to you. I had been hoping to hear how far you'd get in your communication with her."

For a moment, I wonder if she's teasing us, but Lilly seems entirely sincere.

"Well, now that you're here anyway, would you mind doing the introductions?"

Lilly nods and starts talking to the servant woman. It's not easy to follow her, but we can clearly make out our own names among her words. The woman smiles and repeats our names.

"Hanako and Hisao."

We both smile a bit at hearing our names spoken in such a foreign accent.

"Hanako, Hisao... This lady is called Allison. She's my parents' housekeeper and coordinates the rest of the staff. She's also in charge of making whatever purchases the household needs and is often tasked with the meals as well. It is her cooking skill we'll be enjoying during our stay here. I have learned during my last trip here that she's a very good cook."

"Hello Allison."

"H-How d-do you do, Allison?"

Allison smiles at our attempts to get her name right and from her subtle grin, I can tell we're mangling the pronunciation a bit.

"Her name can be tricky for Japanese to pronounce correctly, but you still did rather well."

With the formalities out of the way, the housekeeper motions us to sit at the table which has already been laid and, as Lilly prepares to take a seat, draws up a chair to assist her. Before walking back into the house, Allison turns to us and gives us a short explanation which makes little sense to me but results in an approving nod from Lilly.

"What is she saying?"

"We'll be having chicken soup to start with, followed by freshly made pork pie as the main course and pumpkin crumble for dessert. She hopes we'll enjoy it."

"It sounds good."

Hanako and I sit down, Hanako picking the seat that makes her right side face away from the house.

"The Scottish kitchen may take some getting used to if you've lived in Japan all your life. But if it's not to your tastes, don't hesitate to let Allison know."

"I hope it won't come to that. With the level my English skill is at, what's meant to be 'Could I have something else for my next meal?' could very well come out as 'Your nose reminds me of a pork sausage.' "

Lilly giggles at what she probably thinks is an exaggeration.

"Surely you're not that bad? This vacation offers you the opportunity to get in plenty of practice. And you did remember to bring along a dictionary, did you not?"

"I did, though I was kinda hoping that with you along, we weren't going to need it."

Lilly makes a face as if I just asked her to rejoin the student council.

"I don't mind playing interpreter every now and then, but I won't be around you 24/7. Unless you intend to stay in your bedroom all the time while I'm away, which would be a terrible waste of opportunity, you'll have to interact with others without any help on my part at some point or another."

"Huh? What do you mean away?"

"Initially, my parents were reluctant to pay for two additional tickets. They changed their minds when Akira pointed out that while I was spending time with them, one accompanying friend would just spend a lot of time alone. Two accompanying friends could keep each other company. I did come here to spend time with my mother and father, so during those times I won't always be able to hang out with you."

I kind of understand where Lilly's coming from, though with Hanako and me any kind of contact with the locals is still going to be tricky. English is pretty much my worst subject at school and conversations with people here will probably be difficult and drawn-out if I have to do the talking. Hanako's English, while definitely not on Lilly's level, is still a lot better than mine, but her lack of social skills and unease in dealing with people in general completely destroys the advantage she has over me in the language department. All in all, neither of us is really fit to interact with people around here.

Still, seeing how unique an opportunity we were given by being able to come here, I don't think even Hanako wants us to spend the entire vacation holed up in our room.

"So I suppose Hanako and I will have to find our way around. Any tips?"

"Being a city with an extensive tourist industry, Inverness is easy to navigate by coach. There's a bus stop not too far from here. I'll ask Allison to stop by the tourist information center tomorrow and get you two bus cards, some pamphlets and maps with the major tourist attractions and bus routes."

"That would probably be a good start."

"Are you two more interested in nature or culture? There's plenty of both in the area."

"I think I'd personally like a bit of both. I think the smartest thing is for Hanako and me to do the scenic parts by ourselves and save the cultural spots for when you're coming along so you can translate whatever the tour guides or videos have to say and we don't miss anything."

I look at Hanako who briefly nods to indicate her agreement.

"That sounds like a very good idea, Hisao. I'm sure we'll still get plenty of those opportunities."

At this moment, Allison returns with the first course of our meal. The soup tastes differently from the soup I usually buy from the cafeteria, but it's quite good nevertheless, and I think I can learn to really like this. As we eat, I take some time to look the girls over. Lilly's wearing a blouse with fairly short sleeves, sandals and a skirt that reaches down to her knees - a lot less conservative than her usual skirts which reach all the way to her ankles. Hanako's pants aren't unlike the ones she usually wears, but her blouse is slightly lighter. It still has long sleeves to cover the burns on her right arm, but the area around her neckline shows slightly more skin than her usual outfit does.

"Do the two of you have any plans for the evening?"

"I promised Hanako a tour of the mansion. She was really eager to see the rest of it for herself."

"Did you really sleep for nearly 24 hours, Hanako?"

"N-Not really. I woke up at ten o' clock. I just... wanted to finish m-my book first before going out."

Wow, that means she's been just lying next to me for nearly 7 hours. No wonder she was so eager for me to get up. I don't exactly buy the excuse about the book, and from the looks of it Lilly doesn't either. It's a whole lot more likely that Hanako decided not to leave our room because she was afraid of awkward encounters with the housekeeping staff or worse - with Lilly's parents. She probably dreaded the idea of making a poor first impression on them.

"I'll be honored to give you a small tour, Hanako. Any other plans?"

"No. Perhaps take a walk along the l-lake. We could see it from our bedroom window."

"Akira and I often went there during our last stay here. She often challenged me to swimming matches, though I'm afraid it was never much of a competition. It's not truly a lake by the way, despite Akira calling it that. Moray Firth is more like a cove or a bay. It's connected to the North Sea, though since it's almost completely surrounded by land you don't experience a lot of waves."

"I didn't even bring my swimming trunks, so I hope she's not thinking of challenging any of us."

"I don't think she will. She has her job here now, so after tonight we probably won't be interacting with her a lot, unfortunately."

"Tonight?"

"She called me about an hour ago and invited me to come and visit one of the local pubs with her tonight. I was hoping you'd be willing to come along as well."

"She's not wasting time in making good on her promise to take you out for a drink once you got here."

"It appears so. We'll be heading to downtown Inverness and see if we can find a place we like. I think she'd enjoy your company as well."

"That jazz club outing last time was pretty fun."

I look in Hanako's direction to see what she thinks. She seems to take a moment to consider the offer and then softly nods to indicate her agreement.

"O-Okay then."

"Wonderful. Let's make tonight the first of many memorable experiences."

Chapter 23 (Hisao)

"Let's get out here. The place should be around the corner."

Akira takes out her wallet, pays the cab driver and motions us to get out. She then takes Lilly's hand, puts it on her arm and carefully starts guiding her down the street. Hanako and I take a moment to look around. The airport and the green hills of the countryside could have been mistaken for being located somewhere in Japan, but that's definitely not the case with the town. Especially the older buildings we pass feel extremely foreign to us. They serve as an unavoidable reminder, aside from the cab driver's incomprehensible dialect, how far away from Japan we are.

"Shall we?"

I playfully take Hanako's hand and place it on my arm similar to what Akira just did. Hanako giggles, wraps her arm around mine, and we start following Akira's lead. After less than a minute, we reach the entrance of what seems to be a bar. Before we enter, Hanako turns around, pulls her photo camera from her bag and takes several pictures of the picturesque buildings lining the street.

01

"Want me to make some recommendations?"

As we enter, Akira cheerfully points to the bottle-filled shelves behind the bar. The place has a bit of an old-fashioned quality to it with most of the furniture made from unpainted wood and a stuffed head of a stag on the wall near the bar. The front of the room is fairly crowded, but there are several free stools near the bar itself. Near one wall is a small podium, and I think I can see something resembling a pool table in one corner on the far side of the room.

"They probably have soft drinks here, don't they?"

Lilly throws us a slightly mischievous smile as she folds up her cane and takes a seat on one of the bar stools.

"Would the two of you object to a glass of wine so we can perform a proper toast to Akira?"

I sit down one seat away from Lilly so Hanako can sit in between us and not worry about other patrons staring at her.

"Have you forgotten that the three of us are only 18, Lilly?"

Lilly chuckles, obviously having expected that answer.

"18 is old enough in this part of the world, Hisao. You can order whatever you like here."

"That's pretty convenient, though we'd still better moderate ourselves. I'd hate the idea of one of us getting sick in the cab on the way back."

"We won't be taking a cab, Hisao. We'll have a private transport to take us back to our parents' place. Even so, you make a good point. Let's not get carried away while we're here."

I throw a look at Hanako, probably the one among us with the lowest alcohol tolerance, to ask her opinion. She gives a brief nod to indicate it's okay, and I turn back to Akira.

"So I guess we'll have four glasses of wine. Would you mind ordering? I bet I'm incapable of even pronouncing half of the names on those bottles."

Akira grins.

"Heh, would you believe lots of those brands are new to me too? Fortunately I've had a taste of several ones during our last time here. You won't be disappointed."

She beckons to the barkeeper and points to one of the bottles on the shelf behind him. After the barkeeper finishes handing us all a glass, Lilly takes hers, sniffs carefully to take in its scent and then raises it with an appreciative smile.

"I would like to perform a toast to my hard-working and wonderful sister, who has started working her way up the ranks here at head office. May her new job be met with great success and ample satisfaction. And may it be known that I admire and respect her very much."

"Cheers!"

"C-Cheers."

We raise our glasses, perform a toast and each take a sip. The slightly sweet taste of the white wine Akira has gotten us is surprisingly similar to what we had during Hanako's birthday party. Akira seems to have a knack for picking tasty drinks. While Hanako, Lilly and I down our drinks in small, measured sips, Akira manages to empty her entire glass in a single gulp. Upon putting her glass back on the bar, she flashes Lilly a sheepish smile.

"Man, you may have a knack for speeches, Lils. Though I feel kinda compelled to point out that my current position probably has less to do with my work record than it has to do with me being a Satou."

Lilly gives her sister an encouraging smile.

"I know Father pulled a few strings to get you that recommendation, but I also know that now you're here you will do everything in your power to prove yourself and push yourself to excel until everyone at the office is convinced that putting you where you are now was not a special favor, but rather an act of foresight."

Akira gives Lilly an amused look, but when she speaks her tone is somewhat wistful.

"Probably... I guess... that's part of being a Satou as well, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if Father felt the same when he first came here."

"Heh, from his reputation at the office I'd say he's still in the middle of that process. People seem to regard him as some kind of one-man army over there."

"You had better not become such a workaholic that our phone calls start getting phased out over it."

While Lilly's tone is playful, both she and Akira fall silent for a moment. Until now, it appears that they met up with one another whenever they could and contact took place on a regular basis. When Lilly

returns to Japan however, their contact will be limited to carefully timed international phone calls and there's no doubt in my mind that both of them are painfully aware of this right now.

"Don't worry about that, Sis. I'll be sure to keep my priorities in order. Let's ditch the depressing thoughts tonight and have a good time."

Akira raises her hand and affectionately ruffles Lilly's hair, surprising her for a moment and then gestures to the barkeeper for another drink. While he's refilling her glass, the barkeeper says something to Akira that I can't quite make out but causes Lilly to 'hmmm' quietly. Akira then nods and passes him several bills from her wallet.

"What was he saying?"

"There's pub quizzes being held here during the weekends and the next one's about to start. I just paid him the admittance fee. You two interested in teaming up with us?"

I exchange a glance with Hanako. I don't think I'll be able to pull my weight here. I probably won't even understand the questions, let alone know much about what probably passes for common knowledge around here. Hanako seems a bit hesitant as well.

"I think we'll pass. I noticed a pool table in the corner over there and Hanako still owes me a rematch after our last game in the jazz bar."

Hanako nods with a small smile, eager to get farther away from the din in the front area and have a small competition with me.

"I accept t-the challenge."

"Have fun you two. We'll be at the table near the podium if you need us."

"Would it be okay if I paid a visit to the restroom first? I doubt we'll be allowed to leave our table during the quiz itself."

"Sure Sis. Let me show you the way."

Lilly folds out her cane and places her hand on Akira's arm. We follow them to a small corridor near the back.

"Ladies room is the door on the left."

As Lilly nods and navigates down the corridor, we turn to Akira.

"Lilly sure knows how to perform toasts. Sisterhood must be a wonderful thing."

Akira nods and smiles warmly.

"Several of my colleagues can't stand their siblings. I think I just got lucky. We've always gotten along well despite the 7-year age gap. We got even closer when it was just the two of us living together."

"That couldn't have been easy, a 19-year old and a blind 12-year old living on their own, even with Lilly being as independent as she is."

"Don't mention to her that I told you this, but back when our parents first moved to Scotland, Lilly wasn't independent at all. I mean, whenever one of our parents wanted something done that they couldn't do themselves, they'd ask me to do it. Before our parents left, they liked pampering Lilly."

"So you taught her how to do stuff like laying the table and cooking?"

Hanako suddenly stifles a soft giggle. Akira grins broadly.

"In case that didn't tip you off, cooking isn't exactly where my talent lies, to use Lilly's words. That's as polite as she can be about it. That ought to tell you something."

"If you didn't then who did?"

"After our parents left, we hired a housekeeper who stuck around for some time. "

"And this housekeeper taught Lilly?"

"At my request in exchange for a very generous bonus. I wanted some peace of mind. I wanted to be able to sleep peacefully at night and do my job without worrying all the time. The burden of responsibility was enough as it was. I could have hired someone else. Heck, I could have easily hired two... Mom and Dad never really left us strapped us for cash. But..."

"Yes?"

"I really hated still depending on our folks' money all the time - as if things were alright as long as they just kept paying. If we'd get independent enough for the two of us to get by without additional help, I wanted to shoot for that. And we reached that point eventually. Lilly was a very diligent pupil and a fast learner."

Akira seems aware of the fact that her own pride played a role in this whole thing and looks at the floor for a moment. I quickly move in to fill the moment of silence.

"Lilly's probably more self-sufficient than many of her classmates who have partial eyesight."

"That's a good thing. University probably ain't gonna be as accommodating to blind people as Yamaku. If she wasn't as independent as she is, she'd have had no choice but to follow me to Scotland."

Noticing the door of the ladies room opening, Akira points at the pool table nearby.

"We'll be heading to our seats. You two have ever played English billiards before?"

"English billiards? I thought this was a pool table."

"Look at the case on the wall. You can't play pool with only three balls."

I look into the direction Akira's pointing and notice a device on the wall with three balls, a white, a yellow and a red one, resting in three indentations at the top and a coin slot on the front. Akira walks over to it and takes one of the balls. Immediately, a high-pitched buzzer sounds, causing Lilly to flinch a bit. She quickly puts a coin into the coin slot and the noise stops.

"First game's on me. When the buzzer goes off you'll either have to insert another coin or return the balls to the case. You guys know the rules?"

One look at Hanako tells me she's as much in the dark about how to play as I am. Akira seems to read our expressions.

"One player uses the white ball and one player uses the yellow one. You score points by hitting the other balls with your cue ball in various ways. You get points for bumping the other balls into a pocket with your cue ball which is called a 'winning hazard' or by pocketing your own cue ball after contact with another ball which is called a 'losing hazard'. It's 3 points for moves involving the red ball and 2 points for moves involving the other player's cue ball. You also get points if you hit both other balls with your own cue ball in one shot. I believe they call that a...er..."

"A cannon."

Akira shoots Lilly a smirk after the latter finishes the explanation for her.

"Heh, showoff. Let's hope your recollection of trivia is also gonna help us win that quiz."

After giving us an explanation about where to put the balls after pocketing them and what constitutes a foul, Akira points at the scoreboard on the wall.

"You can decide for yourself whether to make up a winning score or just play until the time runs out. Everything clear?"

"I think so."

"Yes."

"Great. Have fun. And wish us luck."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for you."

"Good luck."

As the Satou sisters make their way to the front of the pub, Hanako hands me a cue, and we each shoot a ball across the table to see who gets the first turn.

"Looks like you're closer to the front area than I am. Do you want to play with white or yellow?"

"Hmmm... I'll take white."

"I think it's best if we simply play until our time is up. Okay?"

"Okay."

Taking a moment to plan her move, Hanako shoots her cue ball forward and hits the red ball with considerable force, but then misses the yellow one by only a few centimeters.

"My turn."

Hanako's shot has left the balls in an advantageous position for me, and after taking careful aim, I manage to knock my own cue ball into the pocket after just barely grazing the red ball. This game is definitely gonna be trickier than that time we played pool. Since we're both new at this, the odds

should be fairly even but I learned last time that Hanako has slightly better form than me. Beating her isn't going to be easy.

"Good shot."

"Thanks."

I put my cue ball on the designated spot on the table and try to shoot a repeat of my previous shot. This time, however, my aim is slightly off and my ball lands in the pocket without hitting any others.

"Ugh, a foul. That means you get 2 points, doesn't it?"

"Y-Yes."

I move the sliders on the scoreboard and watch Hanako lining up her shot. The expression on her face is that same mixture of concentration and relaxation she had during that last game of pool we played. There are quite a few people in the pub at the moment, but now that the quiz has started almost everyone is gathered in front of the stage on the other side of the room, and nobody seems to be paying us any attention. I try to make out what the quiz host is saying, but can't really catch more than a few words here and there. We probably made the right decision in not going along with Lilly and Akira. The whole situation gives me a slight feeling of déjà vu.

"This sure brings up memories, doesn't it? The four of us going out and Lilly and Akira doing their thing while the two of us spend the evening knocking billiard balls around."

As she hits her cue ball and bounces it off both other balls, I can see Hanako smile at the memory.

"Let's h-hope this evening will b-be just as fun."

I had fun at the time as well, though in a moment of naïvete I also made a mistake that evening that nearly sank my chances with Hanako. When I told her, while she was in the process of opening up to me, that I was happy to protect her, it was a remark said with nothing but the best intentions. It wasn't until our confession in the park that I realized just how denigrating that must have sounded to her.

"I'll try not to mess up and say anything hurtful this time around."

"W-What?"

Hanako was preparing an attempt to pocket my cue ball with her own, but upon hearing my words she looks at me and gives me a confused look. She thinks for a moment, then realizes what I was referring to.

"Oh... ummm... It's okay. I nearly f-forgot a-about that already."

"Sorry for bringing it up."

Hanako reaims her cue and takes the shot, but misses her intended target though her ball manages to touch the red ball before coming to a standstill.

"I'm... trying n-not to ponder the p-past while I'm here."

"You're right. Better to focus on the present."

As I move in to take my turn, I notice Hanako shaking her head with a shy smile.

"I... really... like the present as it is r-right now. I think I can... enjoy it more if I don't think too hard about things. But I still n-need to figure out what I want in the f-future."

That's the first time I've heard from her about that. I've asked her about it before, but she always told me she didn't know yet, and I'd drop the subject in order to avoid putting pressure on her.

"Good to hear you're giving it serious thought."

"I... I'd like to have it sorted out before c-classes start again."

"Do you have a general idea already?"

I've made an effort to come up with suggestions myself before, but it's kinda difficult because Hanako doesn't seem to have any subjects she naturally excels in, unlike Lilly and myself. However, also unlike Lilly and myself, Hanako doesn't have any subjects she's particularly bad at either. It's almost as if even Hanako's test scores are focussed on the purpose of not standing out. That does make planning a future a tricky activity.

"Maybe."

I take a shot and manage to nudge Hanako's cue ball into a pocket.

"Care to tell me about it?"

Hanako doesn't respond, but merely looks at me. I know that look on her face. It's her 'Quid pro quo' expression.

"I'll tell you about my plans in return, okay?"

"Okay."

I make an attempt to pocket the red ball this time, but my shot is too soft, and my target stops mere centimeters away from the pocket in the corner.

"After starting the club with him, I think I'd seriously break Mutou's heart if I didn't pursue science as a career path. That part is pretty much a done deal. Unfortunately, I'm not sure yet about the specifics. That's why I asked Mutou to cover a wide range of topics at the club during the upcoming months."

"You're hoping to... c-come across a subject eventually that you feel a c-click with?"

"That's the idea. Also, there are several universities in my hometown that offer wide selections of scientific studies and whose entrance exams I should be able to handle. If I could make it into one of those, I could save on the costs of renting a dorm room on campus by moving back in with my parents. I have to be mindful of my family's financial situation."

Hanako nods understandingly and prepares to finish the shot I failed to get right.

"So how about you?"

"Ummm... Did you... like my article? About the science club?"

"I loved it, and it seems like Mutou did too. Why?"

"Naomi wants m-me to write the next ones too."

"Will you?"

"Yes. The next one is about our own club, so I can use my own experience. There's no need to contact a teacher or club president, which makes it easier."

Personally I'd still be at a loss on what exactly to write and how to word it. Writing essays was never my strong suit, but Hanako doesn't seem worried about that. Come to think of it; when I woke up I saw her scribbling on a notepad.

"Were you busy writing your next column when I was waking up?"

"Just b-brainstorming a bit. But I want to have it finished before we fly back to Japan."

"I suppose this is related to your plans for the future, isn't it?"

Hanako takes aim and knocks both the red ball and her own cue ball into the corner pocket.

"Maybe... I could... do something related to that."

"You mean... study journalism?"

Hanako doesn't answer immediately. She merely gives me a long look as if to try to read my thoughts and determining whether I think she's gone crazy. After a few silent seconds, she slowly nods.

"What do you think?"

I'm not sure. No matter how hard I try, I'm completely unable to picture Hanako pushing herself through a thick crowd in order to shove some celebrity a microphone in their face. On the other hand, from what I've learned about her activities at the newspaper club, she's been genuinely enjoying them, and people are always more eager to push their boundaries when they're working on something they're interested in. And pushing boundaries and devising workarounds to our limits is what every student at Yamaku is encouraged to do. I'd never imagine Emi's friend Rin to be an artist either, seeing that she has no arms, yet she has learned to transcend that limitation, and now she's supposedly one of the best painters in the art club. Could it be the same with Hanako?

"To be honest, it comes a bit out of the blue. It's not anywhere near the direction I thought you'd be heading into."

Putting the balls back on the table, Hanako smiles meekly while preparing to strike her cue ball.

"Ummm... What d-direction did you...AH!"

I'm having the impression Hanako's mind wasn't really into that last strike, since it's way too hard and as a result her cue ball flies off the table and rolls towards the bar, coming to a stop underneath one of the occupied barstools. I look at Hanako, and she gives me a pleading look back. I suppose it's up to me to be a gentleman.

"I'll go get it."

Hanako smiles in relief and gives a silent nod. I put down my cue and walk over to the people seated at the bar. I can see a businesswoman, a redhead man dressed like a tourist and an older woman wearing a rather expensive beige jacket. As I approach, the two women turn around and look me over.

"Ah...please excuse me."

I instinctively bow before remembering that's not exactly a common practice in this country. I then bend down and reach out to grab Hanako's cue ball which has rolled under one of the women's barstools. But before I can take the ball, I hear the occupant of the barstool clear her throat. With a puzzled look I get back up. She gets off the barstool, reaches down, takes the ball and drops it into my hand.

"There you are."

"Thanks, but it really wasn't... necessary to..."

The woman stops me with a gesture and gives me a mischievous smile.

"You were just... retrieving something you dropped, correct?"

"Yes?"

I wonder what exactly she's getting at? She chuckles as if I just said something hilarious.

"Every Scotsman is... familiar with that old trick, lad."

What does she...WAIT A SECOND! As I realize what she's insinuating I visibly reel in shock.

"I wasn't trying to..."

The bartender and the other woman both laugh as they watch me blush.

"It's a joke, lad. I hope you're not angry."

Not really knowing how to respond to her, I simply shake my head and walk back to the billiards table.

"I had to go through a lot to get this back for you."

Hanako smiles and plants a soft kiss on my cheek.

"Thank you."

Since Hanako got a foul by striking a ball off the table, it's now my turn again. I retrieve my cue and take careful aim.

"By the way, what was it you were about to ask before you bounced that ball off the table?"

"Hmmm? Oh, I wanted to know... what direction you thought I h-had in mind for myself."

I strike the cue ball and manage to hit both other balls, but my ball ends up resting against one of the edges of the table, making the next shot a tricky one.

"Well, my reasoning was that since you seem to handle computers pretty well you could perhaps try for a career in the IT sector. There's a pretty high demand for people with experience in that area."

Not to mention the fact that that area also draws people with slightly less well-developed social skills, meaning Hanako would stand out less. I decide not to mention this though.

"I did... think about that. There's this girl at the n-newspaper club who does the editing together with me."

"The girl with the large cast on her arm?"

"Yes. Jun. She really likes computers. The few times we speak, she usually speaks about them. About v-video games and computers in general. It made me realize... I l-like working with them, but they d-don't interest me enough to make a career out of it."

I am about to reply to her when we're surprised by a sudden buzzing noise.

"Time is up."

"And you've won."

I have, though only by a few lucky shots. We are only a few points apart. If we play another game, it might very well end differently. We both look at the buzzing case with a look of annoyance. Hanako starts gathering the balls in order to return them to the case while I start searching my wallet for coins to insert into the slot. Before either of us can finish, the buzzing suddenly stops. I look up and notice the patron who fluttered me earlier standing next to the time clock. She must have put some coins of her own into the slot. She gives us a friendly smile.

"To make up for ***** *.*."

"Ah, excuse me?"

Hanako seems to have caught the patron's meaning as she whispers into my ear.

"She said it's to make up for embarrassing you. What d-did she do?"

I briefly tell Hanako what happened when I went to retrieve her cue ball. Hanako looks a bit sheepish. I can tell she finds it somewhat amusing, but doesn't want to laugh since I went to get the ball back that she shot off the table.

"I have no idea if this is the famed British humor or if this person is just plain weird."

The patron watches our conversation with an amused expression, though she obviously can't understand what we're saying. When we stop talking, she shrugs her shoulders.

"Well... it... was a rather bold action."

"Sorry... err... We're on... vacation here. My English... is not very... good."

This gets her to smile.

"It's not that bad. I can understand you well. Your... pronunciation is good."

"That's... ah... good."

I'm finding her rather easy to comprehend compared to most people here, and suddenly I realize why. Instead of a Scottish dialect, she's been speaking to us in common English without a very noticeable trace of a local accent and it sounds like she's been doing her best to speak slowly and clearly.

"You're... not from around here?"

"I am, but I deal with many people from abroad at my work so I try to speak plain English when talking to people who aren't Scottish themselves. I can speak Scottish if you like."

"Please don't."

"Or maybe I should speak in Japanese instead. It'll probably make it easier for us to understand one another."

Both Hanako and I gasp in surprise since that last statement was delivered in accented but otherwise completely fluent Japanese.

"Y-Y-You speak Japanese?"

The woman allows herself a brief laugh at our astonishment.

"Hmm hmm. I've lived in Japan for over 20 years. "

The woman makes a polite bow.

"I'm very honored to meet my daughter's best friends."

"Are you...?"

"...Lilly's and Akira's mother? I am. Here in Scotland we're not as formal as people are in Japan. Would you mind if I address the two of you by your first names while you're here?"

I share a quick look with Hanako, who is still trying to digest what just happened and can only manage a flabbergasted nod. When in Rome...

"Err... That's okay."

The woman smiles broadly and extends her hand.

"Then I will address you as Hisao and Hanako, and you can call me Karla. Pleased to meet you."

Despite my dumbfoundedness, I manage to extend my hand and am given a firm, confident handshake. After a subtle nod in her direction, Hanako remembers to follow my example and hesitantly sticks out her hand for a handshake as well.

"Karla?"

"Yes. Karla Satou."

After shaking Hanako's hand, Lilly's mother turns to me.

"It seems I caught you two by surprise. Didn't Lilly tell you that I'd be picking you up tonight?"

"She did mention we'd get 'private transport', but I didn't expect anyone to turn up this early. I also wasn't quite sure what either of you looked like."

"I suppose I did get here sooner than initially planned. I was getting a bit tired of courting investors, and my husband and the colleague who was with us seemed to be handling things fine without my input. I was already slated to leave early in order to pick all of you up, so I figured I could be missed for a little while longer. I don't get many opportunities to see my two daughters together."

She gives the two of us a long analyzing look that makes Hanako fidget nervously.

"I wasn't sure what either of you looked like either. We spoke briefly on the phone before, didn't we? I think you look a little like I imagined you to look like."

"You look quite a bit more like your youngest daughter than I imagined."

She chuckles modestly.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

My words were more an honest appraisal than an attempt at flattery. I can instantly tell that Lilly gets most of her looks from her mother. Karla Satou is a tall woman, probably as tall or even slightly taller than Lilly with a similar figure. Although her hair is significantly shorter than Lilly's - about neck-length from what I can see - there's a familiar waviness to it, and its color is the same vibrant blond as that of her daughters, although it's already slightly grey near the roots. Her eyes are deep blue like Lilly's, but unlike Lilly's cloudy and unreadable stare, Karla's eyes have a sharp and curious gaze to them, and I can see a twinkle in there that I've seen in Akira's eyes as well. Karla's wearing a neat-looking business suit, but the lower part of it consists of a dark skirt that reaches down to her knees instead of pants like Akira's, and around her neck is a cross-shaped necklace similar to the one Lilly often wears. While looking just as formal, Karla's attire looks a lot more feminine than Akira's office clothing. She must be in her fifties already, but she's still quite good-looking. Unlike Lilly, who has a rather pale complexion, Karla has a rather obvious tan, suggesting she's an outdoor person. It would explain her rather fit and healthy appearance.

"Do Lilly and Akira know that you're here already?"

"They do. I made sure Akira spotted me when I came in here. Unfortunately I can't just walk up to them to say hello while the pub quiz is still going on. People might think I'm feeding answers to my daughters. So until that quiz is finished, it'll be just the three of us. If you don't mind some company while playing billiards, that is. I promise not to intrude."

She winks at me.

"I can even retrieve stray cue balls for you if you like."

Ouch!

"I... don't mind."

"M-Me neither."

"Wonderful. I'll go and get my beer from the bar. Can I get you two anything to drink? It's on me."

"Really? Could you please get me an orange juice then?"

"F-For me too, please."

"Coming up."

As Lilly's mom walks back to the bar, I turn to Hanako with a slight smirk.

"Lilly's figure coupled with beer and a business suit. I'm shooting for a 50/50."

Hanako presses her hand to her mouth to hide a giggling fit. Looks like I wasn't the only one appraising Karla and trying to determine whether she's more like Lilly or Akira.

"Yes."

"So, wanna go for another game? I believe I now owe you a rematch."

"Let's play again."

As we put the balls in position, Karla comes back and places two glasses on the edge of the billiards table.

"Lilly told me the flight was kind of a taxing experience. Have you two gotten your bearings back already?"

"I'm still suffering from jetlag, but I'm pretty well-rested right now. The accommodations have been really good."

Karla smiles appreciatively.

"Don't hesitate to ask if you need anything. If I'm not around, feel free to approach the staff. I take it you've met Allison?"

"We have. She's a very good cook."

"She is. If you get homesick, be sure to ask her to cook up some Japanese meals. She may not speak your language, but she knows a truckload of Japanese recipes. *chuckle* She IS employed by my husband after all. And don't be afraid to ask her if you need anything else."

It's nice to hear we're essentially having our own private restaurant. This vacation just keeps getting better and better. Hanako and I resume our game, and true to her word, Karla mostly goes back and forth between watching our game and listening to the quiz host's questions without making a lot of

conversation aside from occasional small talk. We hear the buzzer again after what turned out to be an intense neck-and-neck race, and I let out a sigh as I realize that I'm a handful of points behind Hanako.

"Well, at least we kept the suspense going until the very end."

Hanako permits herself to show a proud little smile.

"It was a good game."

"I guess you two are even now, huh?"

Karla picks up the balls and puts them back on top of the time clock device, shutting down the annoying buzz.

"We are. We may need a third game to break the tie."

Hanako's expression tells me she'd be up for that, but Karla motions toward the front area and I notice the quizmaster is no longer on stage.

"You might want to wait with that for a moment. It looks like they're checking everyone's answers right now. We'll probably hear who has won in a few minutes."

"I wonder how they did."

"What team name did they come up with?"

"Team name?"

Karla gives me an amused look.

"Not familiar with pub quizzes, are you? It's sort of a tradition for each participating team to think up a creative name. Like erm...'Knuckleheads' or 'Intellectually Challenged' or 'B for Dyslexic'. That sort of thing."

"They've probably picked one without us. We'll just have to see."

Knowing Lilly, it might very well be a play on blindness of some kind... That'd be the sort of thing she'd do, though that wouldn't apply to Akira, so maybe they went with something else.

Suddenly the quizmaster gets back on stage and gives a few taps on the microphone in order to make clear he has something to say. I try my hardest to make out what he's saying, but his accent and our distance from the stage make that somewhat of a lost cause. Lilly's mom seems to read my mind.

"Right now he's simply thanking everyone for participating. The people who came in third will get a free drink, the ones in second place will get three free drinks and the winners will get a special prize."

"And what would that be?"

"Usually just drinks. This is a pub after all."

The quizmaster makes an enthusiastic gesture, and the people in the room burst into applause at his words.

"Third place goes to 'The Masters of Romance'. I don't think that's them."

"Doesn't sound like it. Who on earth would think up such a name anyway?"

Another announcement from the quizmaster and another applause follows. I can see Lilly's mother smirking briefly.

"Second place goes to 'The Master Baiters'. That had BETTER not be them."

"Naw. Lilly's too classy for that."

Finally the winner is announced and Karla brightens up.

"Well, well. Winner of tonight's quiz is 'Oriental Express'. Heh, clever."

Sure enough, I can see Akira and Lilly getting up as a thunderous applause fills the room. Karla, Hanako and I are happy to join in with the applauding crowd. Akira takes Lilly's hand and carefully guides her up the stage.

"That's pretty amazing. Two people who've lived in Japan their entire life beating what's probably a bunch of locals."

"Heh, the questions they use here are never about local tidbits during the summer break. Gotta give the tourists a fair chance, after all. It's still impressive though."

After the quiz host gives both of them a firm handshake, Akira feistily throws her hand up in the air and gives a 'V for victory' sign. Lilly merely gives a few modest waves as she's handed a bag presumably containing their prize. Their presence on stage results in another wave of applause and more than a few wolf whistles as well. Lilly and Akira seem to take the attention pretty well, but I'm happy Hanako and I decided not to join the team. I don't think getting up on stage would be Hanako's idea of a great time.

Knowing that Akira will eventually go back to where she left us, I decide to stay near the billiards table rather than meeting the sisters in the middle of a noisy crowd. Eventually they get down from the podium and slowly make their way back to where we are. Akira is wearing a confident grin.

"Man, those guys were no challenge at all. Imagine how easily we'd kick their asses if we'd take them on on our home turf."

"Well done you two."

"Congratulations. What d-did you win?"

"Let's have a look, shall we?"

Akira takes the bag from Lilly and looks inside, then fishes up a bottle with a honey-colored liquid inside.

"Heh, Scotch whisky. Two bottles. I should've guessed."

I take a look at the name on the bottle's label and promptly get a headache.

"Geez, can people around here actually pronounce that name?"

"Auchentoshan? Can't say I've tasted that one before, but this is not cheap liquor we've got here. Looks like we just won back our entry fee big time. Although..."

Lilly smiles playfully.

"I wonder..."

I'm sure I know what Lilly's thinking. I'm not sure how serious she is, but I can see her mother's eyes narrowing.

"Lillian!"

"Mother!"

Lilly's pout and the slightly whiny tone of her reply, as if she just got caught with her hand in the cookie jar, seem so out of place for her that Hanako can't hold back a giggle. Lilly quickly recovers though and puts on her usual composed smile.

"Please use my real name, Mother."

"I hope you weren't seriously considering drinking that."

Lilly doesn't answer immediately. I know from experience that she has a habit of carefully choosing her words before speaking, but the slight delay seems to annoy Karla a bit.

"I admit it might be a little bit irresponsible."

Karla shrugs her shoulders.

"Only if you haven't been carefully and gradually building up your alcohol tolerance while you were in Japan."

"I have not."

No carefully considered reply this time. Lilly seems to recognize the importance of quickly denying Karla's suggestion. I wouldn't be surprised if Lilly's mother thinks that Lilly never even drank alcohol before. Akira grins an amused grin before coming to her sister's rescue.

"She does have a point, Lils. This Scotch contains 40% alcohol. That's a bit much if you're not used to alcohol or don't know exactly where your limits lie. Since it's a shame to waste our prize, why don't you let me try exchanging it at the bar for something milder? Like a few bottles of quality wine."

"Would that be acceptable, Mother? There's still a toast I have to perform when we get back."

Karla considers it for a moment and then gives a resigned nod.

"I'm personally fine with that. Just remember that we have a picnic scheduled for tomorrow, and you're coming along, whether you're feeling up to it or not."

Chapter 24 (Hisao)

01

"I think it's only fair for me to take my half of the spoils."

Akira reaches into the bag, takes two bottles of wine out of it and hands them over to Lilly.

"These two should get the three of you through the night. Don't drink it all at once, kids."

After winning the pub quiz and getting two bottles of Scotch whisky as a prize, Akira made a deal with the bartender and exchanged the two bottles of Scotch for four bottles of wine. We didn't stay at the pub for much longer afterwards, opting to spend the rest of the evening at the Satou home. When we got there though, Akira expressed the desire to be brought back to her place. Karla seems a bit disappointed.

"I'll be returning to the place where your father is having his meeting. If you'd like, I could take you along to meet the investors we've been dining with this evening."

"Naw, I'd rather just get some extra rest."

Lilly walks over to Akira and places her hand on her sister's shoulder.

"Thank for the fun evening, Akira. And remember not to drink those bottles of yours alone. You know what they say about those kinds of people."

Akira grins.

"Maybe I should return to that pub and pick up one of the guys who seemed so extremely interested in us."

Lilly's smile drops.

"I hope you're not being serious there."

"Tell you what... You can share it with me if you can find it in your schedule to drop by my place after I'm off-duty."

"I will remember that."

Akira gives us a small wave and then walks off, followed by her mother. Lilly turns to us, still holding her two bottles of wine.

"We're going to need a corkscrew and some glasses. The staff have already gone home, so we'll have to search the kitchen ourselves. If you come across any snacks you like, feel free to take them as well."

Hanako and I guide Lilly to the mansion's large kitchen, and the two of us start searching the various cupboards and drawers. I quickly find a corkscrew in the drawer containing the cutlery, and when I turn around I can see Hanako very carefully taking three glasses out of a cupboard.

"Lilly, I found some crackers and a box of olives. Can we take them?"

"Of course, Hisao. Is there any cheese in the refrigerator?"

"Yeah, a fairly big block. Not sure what kind it is though."

Lilly walks over to me and carefully sniffs the cheese.

"Have you ever had Cheddar before, Hisao? It's very popular here, but, like most kinds of cheese, considerably less so in Japan."

"I don't think so. It can't hurt to give it a try though."

"Hanako, could you help me cut it into smaller pieces?"

"Sure."

As the girls prepare to start cutting the cheese, a thought suddenly springs up in the back of my mind.

"Lilly, before we left the pub, your mother spoke of a picnic."

"Yes, are you up for one? Supposedly the area she's picked is quite interesting."

"Is that okay? You said you'd be spending some time alone with your parents without us around."

"Mother's still curious about both of you. I don't think she'll object."

"Very well then."

Lilly smiles.

"There should be a set of notes nearby somewhere. Could you get me one and a pen, please?"

Hanako puts a piece of paper and a pen in Lilly's hand, and I can see her slowly and carefully writing a small note that she then puts on the kitchen sink unit. It says: 'Picnic for four. Please change shopping list accordingly.' She then turns to Hanako.

"It is usually Allison handling the food for a picnic, but it might be fun for us to prepare it instead tomorrow morning. Will you help me?"

"Sure. I'd love to."

"Wonderful. I'm looking forward to it. That's for tomorrow though. Tonight, let's hang back and relax."

Taking the bottles, glasses and snacks with us, we make our way to the mansion's spacious living room.

"Is there a remote control lying around here, Hisao?"

"There's one near the fireplace. Want me to give it to you?"

"Just press the on-button. It should still be on the right setting."

I do as instructed and I hear a beep coming from the fireplace. A moment later, flames appear behind the glass window covering the fireplace. The light and heat coming from the gas fireplace give the

room a cozy atmosphere. Lilly starts filling our glasses and gestures towards a smaller couch near the low table in the middle of the room.

"I think it'd be most appropriate if the two of you take the love seat."

"Okay."

I take one of the glasses off the table and sit down on the single cushion couch. Following my example, Hanako sits down next to me. Lilly takes a seat on the larger couch on the other side of the table. Waiting a moment to make certain we've gotten comfortable, she smiles at us and raises her glass.

"A second toast this evening, this time for my wonderful friend Hanako, who has, last week, successfully completed her first aid training and is now a qualified first responder. May she never need the skills she was taught there, and may it be known that I admire and respect her very much."

"Cheers!"

"C-Cheers?"

Hanako blushes lightly, not sure how to deal with Lilly's praise, obviously not finding it completely unpleasant, but not completely comfortable either. As if attempting to look for distraction, she puts her glass to her lips and starts sipping at it. Looking at Lilly, I notice she gives a soft nod.

"Well, bottoms up."

02

As Lilly finishes a story about a funny incident involving Akira, I can hear Hanako giggle and suddenly feel her hand ruffling my hair. That's probably the fourth time she's done this over the last fifteen minutes. We've been hanging out here in the living room for well over an hour, and we finished the first bottle of wine a few minutes ago. To say that the atmosphere is cheerful is quickly becoming an understatement. I don't think anyone's actually completely drunk yet, but I'm sure we've reached the point where each of us is getting rather tipsy. The fact that the wine Akira obtained for us is really tasty, that the atmosphere between us is completely relaxed and that we don't have to be secretive about having a few glasses this time around probably all contributed to that.

I remember the time the three of us had our first encounter with alcohol during Hanako's birthday party. While Lilly merely became slightly more playful and forward than usual, the effect of the wine on Hanako was noticeably less subtle. Not only did her usually rigid inhibitions fall away after she had a couple of glasses, but she also became remarkably clingy. I'm starting to notice that aspect of her returning as the evening goes on.

"Heh, so even Akira screws up sometimes. She doesn't seem like someone you'd usually have a lot of worry over."

"Those occurrences are indeed very rare. She's more responsible than she seems at first."

"Like earlier this evening? When she joked about going back to that pub and pick up some guy, you seemed put off."

03

Lilly's smile fades just a little. For a moment her thoughts seem elsewhere. Then she takes a sip from her glass and sighs softly.

"It's not really that... It's just..."

Suddenly the atmosphere is starting to get gloomy. Did I touch some unknown nerve?

"You are aware that Akira was in a relationship until recently, are you not?"

"Yes, when we decided to spend a long weekend in Hokkaido, you mentioned we'd be cleaning up the place because Akira and her boyfriend would be using it the week after."

"That... trip never took place. We were the last ones to use the summerhouse before it was sold."

"When we first learned about your parents' summoning she mentioned having broken up with him."

"She intended to spend the weekend with him there and tell him about her new job at the end of it. But it turned out he already knew about it."

"How?"

"Yuichi's employed at the sales department of the company's Japanese branch. He and Akira met at work, although they generally didn't see each other on the workfloor very often. He heard the news about Akira's promotion through the grapevine, so to speak, before we even got back. When she invited him to spend the weekend with her, he confronted her with the rumors he heard."

"I suppose he wasn't very happy about it."

"I don't know the details, but I do know that they got into a fight, and she broke up with him then and there. They've been together for quite some time, and Akira seemed happy with their relationship. She doesn't show it, but I'm positive she's still hurting over it. She came back to Japan knowing she was going to break up her relationship, but this was not the way she wanted things to end."

04

"That kind of explains your reaction to her remark. Then again, maybe all that attention in the pub wasn't for her but for you."

Lilly giggles.

"I certainly hope not."

"Why not?"

"Perhaps I'm jumping to conclusions, but I do not think any person who wolf-whistles a lady would be my type."

Somehow that answer doesn't surprise me at all. Lilly is still a lady through and through. That does make me wonder about something else, though. Hanako mentioned once she didn't remember Lilly ever having had a boyfriend while she was attending Yamaku, despite the fact Lilly's a very popular student. Perhaps she has some very particular tastes?

"If you don't mind me asking a bold question... What kind of person *would* be your type, Lilly?"

Lilly sends me a very cheeky grin in return.

"That *is* a bold question, Hisao. May I ask why you are so interested? You already have Hanako, after all."

I can tell that Lilly's merely being a tease, but I nevertheless feel a sharp stare coming from my right. Looks like Lilly's remark is pushing me into very dangerous territory.

"Looks like a guy can't even be curious about his friends anymore without being accused of considering infidelity. Forget what I just asked, okay?"

"It's okay, Hisao. It wasn't an unfair question. But not an easy one either."

As Lilly takes some time to think up an answer, I give Hanako a quick reassuring kiss on the cheek although it doesn't seem to completely get rid of her suspicious frown.

"I think I would be most attracted to the type of person who has a bit of a gentlemanly streak and is kind and honest. He should have a caring personality and a bit of a laid-back pace. I don't think I'd be able to keep up with someone who'd always hurry me along. He does not have to be extremely social, although he should be fun to talk to."

So far no surprises there.

"He should not be adverse to me mothering him a bit at times, but he should display initiatives from time to time as well. He should be able to get along well with my sister and my best friends. It's fine if he doesn't share my musical tastes, although I'm not sure if I'd be able to be around someone who'd be playing... well... jackhammer music all the time."

That's a pretty interesting way to describe music with a loud and heavy bass and percussion. I can get why Lilly, who mostly uses sounds around her as orientation dislikes overbearing music.

"Above all, he should treat me as a person and not look upon me with pity."

I know for a fact that she's not the only person in the room who values that part.

"I would have to like the way he looks as well."

What?

"I'm sorry, did you just say 'look'?"

Lilly sniffs curtly as if admonishing me.

"Of course. Just because I cannot see doesn't mean I don't have my own preferences."

"And what would those preferences be? I imagine something like hair color is a foreign concept to you."

"I think it's very hard to explain to people who do not use their sense of touch to determine appearances. What I 'see' may be completely different from the way you see things or people. I think the term 'I'll know it when I see it' applies here. Somewhat. I have a general idea of what most people I regularly interact with look like..."

Does that include Hanako? I quickly look at her. Hanako seems to understand what I'm thinking for she nods in affirmation.

"A little while back."

Lilly's dazzling smile confirms Hanako's words. I've never heard about that before. I'm impressed. That would make Lilly the second person Hanako has allowed to look upon her face voluntarily. No wonder they have been so close lately. This is probably about the biggest gesture of trust Hanako could give someone.

"Hisao..."

Lilly slowly gets up.

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering... There's one dear friend whose face I still can't picture in my mind. Would it be okay if I...?"

I immediately look at Hanako.

"Is it okay?"

Hanako pouts slightly.

"Why are you asking m-me?"

She's right. Asking her for permission only makes it seem like an act of intimacy. Lilly's been a treasured friend since I came to Yamaku and having her take a look at me is nothing unreasonable although Hanako doesn't seem to enjoy the idea. Still, I don't think this is something I can reasonably refuse.

"Alright then."

I walk around the table and take Lilly's right hand which I then guide to my face before letting go. None of us says a word as Lilly's hand moves over and around my features, from my chin, to my cheeks, to everywhere else including my hair. I expected this to feel a lot more disquieting than it does. I suppose that's because the action is entirely a matter of practicality, being functionally no different to simply looking at someone's face. However, I notice that as she runs her fingers back and forth, a mischievous smile starts appearing on her face as if she's enjoying some private joke. Before I can figure out what it might be, I suddenly feel my arm being grabbed and pulled back just far enough for my face to retreat beyond the reach of Lilly's fingers.

As I look at Hanako, I notice that slightly disapproving pout is still on her face. I'm not sure how long this process usually takes, but from Lilly's slightly sheepish look, I'm almost beginning to wonder if she was... Can you accuse a blind person of staring?

"Thank you, Hisao."

"Ah... Right. Have you memorized it all?"

"I have."

I prepare to get back to the couch we were sitting on, but Hanako isn't moving yet. She's still waiting as if expecting Lilly to say more. Eventually, Lilly smiles playfully.

"It seems you were spot-on about him, Hanako."

I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean, but Hanako's eyes grow wide in horror, and she lets out a gasp, then immediately wraps both arms around me and pulls me back a little further before giving me a pleading look.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. What did you say about me?"

Instead of answering, Lilly merely teasingly shakes her head.

"Sorry Hisao. That's girls' talk."

I get back on the couch, and Hanako sits down next to me, but still holds onto me. I can only assume that Hanako confided in Lilly once that she thought I looked handsome or something and Lilly's statement of agreement, very likely combined with the wine that was consumed, has now triggered some sort of rival reflex in Hanako. Eager to change course and steer out of this minefield, I latch onto the first safe subject that springs to mind.

"You mentioned musical tastes, Lilly. I suppose that excludes anything with a prominent bass. I guess your tastes are more traditional? Like ballroom music?"

I recall Hanako taking Lilly on an outing to a night club that held a ballroom dance night a few weeks ago, so it's a safe bet that Lilly's into that kind of music.

"Ballroom music is among the things I like to listen to. Classical music in general is something I really enjoy listening to. Perhaps youth nostalgia plays a role as well."

"Youth nostalgia?"

"My mother used to play classical music, and me listening to her practice was one of the highlights of my day."

"What does your mother play? Would it be bagpipes or is that too cliché?"

Lilly makes a face.

"Not every Scotsman plays bagpipes, Hisao. And they're not very useful for anything other than Scottish folk music."

"Then what instrument does she play?"

"My mother's rather skilled at playing the cello. Perhaps I can convince her to give us a small performance this week. Assuming that she's kept up with her practice."

Cello, huh? I suddenly remember something I noticed when I was first shown this room.

"I think she has. There's a black case standing in this very room. I bet it contains her instrument."

Lilly's face lights up upon hearing this.

"Oh, she's keeping it here?"

"Yeah, there's a large case standing in one of the corners. I'm pretty sure there's a cello in there."

"Hmmm, would you mind bringing it over here for a moment? Please be very careful with it."

I walk over to the corner and carefully carry the cello case to the couch Lilly's sitting on. She kneels down next to it and slowly feels her way over to the small latches on the side. Opening the case, she takes the instrument out of it and gently, almost tenderly, feels its neck, fingerbox and strings. As she starts toying with the tuning pegs and occasionally plucking a string before carefully adjusting the corresponding peg, a nostalgic look appears on her face. The way she's tuning this thing gives me the impression this is far from the first time she's handled an instrument like this.

"From the looks of it this isn't the first time you've handled a cello."

"It is not. I had music lessons in middle school, and we were allowed to pick an instrument to familiarize ourselves with. I chose the cello, hoping my mother had passed her musical instincts onto me."

"And did she?"

"I don't think she did. I know how to play, but I'm not especially good at it. I haven't touched a cello after I graduated middle school."

"But you do know a few pieces, right?"

"A few. It takes a bit of time to learn to play a song completely by ear and from one's memory, especially if you weren't familiar with it before."

"Care to give us a demonstration?"

"Now?"

"If it's not a problem."

Lilly thinks for a moment before taking her glass and taking another sip.

"Very well then. On one condition."

"What condition?"

"Please close your eyes, and keep them closed until I stop playing."

Huh? What an odd request. I'm a bit puzzled but decide not to think too hard on it and close my eyes.

"Okay, my eyes are shut."

"Mine too."

I can hear ruffling sounds coming from Lilly's direction, followed by a squeaking sound that's probably her adjusting the screw securing the endpin, followed by some more ruffling and finally silence. Then I hear a few strings being plucked and the beginning of a soft melody. It sounds slow and uncertain at first, but gradually picks up. As I listen to the song, I can tell Lilly's earlier appraisal of her own skills was not inaccurate. She's handling the instrument itself well enough, which is something I'm positive I wouldn't be able to do, and she tuned the instrument correctly, but the pace of the song is a bit unsteady, and I can clearly make out the occasional wrong note in there. Then again, it's also possible she's occasionally messing up due to the alcohol having diminished her hand coordination a bit. Suddenly, the song stops, and Lilly lets out a soft, but frustrated sigh. I curiously open my eyes and see a frown of concentration on Lilly's face. After a few moments however, her face relaxes again and she picks up where she left off.

The right notes must have slipped her mind for a few seconds. Memorizing an entire song seems like a massive task to me. I take advantage of the opportunity to quickly look Lilly over. She's still sitting in her usual spot on the couch, holding the cello in front of her. The fingers of her left hand are hard at work trying to keep up with the quick movements of the bow in her right hand. Her handling of the bow is remarkably fluid, considering the fact she's had several glasses of wine already.

As my gaze lowers slightly, I manage to suppress a gulp with supreme effort as I suddenly realize why Lilly wanted us to close our eyes. I remember reading once that the cello used to be considered an inappropriate instrument for women to play because the usual playing posture involves spreading the legs with the instrument between them. Nowadays women probably wear long dresses, but the knee-high summer skirt Lilly's been wearing this evening doesn't even remotely qualify as one. The cello is more than large enough to block the view of her panties, but I can definitely see way more of Lilly's long and shapely legs than anyone would consider appropriate.

Before this latest image can sink into my mind, I feel movement on the couch next to me and the next moment, I can see Hanako getting up and positioning herself in front of me. Getting the hint, I quickly close my eyes again. I don't feel her getting back on the couch though. Is she just going to stay in this position until Lilly stops playing? I cautiously take a peek and sure enough, Hanako is still in front of me, her arms spread wide as if to try and block as much of my view as possible. I fight to hold back a chuckle. Truth be told she looks more than a little silly. There's just something... exaggerated... about her disapproving pout as if she's trying just a little bit too hard to be intimidating, and the result is more cute than threatening.

I open my mouth to tell her to sit back down and assure her that I have eyes for nobody but her, but I'm pretty sure Lilly would immediately pick up any attempts at conversation and figure out what's going on here. I try to get my answer across to Hanako by using gestures, but she either doesn't understand their meaning or is simply refusing to pay attention to them.

Resorting to other means, I reach up, carefully take her face in my hands and bring it down until her eyes are at the same level as mine. I give her a soft kiss on the lips, making sure to keep it as quiet as I can. That makes her relax a bit, though she still shows no signs of sitting back on the couch next to me. My eyes wander along her body, and I quickly avert my eyes as she catches me staring down the neckline of her blouse for a moment. When I look back at her face, I'm taken aback by the change that has come over her expression. Her disapproving pout has made way for a broad and childish smile that makes me a bit wary. She moves a hand over my face as a gesture for me to close my eyes, which I reluctantly do. I concentrate, trying to pick up any sounds from her, but it's impossible to hear anything over Lilly's music.

Just when I consider taking another peek to see what she's up to, I feel a weight dropping down on my lap and when I open my eyes I can barely hold back a shocked gasp. What caught me off guard wasn't the fact that Hanako has straddled my lap; that much I felt the moment she lowered her hips, but what shocks me is the fact that she has unbuttoned over half the buttons of her blouse, giving me an ample

view of her belly and chest while still hiding most of the scarring on her right side. I instinctively try to look past her to see if Lilly has noticed anything, but as I try to do so, Hanako takes my face in her hands and gently but firmly presses it to her chest.

Of all the thoughts that suddenly assault my brain at once, the first one is bizarrely the realization that I know a story (was it a book or a movie?) where a woman distracts a guard in exactly the same way. Come to think of it, distraction is probably the underlying thought behind Hanako's action. She's beating Lilly's distraction by offering a more tempting one.

How am I supposed to deal with THIS?

I didn't expect Hanako to be this bold, even after emptying a few glasses of wine. Lilly can't see us, but even so...

I can't just tell her out loud to get off my lap and button up her blouse. And Hanako's probably well aware of that. The circumstances effectively have me gagged.

I slowly turn my head to the side. Hanako's breasts aren't large enough to smother someone, but it's slightly less uncomfortable with my nose no longer pressing against her breastbone.

I wonder if this is what she gets like every time she's had too much to drink. She also got pretty clingy the last time. When I went to put her to bed that night, she latched onto me in a similar manner and wouldn't let go. I never asked her how much she remembered from that night and how much in control she was of her actions.

Making one last attempt to get Hanako off my lap, I brace myself and raise my hips, preparing to grab hold of Hanako in case she loses her balance. It doesn't have the intended effect though. My movement merely causes our crotches to firmly rub against each other and the sensation causes both of us to simultaneously let out a sharp breath. Startled by our mutual reaction, I hold my breath for several seconds, and when I look up at Hanako's face I can tell from the fact she's using one hand to cover her mouth that she did the same. When it's clear that Lilly didn't hear us, we both relax and Hanako once again presses my head to her chest, this time letting her chin rest on top of it and softly running her fingers through my hair. Though she's holding onto me pretty tightly, there's still a certain tenderness to the whole thing.

The wine has left me a bit fuzzy as well, but with some effort, I manage to collect my thoughts enough to assess the situation. This is a bit of a weird predicament, but there's probably no need to panic. As long as neither of us makes any sudden movements or sounds, Lilly's probably not going to notice what's happening in front of her. She'll soon finish her song and Hanako will get off my lap on her own since we'll have to put the cello back where we found it. I might as well enjoy the experience in the meantime.

Deciding to reciprocate Hanako's oddly expressed affection, I move my hands underneath her blouse, wrap my arms around her lower back and pull her closer. Hanako's body feels wonderfully warm. I can't exactly hear her heartbeat, even with my ear pressed against her chest, but I can faintly feel it. I'd be lying if I said I hated this. As my fingers detect the thin layer of perspiration on her back and the smell of her body enters my nostrils I can sense desire slowly welling up inside me. Hanako's method of 'seducing' me may be extremely unrefined, but I can't dispute its effectiveness.

06

I'm not sure how much time passed between the moment I decided to get a little bit more comfortable and the moment Lilly finishes the last notes of her song, but I have to admit I wouldn't have minded if it had lasted a bit longer. As it becomes clear that the song's really over, Hanako lets go of me and leans back a bit so we can both give Lilly a round of applause. Considering the fact she hasn't practiced in years, Lilly did rather well though one still wouldn't mistake her for a professional musician.

"Great performance, Lilly."

"Well done, Lillly."

I notice a slight slur in Hanako's voice, though it's not nearly as pronounced as it was during our last encounter with the bottle.

"Thank you, you two. I hope the occasional slip-ups weren't too grating."

Preparing to get up, Hanako slowly raises her hips. I can tell from the look on her face she wouldn't have minded this taking a little bit longer either.

"Not at all. In fact..."

I pause for a moment. I'm not sure if it's a wise idea to let the genie out of this particular bottle, but seeing that we got away with our previous moment of shared affection...

"I personally wouldn't mind an encore."

"I hope you're not making fun of me."

Lilly sounds a bit suspicious as if she's not completely convinced of my sincerity.

"It wasn't perfect, but all things considered it sounded pretty well. And it's cool getting a private performance from a friend."

"Hmmm..."

"I'd... like to hear mmore too."

"One more time then. Close your eyes again please."

07

As I raise my head to give Hanako a knowing look I can't help but notice the glowing smile on her face as if I just proposed to her. I suddenly realize I've seen that type of triumphant smile before. It's an exaggerated version of the 'Hurray, I won!' -smile she shows whenever she wins a game we play together. I suddenly realize that by her slightly intoxicated logic this may very well have been a competition...she felt Lilly was encroaching on her territory and me allowing her to remain where she is for a little while longer confirmed to Hanako that she successfully seduced me away from the 'competition'.

I can hear some ruffling behind Hanako as Lilly readies her instrument for a second song. Hanako softly takes my face in her hands, brings her face close to mine and when the first musical notes start vibrating in the air I find myself locked in a quiet kiss with her. We stay like this for several seconds until, during a particularly loud note, Hanako breaks it off and we let out a gasp that's hopefully drowned out by the music. I once again wrap my arms around her, and when we share another kiss, I notice that Hanako has started moving her hips a little. I give her a surprised look. She's taking it slightly farther than I anticipated. There's a playful smile on her face - broader than usual with just a tiny tinge of embarrassment. Her face and upper chest look flushed, either from embarrassment, intoxication or arousal. Probably a combination of all three.

I'm not sure whether to feel nervous from or excited by Hanako's bold approach. Her motion, a slow but steady grind, has caused a pleasant feeling to start spreading from my groin to the rest of my body and as a sense of arousal starts building up inside me, I find that, without having noticed it, I've started making small grinding movements with my own hips to match hers. I lean back to look at her face and I can see she's trying her utmost to avoid making any sounds. In fact, we're both going back and forth between holding our breath and exhaling sharply whenever Lilly's song picks up slightly in volume. It's somewhat of a reassurance that Hanako's still going out of her way to make sure Lilly can't hear us, even with her usual inhibitions lowered.

The question is how long we can keep this up. The experience is both pleasant and extremely frustrating at the same time. The friction caused by our nether regions rubbing against each other is starting to feel better with each passing moment and when I look at the way Hanako squeezes her jaw shut and closes her eyes every few seconds I can see she very much feels the same thing. But neither of us dares to make even the slightest sound or move a single muscle except for those required to continue our grinding motion. At the same time, despite the fact we're in somebody else's living room, despite the fact our best friend is only a little more than two meters away from us, despite the fact a single loud gasp or moan could betray us, I can barely resist the temptation to kiss her passionately, to fondle her supple breasts, to touch her everywhere. I put my hands on her hips and press her down a little harder. As a result we both let out an involuntary sigh.

08

Suddenly, I can hear something behind Hanako and when I look in Lilly's direction, I notice she has abruptly stopped playing and has gotten up from the couch. My heart skips a beat and for a moment I worry I might end up having an episode right here on the spot. Did Lilly catch us?

"Lilly?"

"I... I think I hear a car outside. My parents must be home. I'd better put the cello back."

SHIT! This is bad. If Lilly's parents catch us the way we are now they'll probably either drown us in the nearby bay or ship us back to Japan in the cargo hold of a plane. Or maybe both. When I look at Hanako, who's in the process of getting off my lap, I notice she looks scared as well. Lilly has already started messing with the endpin's screw, but can't really get it loose. I hurry over to her, grab hold of the screw and give it a few hard twists until it's loose enough to dislodge the endpin. When I look back at Hanako, I notice she's frantically trying to button up her blouse, but her nervousness coupled with the effects of the wine she's had make her unable to get even a single button fastened. Somewhere in the house I can hear the sound of a door. We have to get out of here or this vacation will meet a very premature end. As if some divine entity has decided we still have business here, a semi-acceptable excuse suddenly finds its way into my brain. I quickly run over to Hanako who's still fumbling with her blouse.

"Lilly, I think it might be better to introduce ourselves to your father when we're completely sobered up. We don't want to create a bad first impression. Please excuse us for tonight."

"Ah... Hisao? Wait, what...?"

No time for discussion. We probably only have a few seconds left to spare. I grab Hanako's hand and make a mad dash for the exit.

"Good night, Lilly."

In our haste to get out of the room, up the stairs and into our guest room, we nearly trip over our own feet a few times. When we reach our room I throw open the door, pull Hanako inside, close the door and frantically lock it as if some demon from the netherworld has been chasing us. As I confirm that

the door is really locked, it takes me a few seconds to realize we're safe. Man, what a screwup this could have been. I turn around to face Hanako, the both of us still panting heavily.

"We're... safe...I think. We... got away... with it."

"Y-Yes..."

09

We take a moment to catch our breath, look at each other as if to say 'Now what?' and then burst into an uncontrollable laughing fit. The situation is simply too ridiculous to grasp. When we have finally gotten the tension and adrenaline out of our system, I get close to Hanako and hug her gently. Should we go to bed now? If last time was anything to go by, we'll probably feel like crap in the morning. But I can't say I'm tired yet. And as I hold the still softly giggling Hanako, the warmth of her body brings back the feelings we shared in the living room earlier.

I'm probably not the only one feeling that way as Hanako hugs me back less than gently and presses herself against me like she did after her birthday party. This time, however, she raises her head and starts kissing me. In contrast to the few careful and quiet kisses we shared downstairs earlier, the ones we're exchanging now are passionate and filled with longing. A slight aftertaste of the wine we've had earlier fills my mouth as our tongues dance around in a fevered embrace, and I feel my head getting a little fuzzy again. I can feel her hands move underneath my shirt and stroking my back. Eager to return the favor, I move my hands underneath her blouse. As soon as I do so, she lets go of me and starts shaking her shoulders, trying to shake off her blouse without breaking our kiss. Since she's gotten slightly sweaty already, causing the blouse to stick to her body a bit, I decide to speed things up by taking it off myself. I raise my arms, hoping Hanako gets the message, and sure enough a few seconds later my shirt is pulled over my head and dropped at my feet. We resume our makeout session, and with more luck than skill I manage to get Hanako's bra off in a single try. We edge towards the bed step by step without breaking our embrace or our kisses and somehow manage to kick off our shoes on the way. Keeping one arm around Hanako's waist, I start fondling her left breast with the other hand, drawing a nasal moan out of her in the middle of our kissing.

When we finally reach the bed, there's only one thought on my mind. I want her. The desire she's awakened in me isn't going to be satisfied with mere kisses anymore. I feverishly try to undo the button of my pants. It seems to take an eternity. The moment I get it loose and unfasten my zipper, I feel two hands grab hold of my pants and pull them down in one go, taking my boxers along with them. Emboldened by Hanako's act, I reach out, unbutton her pants, and a moment later her pants and panties are around her ankles as well. With the last pieces of clothing (somewhat) out of the way, we indulge in the mutual hunger we feel. As we act out our desire, it strikes me how different this is from how we usually do this. Whenever we satisfied each other in the past, we made certain to build things up slowly and carefully, making sure to keep things tender and gradually explore more intimate areas as we proceeded. This is nothing like those other times. We're feverishly moving our hands across each other's body, almost at random as if we're possessed by an unbearable itch yet we can't find the correct spot to scratch. The wine we've had this evening is probably at least partially responsible, but I don't think that's all there is to it anymore. Is it the fact we were stimulating each other earlier while being forced to repress every signal our body was trying to let out? Or is it the fact we haven't done it in a month and we're both dying to change that? Taking a moment to finger her, I can instantly tell that she's ready. We were probably both ready the moment we dashed into this bedroom. I lift one of my legs, trying to get my pants off without taking my hands off Hanako's body. However the next moment, my leg gets stuck, I lose my balance and I nearly fall backwards. The only reason we remain standing is because Hanako manages to brace herself in time. That was close. I could have hit my head against the nearby dresser and broken my neck. What a pathetic way to go that'd be. We'd better do this another way. I turn to the bed and pull back the sheets.

"Hanako, ah let's get on the bed."

A feverish kiss, followed by a gasp.

"Y-Yes."

Then one more.

Hanako gets onto our bed, crawls a little farther onto it and then starts wiggling her legs in an attempt to get rid of her pants. I nearly feel my heart stop at what I see before me. The sight of a thoroughly exposed Hanako, on all fours and completely naked save for her socks and the pants and panties around her ankles, is a temptation I can't resist. I get on my knees on the bed behind her and carefully, yet firmly take hold of her hips.

"Hanako...c-can I...?"

The brief nod that follows is all I need. I put the tip of my member against her entrance, carefully use my fingers to brush her labia aside and then push myself forward and into her.

"Hhhhh!"

"Eaagh!"

Hanako gasps in surprise as I enter her, and the intense pleasure I feel as her insides envelop me forces a loud moan out of me. It's soft and warm inside of her and from this position I can penetrate her slightly deeper than usual. I remember to check on Hanako, but notice she shows no signs of discomfort. I feel a deep sense of satisfaction as I thrust my hips back and forth, as if I've been staring at a wrapped present for days on end and finally get to open it. The pleasure that shoots through my hips is enough to cause my knees to buckle slightly, and I hold onto Hanako's hips for added support. I notice the sounds that Hanako's making are a bit louder and more unrestrained than usual. Wanting to pleasure her more, I bend over a bit and fondle her breast, then try to position my hand near the spot where we're joined, so I can finger her some more. As I feel my way around, I suddenly feel Hanako's hand over my own as she guides me to the right spot. It's a bit awkward since I can't move as easily while bending over her like I am. Still, Hanako's cute moans in response to the stimulation more than make up for that. As I feel my limit approaching, I take hold of Hanako's hand, which is still resting on top of my own and press it against the spot I was focussing on until now. She doesn't react immediately, and for a second I believe she's not going for it. Then she furiously starts rubbing and I firmly grab hold of her buttocks with both hands and start thrusting again. The sight of Hanako in front of me, the wonderful sensation that runs through me with each movement of my hips, the sound of our heavy breathing, even the sound of my body slapping against hers (which we usually find embarrassing) all combine to push us towards our rapidly approaching climax. Shaking the last few shreds of embarrassment from my mind, I give in to lust and give us the final push towards the inevitable.

10

Chapter 25 (Hisao)

01

I wish I was dead.

Was it this bad the last time?

It might have been but there's no way to know for sure. Even digging through my memory feels like smashing my head into a wall. Or into a pile of broken glass. Or into a wall with broken glass embedded in it.

02

I grit my teeth as I try to bear the painful pounding inside my head. It doesn't really help, although I am getting slightly more aware of my surroundings. I notice a lot of light around me. A painful lot of light. Too much light. I roll onto my back, use both hands to shield my eyes and carefully open them. Even the small rays of light slipping through the cracks between my fingers manage to hurt my eyes, but I nevertheless keep them open. Eventually my vision has adapted enough for me to look around the room through squinted eyes. The torturing light turns out to be sunlight from the nearby window. My eye falls on the nearby curtain. If I could get to that curtain and close it that would make things a lot more bearable.

Damnit.

Of course, the curtain's too far to close from where I'm lying, so I'll have to get out of the bed and make my way over there which is easier said than done. My arms and legs feel like someone snuck up to me in my sleep and injected lead into my veins.

I really don't want to get out of bed, but that light isn't going away by itself.

I manage to make my way to the edge of the bed, but as I prepare to step out of the bed I notice that something is somehow keeping my legs stuck together. I pull away the covers just a little bit so my feet become visible and I notice that I'm still wearing my socks and that my boxers and pants are around my ankles. I groan softly in exasperation. The way I'm feeling right now, even the effort of having to pull up my pants and underwear comes across as an excruciating task. Still, I'll have to do it if I want to make it over to the window. Trying my hardest to ignore my body's protests, I manage to sit up, reach out and pull up my pants. The window is only four to five steps away, but it feels more like fifty. When I finally reach the window, I give a sharp pull on the curtain and sigh as the lighting in the room dims. It does little to diminish the throbbing sensation under my skull, but I do feel a bit of relief now that I can open my eyes without getting the sensation of someone rubbing them in with pepper extract.

Now that I can look around the room without squinting, I notice a motionless form on the bed. I faintly recall waking up partially lying on top of something warm and soft before rolling onto my back. Hanako's still largely covered by the bedsheets, but I can see her long dark hair stick out on one end and her socks and pants sticking out at the other end. I let out another soft groan. It hurts to think too much right now, but I manage to remember just enough of last night's events to blush a bit.

Despite feeling sick and exhausted, I hesitate to get back between the sweat-soaked sheets and opt to take a quick shower instead. The warm water running over me feels good although it does less to ease my hangover than I was hoping for. It does ease my hurting brain a bit, allowing me to think back on last night's events. It's not the first time a few drinks have left Hanako a bit clingy, but it's definitely the first time she's gone this far. It's not like I've been acting like the adult in the room though. After last time, I thought I'd be able to handle Hanako just fine, even if she got like this. But now it turns out that that Hanako is able to handle me just fine as well.

I get out of the shower, not really feeling any better but certainly feeling more awake. I still have a headache and feel rather exhausted. While it took me very little time to fall asleep, my sleep was restless for most of the night. I wonder if getting back into bed will be a good idea. I take a look at Hanako who's still lying on her stomach in exactly the same position as before and probably hasn't moved a muscle since I went to take my shower. Last night, after we finished, we pretty much collapsed on top of each other, and I somehow managed to get my hands on a sheet to pull over us. Under other circumstances, I'd have no seconds thoughts about getting back in bed. Hanako's sleepy smile in the morning is one of the most beautiful things in the world to wake up to. This morning, however, it's pretty likely she'll feel as queasy as I'm feeling right now, and I'm not so sure how she'll react to the memory of last night's events, but smiling about the whole thing will probably be the least likely reaction. I think the best thing for me to do is give her the opportunity to recall the whole thing

herself and let it sink in without my presence adding an extreme amount of awkwardness to the situation. With some effort, I put on some clothes, unlock the door and leave our room.

03

As I close our bedroom door behind me, I realize I'm not even sure what to do now. I find that I even lack the energy to think up ways to keep busy. The pounding feeling inside my head has subsided to give way to a still slightly unpleasant throbbing, and my throat is unusually dry. I wonder if I'd be allowed to get something to drink from the fridge. While searching the kitchen for snacks last night, I remember having seen several bottled drinks there. While making my way down the staircase, I slowly become aware of music coming from somewhere in the house. As I stop to listen, I realize that I've heard both that song and that instrument before. I follow the melody to its source and end up in the living room where I see that the cello is now being played by its actual owner. Compared to yesterday, Karla is dressed a lot more casually this morning. Instead of her business suit, she's wearing a pair of sporty jeans and a light blouse. Upon noticing me, Lilly's mother gives me a cheerful nod and a smile.

"Good morning, Hisao."

"Good morning. I hope you don't mind an audience."

She makes a quick gesture with her head.

"I already have an audience, but I don't mind a larger one."

When I look behind me, I notice that the large couch on my side of the table isn't as unoccupied as it seemed when I entered the room. Lying on the couch with her eyes closed is Lilly. She's wearing the exact same clothes as yesterday, making me wonder if she's been to her room at all last night. She hasn't really acknowledged my presence since I entered the room, though with Lilly it's sometimes difficult to tell whether she's asleep or not since she also has her eyes closed half the time when she's awake.

With Lilly taking up all the space on the couch, I simply take a seat on one of its armrests and listen to Karla's playing. I recognize the song as the same melody Lilly played for us last night. Even in the rather sorry state I'm currently in, I can make out the subtle difference between Lilly's playing last night and Karla's performance right now. Somehow Karla's playing seems to flow more naturally, and there's an effortlessness about her movements that hints at quite a bit of experience. The melody itself is subdued and soothing to listen to, but also a bit melancholic. Eventually, the song ends, and I think about clapping for a moment, but then decide that the noise would probably hurt my brain and settle for an appreciative bow.

"That sounded good. Is it a Scottish piece?"

Karla shakes her head.

"The name of the song is 'Concord', and I believe it's originally Canadian. I picked it up before I first moved to Japan. It's always been one of my favorite pieces though it's kinda lacking without a piano accompaniment."

"Do you often practice in the mornings?"

Karla grins and shakes her head.

"I wasn't practicing. When I came home last night, I caught my daughter examining my cello, and she asked for a performance. I wasn't dressed for the occasion at the time, so I put it off until today, and

when we found her on the couch this morning, I decided a morning concert was a nice way to wake her up."

"Is she awake now?"

Lilly answers my question by letting out an uncharacteristically loud yawn. Karla grins mischievously.

"'Awake' is probably stretching the definition."

Lilly groans softly and slowly sits up, gently massaging her forehead. Looks like what's ailing me is also wreaking havoc on Lilly. Wait... Did Karla just say that Lilly spent the night here in this very spot? I take a look and notice a particularly large drool stain on a part of the couch near Lilly's head that escaped my attention before.

"Did you say she slept on the couch? Why?"

"Beats me. She was rather tipsy when we came home last night, so we were quick to call it a night. We took her upstairs, and she mentioned wanting to take a lavatory break. Haha, I thought she was maybe going to offer a little prayer at the porcelain altar, so we decided not to wait until she was done and bid her goodnight. Her room was right next door, so we figured she'd be able to find her way there. But for some reason she decided to go back downstairs and pass out on the couch instead. The housekeeping staff found her here when they arrived. My husband has been really grumpy about that this morning."

Lilly groans as if even formulating words is already unbearably painful.

"Like I... said... before. My bedroom... door was... locked."

Karla shrugs her shoulders with a puzzled expression.

"She says her door was locked when she went for her bedroom, but when I checked this morning that didn't turn out to be the case."

I'm about to dismiss the whole thing when I suddenly remember something that Lilly told me yesterday.

"Lilly didn't sleep in that particular room the last time she stayed here, did she?"

"No, she stayed in the room you and Hanako are currently using. We decided to let you two use that room since it's larger and more suitable to accommodate two people."

If I remember correctly that restroom is situated right between our bedroom and Lilly's.

"I locked our door last night before we went to bed. Perhaps... err..."

"..."

Lilly doesn't respond, furrowing her brow instead as if trying extremely hard to remember her exact train of thought from the night before and not quite succeeding.

"Which door were you trying to open after you got out of the restroom? The one on your left or the one on your right?"

"..."

"You didn't forget that you changed rooms this time around, did you?"

"..."

Karla has watched the one-sided conversation with more than a small hint of amusement and takes this moment to chip in.

"Hahaha, you're lucky you locked your door last night, or you'd have had one hell of an awkward awakening."

She has no idea just how awkward.

Lilly seems to have given up trying to figure out how she ended up mistaking our room for hers and lets out another tortured yawn. Karla shrugs.

"Well, at least that little mystery is now solved. That leaves us with the matter of getting you back to the land of the living."

"I'm... okay."

"Not convincingly so. Why don't you go and take a bath? It might make you feel better. Let me take you there."

Lilly slowly gets up from the couch, her movement stiff like an old-fashioned robot. I turn to Karla.

"So much for the effectiveness of using a cello as an alarm clock."

"My own mother used the the good ol' ladle and frying pan combination to get people out of bed. I should give that a try next time. I've always wanted to wake someone up that way."

That may very well be the cruelest thing I've heard in my entire life, and from her visible cringe, it appears that Lilly completely shares that impression.

"Please... don't... ever..."

Karla playfully chuckles at the comically terrified expression on her daughter's face and then takes her daughter's hand and starts guiding her towards the exit. Before leaving the room she turns around to address me.

"Just make yourself comfortable, Hisao. I'll be right back."

As Lilly and her mother leave the room, I take a seat on the couch Lilly was occupying earlier. Looks like Lilly's not in any better shape than I am, though it appears her parents at least remained unaware of last night's events. Lilly's mother didn't seem to mind the fact that we're all feeling rather queasy, although it seems her father didn't take it quite so well. I feel a bit bad about that. It seems unfair that Hanako and I got away with our little act last night, and Lilly might get into trouble for an innocent, if rather dumb, mistake. That's of later concern though. I should probably focus on how to act around Hanako when she wakes up. As I'm pondering the matter, I hear footsteps behind me and see Lilly's mom enter the room with a glass of water in her hands that she hands over to me.

"You're looking a bit worse for wear yourself, so I got you something to drink."

"Thanks."

The water doesn't do much to dull the throbbing sensation in my head, but it eases my throat a bit and makes speaking a bit less painful. Karla sits down on the love seat across from me and starts putting her cello back into its case.

"Just give it a bit of time. You'll probably feel better in a few hours."

"I suppose there aren't any effective folk cures for this?"

Karla grins.

"There's this old Scottish remedy of putting poultices of onions under the armpits to draw toxins out of the body. But I wouldn't recommend that."

"...good."

"Last night we could already tell that Lilly had several glasses, so we left a message in the kitchen asking Allison to make and leave you some BLT sandwiches and plenty of juice in case you guys'd be suffering from a hangover. They'll help getting you back on your feet."

"They actually help?"

"They'll make you feel a little bit better."

"Ummm... Not to pry into your affairs, but... was your husband very upset about Lilly drinking?"

Karla frowns for a moment and gives me a sheepish look.

"He wasn't upset that you guys had a few glasses or even that you got a little drunk. We felt that if Lilly failed to mind her tolerance threshold, the resulting hangover would be enough of a punishment already. What rubbed him the wrong way was that it was the housekeeping staff who found Lilly sleeping on the couch this morning, and they seemed to find it extremely funny. My husband felt his daughter embarrassed him and caused him to lose face in the eyes of his personnel. "

"Is she going to get into trouble?"

"He said she's not going to be allowed to do any more drinking for the remainder of her stay here."

Knowing Lilly and how much she enjoys the occasional sip of wine, that seems extremely harsh, especially since getting her hands on wine back in Japan is going to be tough with Akira now having moved away. Of course, since Lilly's parents presumably don't know that about their daughter, they probably don't think it's that severe a punishment.

"Really?"

She looks at me.

"You think that's too severe, don't you?"

I don't think it's my place to tell parents how to deal with their children. Even if those parents haven't had contact with their children for years.

"I'm not sure."

Lilly's mother gives me a tired smile.

"My husband hails from a rather traditional Japanese family, and he was taught from an early age that causing a family member to look bad or embarrassing them in any way is pretty much the biggest sin you can possibly commit."

"I don't think Lilly would ever embarrass her parents on purpose."

"I don't think so either. My husband's been rather tired and anxious the last few weeks. Work-related stress, no doubt. He hasn't been sleeping well either. It's making him more irritable than he usually is. I'll talk to him later. He might change his mind."

She gives me a playful wink.

"You guys aren't looking like you're going to hit the bottle again anytime soon anyway..."

She has a point there. Just the idea of drinking alcohol again is enough to worsen my headache.

"...but enough about that for now. There's something I wanted to ask you."

All of a sudden, her playful look seems to have turned serious.

"As you know, we have a picnic scheduled this afternoon. I was thinking of combining it with a bit of physical activity. You two know how to ride a bike, don't you?"

I've never asked Hanako, but it's fairly safe to assume she knows how to ride one. Lilly on the other hand...

"I do and Hanako probably does too. But how about Lilly? She won't be sitting on the rear rack of your bike, will she?"

"Leave that to me. What I wanted to know is if you're up for it. Lilly didn't give me a lot of details, but I do know you've had an accident recently that resulted in a short hospital stay. Something to do with your heart? It was the reason Akira postponed her flight. There's a hospital only a few miles away from here, but I wager it's not among the sights you're planning on seeing during your stay here."

"Seems like a good goal to shoot for."

"Do you think you'll be able to handle it? The weather predictions for this afternoon say it's gonna be fairly hot, but we'll have plenty of time so we can take it as easy as we like."

I can't say I take to hot weather very well, but between the three of us I'm the only one working out on a daily basis. I wouldn't be surprised if I'm in better shape than Lilly and Hanako, despite my heart condition.

"I might be able to handle it. I work out nearly every morning at school. I've gotten a fairly decent idea of where my limits lie."

"You work out, huh? We have a home trainer in the attic. I like to take bike rides around the countryside when the weather's good, but I make a lot of use of it during the winter. If you want to continue your daily regimen you're more than welcome to use it."

"Thanks for the offer. I'll keep it in mind."

"If you think it won't be too much for you, we'll leave the car at home today."

She takes a look at her watch and gets up from the couch.

"I have to stop by the office for a few hours. Today's officially my day off, but I promised I'd drop by to ensure everything's going well. I have to make a little arrangement for our picnic trip too. I'll be back shortly after noon. Can I give you guys some advice?"

"Sure."

"Make sure to get rehydrated and restock on the nutrients. Help yourself to the sandwiches Allison left in the kitchen, drink plenty, get some fresh air and then get some additional rest. You'll feel a lot better afterwards."

04

As Karla leaves, her hand held high in a parting gesture, I take some time to reflect on what she said. What she suggested had better be nothing short of a miracle cure. We agreed to prepare the food for the picnic, and now there's a bicycle ride through the countryside to get ready for as well. The way I'm feeling right now, I don't really feel up for even one of these activities, but Karla's enthusiasm is hard to refuse. Fighting the lethargic sensation that's still weighing me down, I get up and make my way to the kitchen. Not hearing any sounds coming from there, I assume it to be empty and walk in letting out an unrestrained yawn that dies abruptly as the person standing near the kitchen sink unit turns around and gasps.

"Hanako! Ummm...I mean, good morning Hanako."

I hadn't expected Hanako to be up already. She probably went straight down to the kitchen to get something to drink. She doesn't look in much better shape than Lilly or myself, but as we spot each other, our hangovers are quickly made irrelevant by a more pressing matter. Looking at her promptly brings back the memories of last night's events, and I cannot help but blush a little. There's no questioning whether Hanako picked up on my reaction as she instantly flowers into a full blush herself, followed by a desperate whimper. At least this removes any doubt about whether either of us has had enough drinks last night to suffer a convenient memory loss, and with it my hopes of being able to settle this matter by simply denying it even happened in the first place are cruelly dashed. For a moment I can see Hanako's gaze dart around the room as if looking for an escape route, and upon concluding that I'm standing in front of the only exit to the room, she pitifully crosses her arms in front of her chest and lets her head sink, unable to look me in the eyes. I don't think there's ever been a more awkward moment between us, and we've had several over the course of the few months we've known each other.

How do you deal with a situation such as this?

Apologize?

Laugh about it?

Avoid the subject?

I'm probably not going to get a lot of input from Hanako on this one. She seems completely preoccupied with fighting the urge to bolt from the room. While I'm still deciding on how to act towards Hanako, I notice something moving from the corner of my eye, and when I look through the window I can see a person in her twenties approaching the house. She must be part of the cleaning staff. I look back at Hanako who has noticed the woman as well and is looking slightly panicked.

If people see us acting the way we currently are, they're surely going to suspect something fishy is going on. We'll need to get this matter settled before the picnic this afternoon. We're going to need some privacy. Maybe the nearby beach Lilly showed me during the initial tour she gave me. We could eat at the same time.

I notice the sandwiches Karla spoke about lying on the kitchen sink unit. I turn to Hanako and do my best to sound as casual as I can.

"Hanako, Lilly's mother said those sandwiches were prepared for us. We could have some drinks as well. I'd like to take a short walk to get some fresh air. Will you please join me?"

Hanako doesn't react at first, but right before I'm about to repeat my question she gives me a barely visible nod. I take a small shopping bag that's hanging from a hook on the wall, put several sandwiches inside and then open the fridge to look for drinks.

I'd really rather not address this matter at all, but if Lilly notices how awkward we are with each other right now, she'll almost certainly jump to conclusions. I don't think we'll have much of a choice but to settle matters before Lilly gets back. She was probably puzzled enough already by our sudden escape from the living room last night.

As I reach out for one of the several small bottles of juice labelled 'Irn-Bru' or something, I suddenly have a flash of insight.

What if Lilly heard us? We tried really hard not to make any sounds, but we couldn't suppress everything. Her hearing can't be that good, can it? But she did hear the sound of her parents' car. I don't think I picked it up myself, and neither did Hanako. Crap! What were we thinking anyway?

Doing my best to put these thoughts aside, I help myself to a few of the bottles, put them in the bag, close the fridge and beckon Hanako to follow me outside.

"This looks like a good spot."

The crisp morning air coupled with the gentle sound of the water lapping against the shore gives the area a calming atmosphere. There are a few large rocks nearby that seem perfect to use as a place to sit down. I look at Hanako and gesture her to sit down next to me. Since we left the kitchen she's been meekly following me without saying a single word like a bad pupil following a teacher to the detention room. Even as she sits down next to me, I notice she's sitting several paces away from me. Deciding that the elephant in the room can wait until after we've had breakfast, I take a bottle and a sandwich and hand them to Hanako who quietly takes them. As we sit there, nibbling our sandwiches and then flushing the bread and meat down with the soft drinks we got, I can tell from her posture that Hanako is slowly relaxing a little bit. I figure now would be a good moment to start a conversation.

"I guess we're both a little under the weather after yesterday. How are you feeling right now?"

"...M-My h-head hurts."

"Same here. You're not nauseous, are you?"

"A b-bit. But I c-can eat without b-being sick, I think."

"Me too, though the meat's a bit much. Lilly's mom said these sandwiches will ease hangovers though."

"I h-hope so."

"If it's a consolation, Lilly isn't any better off from the looks of it. At least we slept in a bed this night."

"W-What?"

I briefly tell Hanako about Lilly spending the night on the couch.

"Heh, so it's a good thing I locked our door, or we'd have had a really uncomfortable moment in there."

"Ahahaha."

That has to be the most joyless laugh I've ever heard out of Hanako. I'm not sure if this is something Hanako will be able to laugh about later, but she certainly hasn't reached that stage right now yet. Still, now that the subject's come up, it's probably best to press on.

"So... um... About what happened between us last night..."

Hanako lets out a dejected sigh that makes me feel guilty about even finishing my sentence.

"It's kinda awkward for me too, but Lilly's probably going to think strange stuff if we're this jumpy around one another all day long."

That seems to get through to Hanako since she turns to me and gives me a resigned nod.

"I'm... s-s-sorry."

"It's okay. I giddily went along with it. We're both equally to blame."

"But I... s-started it."

"You don't really see Lilly as a rival, do you? Lilly's far too loyal to you to even consider trying to steal me away from you. And I wouldn't trade you in for her either. She's a good friend. A wonderful friend. Like an older sister. But nothing more than that."

"I... I know."

I think Hanako's gotten to the point by now where she can believe my words if she stops to think about them rationally, but on some deeper level a part of her is probably still convinced that Lilly could easily seduce me away from her if she made even a half-hearted effort. Which is probably why she got so territorial when Lilly praised my looks. I'm positive, however, that that fear will eventually disappear as we continue our relationship.

"This could have created an awkward situation with Lilly's parents, but in the end we got away in time and nothing bad happened. That's what matters. I don't think any less of you after last night. The two of us will probably be able to laugh about this later."

Hanako doesn't seem too sure about that last part, but she still looks relieved by my words.

"I'm... h-happy about that, but... w-we still s-shouldn't have d-done what we d-did."

"Aside from the place where we started this, do you regret the act itself, Hanako?"

Her face turns as red as the tomatoes on the sandwiches, but eventually she manages to softly shake her head.

"I... d-don't think s-so,b-but I... d-don't w-want to do it... l-like that ever again. Umm... Y-you...?"

Since we're boyfriend and girlfriend now and since we've had sex before, I assumed that what we did was as consensual as we could make it, but maybe I'm wrong about that. She seemed to be enjoying it a lot last night, but now that I think about it, I doubt a sober Hanako would ever let me do it with her in a position that puts just about all her scars on full display like that. She's still really sensitive about them.I hope I didn't overstep my bounds. That would give this whole thing a very bitter aftertaste.

"I can't exactly say I hated it, but I get that we got a little carried away. I enjoyed the act itself though."

"If... If your chest s-started hurting, w-would you have stopped?"

Suddenly I get where she's going with this. I hadn't even thought about that. But it's clear that Hanako did. At least, after the fact.

"I'd like to say I would have stopped in time, but I'm not so sure about it now that I think about it. "

"I'm... n-not sure about m-myself either, s-so..."

I recall what the nurse told me some time back when he gave me the talk about keeping the big head in charge at all times. That certainly wasn't the case last night. Damnit! Looks like that stunt in the living room wasn't even the most irresponsible thing we did that night. Given the way we went at it last night, I could have ended back in the hospital here. That would have been hard to explain. I really should have known better. Still, even though something could have happened, that wasn't the case. I put a hand on Hanako's shoulder.

"I get what you're saying. We took a risk that we shouldn't have taken. But nothing happened, so it's probably best not to worry about what could have occurred. There's no point in that. At least we now that know my heart can handle it."

I suddenly remember something Hanako said a few days earlier.

"I... guess this wasn't exactly the slow and romantic experience you wanted..."

Seems like Hanako remembers that as well, and she seems genuinely disappointed.

"...but let's take a rain check on it. We have weeks ahead of us, we have our own private bedroom and Lilly's not gonna be around all the time. I'm sure we'll get plenty of opportunities."

"O-Okay then."

"Cheer up. Nobody but us knows about this little incident, and we'll just keep it that way. They say that shared secrets strengthen a couple's bond with one another."

I give Hanako a kiss on the cheek, and for the first time this morning, there's a little smile on her face.

"Okay. No telling anyone."

"How are you feeling right now?"

"My h-head still hurts."

"Let's take another sandwich and another soft drink."

"I'm not really that hungry."

"Lilly's mom said it helps against hangovers. Let's share this one."

I break the sandwich in two and give Hanako one half. After eating my half, I finish my bottle of juice. I notice Hanako has only finished half her bottle.

"You're not going to drink anymore?"

"One bottle was enough for me. I'm not r-really thirsty anymore."

We take a moment to just sit here and enjoy the fresh breeze blowing over the bay. It's still relatively early in the morning, and the picnic won't take place until after noon. I'm not really sure how long it'll take for Lilly and Hanako to prepare the snacks, but I doubt it'll take hours even in their current condition.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still kinda tired. What do you say we head back to our bedroom and get a few more hours of sleep. We'll probably feel better afterwards."

"What about the snacks?"

"It's not going to take hours, and I'll help out if necessary. I'll set the alarm function of my cell phone to wake us up at half past 11. Lilly's mother won't be back until noon anyway."

"Just a few hours then."

"Let's go."

I take Hanako's hand, and we walk back to the mansion. As we enter, we're greeted by the housekeeper who informs us that Lilly went back to bed for a little while as well. Deciding to follow her example, we make our way up the stairs. Let's hope we'll feel better at noon.

05

"Are you certain you don't need my help preparing all of this? There's a truckload of food on this table."

"Very certain, Hisao. You know what they say. Too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the broth. We might end up getting in each other's way."

"I could help Hanako sort all this stuff out."

"Ummm..."

"The offer's appreciated, Hisao, but I think it won't be necessary. If I can think of something, I will let you know."

I sigh softly and sit back down in the kitchen chair near the fridge. Lilly and Hanako do look like they can handle themselves with the picnic food, but I don't really like feeling like dead weight. Either Lilly's mother was right, and those sandwiches really helped or those hours of additional sleep worked their magic on us, but the gist of it is that all three of us are now feeling good enough to actually be looking forward to a little outing into the countryside. Nevertheless I can still feel the occasional painful throb dance around the insides of my skull, and I would welcome having something to do to distract from the sensation.

"Ummm, Lilly... What's a f-ficelle?"

The kitchen table is filled with enough ingredients to prepare a buffet of, from pieces of bread to bottles filled with stuff like mustard and vinegar to various pieces of fruit and vegetables. We spent the last 15 minutes unpacking everything in the shopping bags supposedly left here by the housekeeper, and now Hanako is frantically switching back and forth between checking the pieces of paper in her hand containing recipes and putting the various items in order.

"It's a thinner variation of a baguette; a French loaf of bread."

"Ah, okay."

"Has the oven already reached the right temperature? I believe it should be at 200 degrees."

"Not just yet."

"We should put the bread in as soon as we can or we won't be able to finish the sandwiches in time."

"I'll keep an eye on it."

We ended up getting out of bed slightly later than planned, and as a result Lilly seems to have stepped up her usual pace a bit, carving loaves of bread so quickly it makes me feel it's a miracle she hasn't cut her fingers off yet. Hanako, in the meantime, is working hard at fulfilling her role as Lilly's first mate, repeatedly reading the various recipes out loud and putting all the ingredients in a specific order on the table while cutting up pieces of bread, fruit and vegetable whenever she has the chance.

"It'd be best if we made sure the ingredients for the tartines and sandwiches are ready by the time we take the bread out of the oven so we can apply the butter while the bread is still hot."

"For both the radish tartines and the avocado and ham sandwiches?"

"Do you think it's possible?"

"If we both work to get the avocado and radishes c-cut up in time. But we must make sure the water with the macaroni d-doesn't boil over."

Lilly turns her head in my general direction.

"Hisao, could you please keep an eye on the macaroni? It's supposed to cook for... ah... Hanako?"

"Mmm... Four more minutes."

"Four more minutes. If you could drain the water afterwards and put the macaroni in the bowl near the sink, that would be much appreciated."

"I'm on it. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment."

It's hardly active work, but it's better than nothing. I get up from my chair and get over to the kitchen island where a pan filled with water and macaroni is boiling on the fire.

"What more do we need again for the radish tartines, Hanako?"

"Ah... Six tablespoons of soft, salted butter, sea salt and freshly ground pepper. Um... I was t-thinking that maybe we could add a bit of black pepper as well. We have plenty for the melon slaw."

"I'm sorry, Hanako, but for this occasion I'd like to stick strictly to the recipes we have. This is the first time my mother gets to experience my cooking."

"Oh... ummm... Okay."

That certainly explains why Lilly is taking this whole thing so seriously and why she insisted on Hanako playing merely a supportive role in the whole thing. This isn't just a picnic to her, but an opportunity to prove herself to her mother. It kind of makes sense that she doesn't want to throw an unnecessary risk into the mix by going along with Hanako's hit-and-miss culinary instincts. Fortunately, Hanako doesn't take Lilly's comment personally, or at least she doesn't show it.

I pour off the water and fill the bowl Lilly mentioned with the contents from the pan.

"I'm finished with the macaroni, Lilly. Where do you want me to put it?"

"Just leave it with Hanako, Hisao."

Before I can approach the kitchen table, a high-pitched whine from the oven draws our attention. Hanako gets up from her chair, places the bread she and Lilly prepared into the oven and then takes the bowl of macaroni from my hands. She places it on the table some distance away from Lilly and herself.

"Thank you, Hanako. Shall we proceed with the radishes for the tartines and the avocado and ham for the sandwiches? If it's not a problem with you, you can do the radishes and move on with the cucumber and pear for the melon slaw when you're done with them. I will handle the avocado, ham and shallots."

"Okay."

Having nothing more to do, I get back to watching Lilly and Hanako work. They do seem to work well together, and someone looking at Lilly without paying attention to her eyes probably wouldn't be able to tell that she's blind. Eventually, another sound from the oven alerts us to the fact the bread is ready, and after Hanako, armed with two oversized oven mitts, retrieves it she gets back to cutting up the vegetables and fruit while Lilly starts working on putting the sandwiches together.

"Hisao?"

"Yes, Lilly?"

"If you're still looking for something to do, would you be so kind as to get some cellophane wrapping from the drawer near the oven and wrap up the snacks as I finish them? Allison said that Mother left some saddlebags in the hallway. Would you...?"

"Sure, I'll go and get them."

I retrieve the saddlebags from the hallway, take a seat near Lilly and start wrapping up the snacks. With Hanako preparing the ingredients, Lilly putting everything together and me wrapping up the snacks and putting them in the bags, it's almost as if we're running a miniature assembly line though my activities take considerably less time, and I'm still spending a lot of time watching the girls perform their respective tasks.

"That should be all for the radish tartines. How far are you with the ingredients for the melon slaw, Hanako?"

"I'm finished with them."

"Good. Could you walk me through the steps one more time?"

"The s-shallots, mint, vinegar, honey, salt and pepper have to be whisked together. The pieces of pear, cucumber, jicama and watermelon are added afterwards."

As she says this, Hanako gets up and starts putting the various bowls, bottles and cans with ingredients in front of Lilly, occasionally thinking for a moment before swapping two. She finishes up by putting a large bowl and a whisk in front of Lilly.

"I put all the ingredients in front of you. Anything else you w-want me to do?"

"How far are the preparations for the macaroni salad?"

"Ah... Everything's done except for the cheese."

"If you could melt the cheese and mix it with the macaroni, that would probably save me a lot of time. I'll finish the rest once I'm done with the melon slaw."

"Okay."

With that, Hanako and Lilly get back to work, and since the melon slaw Lilly's working on will be contained in just one large bowl, there's not a lot for me to do until she finishes. As I watch Lilly getting started on the meal in front of her, something suddenly draws my attention. Lilly's hands are sweeping across the surface of the bowls, but she doesn't put her hands inside to feel the contents. Come to think of it; while she was working on the avocado and ham sandwiches, she also seemed to immediately know what bowl contained which ingredients yet I didn't hear Hanako instruct her beforehand.

"Ah... Lilly?"

"Yes, Hisao?"

"How do you know which bottles and bowls contain what? I don't recall Hanako telling you in advance."

"Hmmmm..."

Lilly's only answer is an amused smile. There's a little smile on Hanako's face too as if they're enjoying some private joke at my expense.

"It's not a secret, is it?"

Lilly lets out an amused giggle.

"Don't worry, Hisao. It's not. Hanako made sure to order the ingredients by type of container first and then alphabetically. The ingredients required for the first step were placed at ten o' clock from my point of view and those required for the second step were placed at two o' clock."

"You mean to say you two have got a system in place for ordering this kind of stuff?"

"We do. It's not the first time we've cooked together. Having a fixed location for everything isn't just important when cooking without sight. It's also essential in keeping your life in general in order when you're unable to see. Hanako knows almost exactly how I like things ordered, both in the kitchen and in my dorm room. She's one of the very few who do."

"So that's why you didn't want me helping her with this?"

"...Indeed. I appreciated the offer, but we weren't given a great deal of time to prepare everything, and it was important to work as efficiently as possible."

"I guess there are some things that are better left to the pros, huh?"

Lilly laughs cheerfully at that remark, even though it makes Hanako blush a little. Lilly opens her mouth to say something, but before she can do so she's interrupted by a sudden sound that I recognize as the ringtone from her cell phone.

"Please excuse me... Good morning. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Good morning, Mother."

I hear Lilly letting out a sigh at the obvious question.

"Yes, I feel much better now."

She puts down her phone for a moment and briefly turns her head in our direction.

"How about you?"

"I'm okay. My head still feels a little heavy, but nothing severe enough to stay in bed for."

"M-Me too."

"Mother?... We're all looking forward to this afternoon."

"No, we're in the kitchen right now. We've been preparing the food for the picnic."

"I'm sure Allison would have made some wonderful snacks too, but she's not the only person in the world who can cook. I'm sure it'll taste all the better for it."

"Half an hour? Yes, that's more than enough time."

"We will see you soon then. Bye."

"She'll be here in half an hour?"

"Yes, she's just left the office, but still needs to arrange our transportation for today."

"Half an hour isn't that much time to finish the remaining food."

Lilly replies with an eager smile on her face.

"Let's get started quickly then."

"It sounds like we're right on time."

As we exit the house, we hear the noise of a car approaching, and moments later we can see a car with an open trailer behind it coming up the driveway. Stopping the car near the garage door, Lilly's mother gets out and looks at our fully-packed saddlebags approvingly.

"Looks like you went all-out with the food. I can't wait to taste it. Well, I guess I'll have to since we'll still have to make our way over to a suitable picnic spot. Hisao, would you mind giving me a hand with the vehicles? They're kinda troublesome to handle on my own."

"Sure."

Lilly's mother walks up to the trailer, climbs inside and pulls one of the vehicles lying inside upright. I smile as I see what she's holding.

"Tandem bikes. Nice."

Lilly's mother smiles cheerfully.

"I figured I'd rent two of them so you and Hanako won't have trouble keeping up with us. It might take a bit of getting used to at first, but I'm sure you'll pick it up in no time."

I walk up to her, and together we lift the two bikes out of the trailer. Lilly's mom reaches inside the car, retrieves a plastic bag and takes four water bottles out of it.

"One water bottle per person isn't really all that much but we should have plenty of beverages to fall back on if needed and we might be able to refill on the way. Anybody's willing to go and fill these up?"

"I will do it. Perhaps you can get the saddlebags attached in the meantime?"

Lilly steps forward and takes the bag from her mother. As Lilly disappears into the house and we get started on putting the saddlebags on the tandems' baggage racks, Karla turns to me with her expression turning serious again.

"Hisao, yesterday's weather reports predicted reasonably warm weather for today, but the impression I got just by being outside for a little while is that they might have been off by several degrees. It's not too late to call this off and take the car. It has a pretty solid air conditioning system if I say so myself."

"I haven't had problems with my heart since I got out of the hospital. I'll probably be fine."

"It's not necessarily your heart you need to watch out for in this kind of weather. Have you experienced heat stress recently?"

"Heat stress?"

"I've heard once that people with heart conditions run an increased risk of heat illnesses. A heat stroke may not sound as nasty or deadly as a heart attack, but it can still mess you up pretty badly."

I notice our discussion has attracted Hanako's attention, and she's currently looking at me with a slightly worried expression. It's true that I felt some signs of discomfort while taking walks through the city near Yamaku on hot days in the past, but I think prematurely calling off our bike ride is a bit of an overreaction.

"I'll be sure to drink sufficiently and give a call if I'm feeling unwell."

Lilly's mother gives a satisfied nod and then suddenly snaps her fingers.

"This might help as well. Just a second."

She walks over to the car and gets some items from the backseat. As she walks back to us, I notice she's carrying two large sun hats in addition to a cap, the latter of which is promptly pressed on my head. The sun hats, both of them made out of straw and each of them having a decorative ribbon wrapped around the top half, look very elegant. However, when I take off the cap to take a closer look at it, I can see it's a rather cheap piece of headwear that's probably part of a promotional campaign or something. I read the letters on the front and give Karla an unsure look.

"Boyd's bike rental?"

Lilly's mother smiles sheepishly.

"They gave me this one after I rented those two tandem bikes. The visor'll at least keep the sun out of your eyes."

That's probably its one redeeming quality. I hesitantly put it back on again and look at Hanako.

"This makes me look silly, doesn't it?"

Hanako quietly shakes her head, but the fact that she's using her hand to try and cover her smile indicates she's probably thinking something else entirely. Karla gives me a playful slap on the shoulder.

"I'd say it's still better than wearing a sun hat designed for females."

It's hard to argue with that. Neither of us seems to have much to add to the discussion so we focus on attaching the saddlebags to the bicycles until we see Lilly returning to us carrying four filled-up water bottles. Karla takes the bottles from her daughter, places them in the bottle cages located on the frame and hands her one of the sun hats she took out of the car. She then gestures us to take our bike. I turn to Hanako.

"So, do you want to go in the front or in the back?"

"What w-would you like?"

"I'll do the steering if you don't mind."

"Okay."

With that out of the way we both get in the saddle and I flip the kickstand.

"Alright, on the count of three... One... Two... Three."

"Ah!"

"Whoa!"

That proved trickier than I thought. Keeping your balance is quite difficult when someone on the same bike is trying to do the same at the exact same moment. Lilly and her mother seem to be doing slightly better mostly due to Karla seeming better at anticipating her daughter's movements.

"Okay, let's try that again. Try to stay straight up, Hanako. Let me do the correcting. One... Two... Three."

Much better. As long as we keep moving at a decent pace we won't have to worry about our balance. Going around corners will still be tricky with such a long vehicle, so we'll just have to make sure to take wider turns. As we reach the end of the driveway, Karla stops her bike and gives us an approving look.

"It looks like you're doing okay. It might take some time to find a cadence that suits both of you, but I'm sure you'll figure out what works best."

"So where are we headed?"

"We'll go east to the village of Culloden, and then we'll head south from there."

"Lead the way then."

Chapter 26 (Hisao)

01

"So we're heading for some old battlefield?"

"Well, that place is part of the local history so I was hoping I'd get an opportunity to show it to you. There's a monument in the middle of the moor, but I don't think having a picnic there is a good idea. Not enough shade."

After traversing the road through one of the nearby villages we're now crossing the countryside again with nothing but open fields all around us.

"Whew."

I don't think we've gone on for that many kilometers yet, but all of us (with the exception of Lilly's mother) are nevertheless starting to get a little winded. The wind provided some pleasant relief from the heat while we were riding through the streets of the village, but here in the middle of the open field it's strong enough to start wearing us out.

"Are you okay? We can take a break any time you like."

That's the second time Lilly's mother has asked me that in 5 minutes.

"I think I'll manage. I do hope that wind dies down soon though."

"It's a bit stronger than they predicted. It'll get less when we get to the road north of the moor since it's lined by a small forested area on one side."

Though the ride is more taxing than I anticipated, I can't deny I'm somewhat enjoying it. It feels good to engage in some physical activity after two days of mostly sitting and sleeping and the route so far has offered plenty of interesting sights. Karla's statement that she likes to take bike rides around the countryside in her free time has been confirmed several times while we were riding through the village, and several people who seemed to recognize her waved at us when we passed by.

"Damn, we might have to stop somewhere soon anyway. I see rationing water isn't really my strong suit."

As I notice my water bottle being nearly empty already, I mutter this to myself without intending anyone to hear it, but moments later I nevertheless feel something poke me in the back, and when I carefully look behind me I can see Hanako offering me hers. I nod in acknowledgement.

"One little sip then. But that's all."

I take a small sip from Hanako's bottle, which is still about half-full, and then hold it out behind me until I can feel it being taken from my hand.

"Thanks."

The road goes on for a much longer time, and pedalling starts getting heavier and heavier. Finally, as we reach a wide open plain that looks different from the fields we've seen so far, Lilly's mom raises her hand as a sign to stop. She gets off her bike and makes a sweeping gesture in the air.

"What lies before you right here is the Culloden battlefield. About 260 years ago, this moor was the site of a rather brutal battle between the rebels attempting to help the exiled prince Charles Edward Stuart claim the British throne and the loyalist army led by the son of the British King at the time; the Duke of Cumberland. The battle has the dubious honor of being the last full-scale battle taking place in this country."

She does sound a bit like a tourist guide reciting stuff like this.

"I assume Scotland sided with prince Charles?"

"Some of the clans opposed him, but the Highlands area here was certainly one of the places containing a large number of supporters to his cause."

She smirks for a moment.

"Said cause being an absolute monarchy based on the Stuart dynasty's divine right to rule. Not exactly a popular point of view these days anymore, but the Stuart house has ruled this country for centuries so they had quite the following back in the day."

"So, who ended up the victor?"

"Well, the prince may have been many things, but a military genius he was not. Against the advice of his commanders, he went with a defensive strategy in a wide open marshland that hampered quick offensive charges while being faced with an opponent who had superior artillery. It worked about as well as you'd expect. In the end, the Stuart followers ended up slaughtered in less than an hour. Most football riots these days last longer."

"And the prince?"

"He got away to France, though he never attempted to organize another uprising, pretty much guaranteeing the eventual decline of the Stuart dynasty and marking the definite end of an era for Scotland. Many of his followers weren't so lucky though. The Duke of Cumberland was more concerned about squashing the insurrection than about appearing gracious in victory, and after the battle he had his soldiers search the battlefield for enemy survivors and execute anyone who was still capable of breathing. Afterwards his troops were sent out to hunt down the escaped enemy soldiers, and they were particularly vicious about it, burning suspect settlements to the ground and killing all soldiers believed to be rebels. All in all, not a day fondly remembered around here..."

As Lilly's mother finishes her story she looks in our direction and suddenly trails off.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Eh, sure. Why?"

"I meant Hanako."

02

I look behind me and notice that unlike Lilly and me, Hanako hasn't gotten off the bike during Karla's story and something about her posture seems off. She's a bit hunched over her handlebar and she hangs her head as if she's on the verge of falling asleep.

"Hanako? "

"I'm... o-okay."

She doesn't look or even sound okay. She lifts her leg in an attempt to get off the bike, but then wobbles a bit and the only reason she doesn't end up falling on her face is because I manage to make my way over to her and catch her before she loses her balance completely. Gently lowering her to the ground, I'm startled when I notice her complexion is paler than when we left, her forehead is covered by numerous tiny beads of sweat, and her breathing seems slightly shallower than it should be.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Lilly's mother kneels down next to us and gives Hanako an analyzing look that makes her instinctively avert her head. Karla doesn't back off though, and after a few moments she turns to me.

"I think we just found our picnic spot. Let's head over to that patch of trees on the other side of the road, give her some shade and start unpacking things. Hisao, you get her there. Lilly, can you help me unpack the saddlebags?"

"Ah... Yes, of course."

I take one of Hanako's arms, put it around my neck and lift her up from the ground. Acting as her crutch, I walk her to the trees Lilly's mother pointed out and get her settled with her back leaning against the largest tree of the bunch. Karla moves the tandems over to our side of the road, and Lilly spreads the blanket and starts unpacking the various sandwiches and salads she and Hanako made earlier today. Suddenly, Lilly's mother takes a bottle from the blanket, holds it to her ear and shakes it a few times.

"Hmmm, did you happen to put ice cubes in this thermos bottle?"

"Yes. They were meant to go with the soft drinks we took along."

"Great. I'll borrow a few if you don't mind."

Lilly's mom takes a handkerchief out of her pocket, puts some icecubes on top of it which she chips into tiny pieces with the handle of one of the spoons we brought along, folds it and then hands it to Hanako.

"Just keep this pressed against your forehead and neck. It'll help."

"Help against what?"

Lilly's mother turns to me.

"It looks to me like she caught a minor case of heat exhaustion. Or at least the beginnings of one."

For a moment a stern expression appears on her face.

"When I said that it was important for you guys to drink plenty this morning after your little party last night, I wasn't joking around."

I hope she's not blaming me for Hanako's condition. If I had known, I wouldn't even have accepted a sip from her water bottle. Come to think of it, I really hope she wasn't saving half of her own bottle for me while neglecting herself. It's not something I'd completely put past Hanako.

"She did drink until she wasn't thirsty anymore this morning."

"Not being thirsty anymore and being properly rehydrated are two different things. Anyway, there's no point in griping about that now. I suggest we simply go on with the picnic and see how things proceed for now."

I can hear Hanako sighing in relief. I know she'd seriously feel bad if this picnic were to be cancelled over her. Lilly's mother gives her a determined look.

"But you'll be drinking an additional share of the beverages, and if you're not feeling any better within 30 minutes, I'm going to call someone to pick us up. Okay?"

Karla's words are emphasized by a rather strict nod from Lilly. Hanako's face drops a bit again, but she nevertheless nods meekly.

"O-Okay."

Lilly's mother relaxes upon hearing Hanako's reply and fishes the remaining food out of our saddlebags. She then raises a bottle of juice before tossing it to Hanako.

"Well cheers then."

03

"Could I have some more of that macaroni salad?"

Fortunately, the beverages, shade and cold handkerchief did end up improving Hanako's condition, and 30 minutes later our picnic is in full swing. Lilly has taken a seat next to Hanako, and both are lazily leaning back against the tree we're sitting under. Lilly's mother and I have made ourselves comfortable on the other ends of the blanket just out of range of the sun.

"S-Sure."

Hanako reaches out and hands Lilly's mother the bowl of macaroni salad. She really seems to like the stuff, which hasn't escaped Lilly's attention either.

"You seem to have a taste for it, Mother."

"It's delicious. What exactly are these little light-green pieces?"

"Hmmm..."

Both Lilly and Hanako think for a moment.

"They're... um... c-chopped olives with pimiento."

"They really add to the flavor."

Karla smiles.

"You're a pretty good cook, dear."

Lilly beams upon hearing those words.

"Thank you. But Hanako deserves credit as well. She's put in a lot of work too."

"..."

For a moment, Hanako and I share a confused look. I could be mistaken but I could swear Lilly's mother looked at Hanako while delivering her compliment. But before any of us can say anything, Karla has already filled up the momentary silence.

"Thumbs up to both of you then."

Deciding not to dwell on the subject, I ask Lilly's mother the question that's been on my mind since the little history lesson she gave us earlier.

"You seem to know a lot about the area. Are you originally from Inverness?"

Lilly's mother nods proudly.

"Yep. Born and raised in the Highlands. Though before I moved to Japan, my work used to take me all over the UK."

She smiles playfully.

"If this is about those history lectures I've been throwing around; I've had practice in the last few days. I've been playing tour guide all weekend for that business delegation that came to visit."

Lilly cocks her head slightly.

"Akira has told us about that. It must have been... something major for you and Father to spend the whole weekend like this."

Lilly's mother gives her daughter a slightly guilty smile.

"Your father and I weren't happy about not being able to pick you guys up from the airport, but... Yes, it kind of was. Probably the biggest event that's happened to the company in over a decade."

"Akira mentioned a takeover."

"That's right."

Sensing that this subject is going over our heads, Lilly's mother looks at Hanako and me.

"I'm not sure how much Lilly and Akira have told you about the family business."

"Not much. Akira hardly ever talks about her job. I only know from Hanako that Akira's a lawyer in your husband's company."

Lilly's mother grins.

"It's not really his company, at least not yet, but he does run it for all practical purposes. Are you guys interested in a short summary?"

"Sure."

Karla grabs one of the sandwiches Lilly and Hanako prepared, takes a big bite out of it and thinks for a moment.

"The name of the company is Satou Medical Technology and it's a family company that was founded by my husband's grandfather. Eventually his son inherited the business and expanded it using capital provided by his two younger brothers who both married into banking families and went into the business of investment banking. The three of them are still the only members of the company's board of directors and officially have the final say on everything. In practice however, it's my husband, who was appointed CEO 6 years ago, who makes just about all the daily decisions and not the old men club in Japan. From what I've heard, their board meetings are little more than social events these days. None of them are really in a good condition anymore to go from business meeting to business meeting abroad to begin with."

Lilly cringes a bit at her mother's playful, and not overly respectful, choice of words, but doesn't interrupt her explanation.

"The company started out producing medical devices like EKG's and respirators for hospitals though nowadays we're also involved in the production of heart rate monitors and AEDs, which can be also sold to consumers and businesses."

She gives me a slightly awkward smile.

"I guess there's no need for me to explain those abbreviations, is there?"

"No, I guess not."

"Our company has had business contacts in the UK and in Inverness in particular for a long time, and eventually we managed to open a second branch by taking over an existing company here. There's a well-developed medical industry around these parts and the Scottish government has taken steps to stimulate the sector, so eventually our Scottish branch outgrew its Japanese counterpart. That's when the board decided to move head office to Scotland with my husband, as the family's heir, being instated here as CEO."

"And now you're planning to open another branch in the US?"

"It's not exactly a done deal yet, but that's what we're shooting for. Ever since we got here, my husband and I have been working hard at setting up a network of contacts in the US, and we're scheduled to travel there and take part in the final negotiations a few days after you guys return to Japan. If everything goes well, we'll be able to enter the North American market, and my husband will have honored an important family tradition."

"Family tradition?"

Karla's face becomes more serious as she continues.

"The Satou family places a lot of pressure on its heirs to perform and perform well."

For less than a second she averts her eyes as if wanting to voice silent disapproval, but she then directs her gaze back to us.

"My husband's grandfather started the business and my father-in-law expanded it significantly with the opening and maturing of the Scotland branch as his crowning achievements. With another branch opening in yet another part of the world, my husband feels like he will have brought honor to his family and to the achievements of his predecessors. To say that this whole thing is extremely important to him is an understatement. It isn't just about work to him anymore, but about being able to face his family and the memory of his ancestor with pride. The Satous are kind of traditional, and family honor is a big thing with them. Heh, samurai spirit and all."

She's probably talking about her extended family as I know that neither Lilly nor Akira are happy about their parents having moved here.

"What's your job in the company? Are you your husband's secretary? You seem to be closely involved with his activities."

Lilly's mother laughs and then shakes her head.

"Heh, you think he'd take an office lady along to his business meetings? Him being married to his secretary would be kind of cliché, wouldn't it? It's actually not that far from the truth. Especially when we first moved here I often acted like his secretary while he was still getting the hang of western business culture. But my official position is being in charge of public relations. I have accumulated a fair bit of unofficial clout on the workfloor though. I've been extremely involved in this whole deal as well, which is why I'll be accompanying my husband in a few weeks to see this thing through."

I'm a bit surprised to hear that Lilly's mother's working alongside her husband - almost like an equal business partner from the sound of it. If the Satous are really this traditional, wouldn't they consider a married woman working to be inappropriate? Especially at such an influential position.

"Did you already work for the company before you moved here?"

Lilly's mother shakes her head.

"No, I've been a stay at home mom the whole time during my married life in Japan. I didn't even know I had a knack for this thing until I came back here and joined the PR department."

She pauses for a moment, takes a bite out her sandwich, sips from her can of soda and then fidgets a bit with the blanket before continuing. I recognize this gesture as an indication of unease, since Lilly occasionally shows the same trait when she's about to talk about an uncomfortable subject.

"Before our Inverness branch also became our head office, we used to have a local manager running things here. When head office relocated, the board determined that a Satou had to be in charge of it. Shortly after moving here, my husband indicated that he needed someone to help him bridge the culture gap between himself and his employees, so he that could become a better manager for his personnel. Someone with personal experience with both the Western and Japanese culture. Someone he felt he could trust and have his best interests at heart. He chose me to fill that role, the board

eventually complied with his request, and I ended up answering his summons, eventually joining the PR department."

"I'm glad you've been doing so well for yourself, Mother."

"Thanks."

I notice Karla's eyes are not directly looking at Lilly during her daughter's comforting words, and for a moment her smile seems extremely forced. Their migration is obviously still a sensitive subject to her.

"In a way, it's not very surprising you ended up performing so well. Your old job and your current one have much in common, after all."

Lilly's mother lets out a playful laugh at her daughter's remark.

"Hehehe, don't go telling that to any of my old colleagues. We used to believe that going into public relations was equal to selling your soul."

"If you don't mind me asking, what exactly was your previous occupation?"

Karla's face brightens as if she had been waiting for me to ask that question.

"Journalism. I used to be a business correspondent writing for the economic and business pages of The Herald, a newspaper located in Glasgow. Later, I moved to Japan and became a foreign correspondent for the BBC."

Journalism huh? That's quite the recurring topic these days. I can see Hanako, who's been quiet for pretty much the entire time we've been here, perking up ever so slightly at Karla's words.

"J-J-Journalism...?"

"Yep."

I can tell that the conversation subject has caught Hanako's attention, but it's clear that she's not yet comfortable enough around Lilly's mother to ask her for details about her former job. Fortunately, Lilly takes this moment to come to Hanako's aid.

"Hanako has recently joined the newspaper club at Yamaku and has already been involved in the production of two issues. She seems to enjoy the activities so far and has been playing with the thought of studying journalism or something related to it."

Lilly's mother's smile grows brighter.

"Ah... Japanese school club life. Shame we didn't have a newspaper club at my old high school. That would have been fun."

She looks at Hanako with a curious twinkle in her eye.

"I suppose you didn't bring one of those issues along with you, did you? I would have liked to read a copy."

Hanako meekly shakes her head, but Lilly takes her handbag, zips it open and casually takes a copy of the lastest school newspaper out of it.

"Coincidentally, I happen to have one on me."

Lilly's mother chuckles briefly at the dumbfounded look on my and Hanako's faces and then takes the newspaper from her daughter. She takes a pair of reading glasses out of her pocket, puts them on and starts thumbing through it. While she's doing so, I roll my eyes at Lilly.

"That may very well have been the most inappropriate use of the word 'coincidentally' I've ever heard in my life. It isn't even a Braille edition for crying out loud."

Lilly grins mischieviously, but doesn't say anything back. Her mother, on the other hand, looks up from the paper.

"You also print your copies in Braille?"

Hanako nods.

"It's...p-pretty tough at times. W-We... ummm... c-convert the f-files with a computer program. The c-copyshop's Braille p-printer can then w-work with them. We h-have l-large font editions too... ah... f-for s-students with l-limited vision."

"That's pretty neat. Is it a lot of work making all those different editions?"

"The... ah... Braille e-edition can t-take a few hours. We usually... just p-print the large f-font edition on larger p-paper to s-save time."

Lilly's mother gives Hanako a slightly worried look. She's probably noticing how much Hanako is stumbling over her own words.

"I can get a bit carried away on the subject at times. Is it okay for me to be asking you these questions?"

"Of c-course."

Hanako immediately nods her head, not wanting her shyness to be taken the wrong way. Lilly's mother seems satisfied with that reaction and proceeds to skim through the paper. A few minutes later, she closes the newspaper and turns to Hanako again.

"It reads here that you were involved with both the editing and the writing. What articles did you work on?"

"Ummm... O-only one s-so far. The c-column about the science c-club."

Lilly's mom opens the newspaper again and starts reading through Hanako's column a second time. Hanako visibly tenses up a little bit, and she's looking at Karla with a slightly worried expression. Eventually, Lilly's mother closes the newspaper again.

"Would you be open to some constructive criticism, dear?"

Hanako's eyes widen for a moment before her face drops, and her gaze wanders towards her feet. Eventually though, she nods softly.

"First of all, the language use and sentence structure are good. I really can't complain about that. But I do have one question. Does your boyfriend happen to be a member of the club this article is talking about?"

"Ah... ummm..."

Lilly's mother flashes us a cheeky grin as Hanako's mouth falls open for a moment.

"Haha, looks like I hit the bullseye."

"H-How...?"

"To be honest it was a bit of a guess. The impression I got from your article is that you were trying to convince readers to join the science club. You aren't blatant about it, but the message is still there when you read between the lines a bit. I figured you were trying to surprise your boyfriend. It's a really sweet gesture, but you need to be careful not to adopt bad habits."

"B-Bad habits?"

"A journalist's primary duty is to report the news and inform the public. People like to think of the news as a tool to help them form their own opinion. If you subtly start making a case for something in your article, no matter how noble, people might become wary of reading your work because they don't like the idea of you trying to steer their opinion in a specific direction. Now, some news organisations are leaning heavier towards certain political mindsets than others, but as a rule you want to try and be as objective as possible. Especially as a journalist who is still starting out."

Wow, she's pretty passionate about this subject. Hanako seems taken aback by her response, but also somewhat impressed.

"Ummm... N-Naomi... I-I mean the editor-in-c-chief w-wanted to p-promote c-club membership."

"Really? Well... In that case, I guess it's alright. I could tell you to forget what I said, but I still think it's sound advice to keep in mind. Although... If you actively start promoting something, you're not really practicing journalism anymore, but..."

Lilly's mother trails off before completely finishing her sentence, but I realize with some amusement what she's trying to say and fail to resist a chuckle.

"You'd be practicing PR instead of journalism. Perhaps the two are closely related after all."

Lilly's mother lets out a sigh of defeat.

"I guess backed myself into a corner with that one. To tell you the truth, I'm not completely innocent myself. When my husband and I were still dating I wrote a series of articles about the Satou company, distributed over several magazines and newspapers here. Though I did put more effort than usual into making them as objective as I could."

Lilly smiles at her mother's remark.

"I never knew that. What did Father think of that?"

"It was a joint effort on our part. He supplied me with whatever information I needed, and I ended up letting his company take advantage of the network I built here over the years."

She shrugs.

"I was also hoping it would give me a positive standing with my future in-laws."

"Ahh."

"After our marriage my husband and I lived with his parents and grandmother for quite some time until we moved to a house two streets away from where they lived. Heh, they used to say that even when not living in the same home, extended family should still live near enough to carry over a bowl of hot soup. I think it's a Japanese proverb of some kind they were reciting."

She pauses briefly while thinking to herself for a moment.

"A bit ironic that they ended up giving my husband a job that sent him off to the other end of the earth, isn't it?"

"What became of them afterwards?"

"My husband's grandmother passed away before Lilly was born, and I doubt even Akira remembers much of her. The care of my in-laws was a bit of a problem when we moved, since it was also my husband's task as the oldest son in the household to take care of them. The company took priority though, and we ended up hiring housekeepers and a private nurse to look after them in our place."

"A private nurse?"

"Their physical condition started deteriorating around the time my father-in-law retired. In fact, his retirement was a result of something that took a major hit on his health. My husband decided to better be safe than sorry. In the end, they ended up moving to a smaller residence somewhere else shortly after we left. They're both still alive, but I don't think they get out much anymore."

Lilly smiles sadly.

"It's a shame. I was looking forward to getting to know Grandfather better after he finally got around to retiring as head of the company. He was absent so often while he was still working that I barely got to know him at all. It also felt strange at first to no longer have Grandmother drop in unexpected to see how we were doing or take us for walks like she had been doing for as long as I could remember. After they moved, contact faded out sooner than I expected."

Lilly's mother appears lost in thought for a moment after hearing her daughter's words but then turns back to us.

"Let's not dwell on depressing subjects for too long."

She gives Hanako a quick nod.

"Hanako, do you mind if I ask you another question?"

"Ummm... N-no."

"Not everyone interested in journalism is drawn to it for the same reasons. Some simply want to be able to travel and see the world. Others do it out of idealism. There are probably a ton more reasons. I'm really curious about yours."

"Ermmm..."

It's possible Hanako never really thought about that herself yet as she remains in thought for a long time before replying to Lilly's mom.

"I... enjoy working on our n-newspapers. Right now it's m-mostly editing and c-correcting, but it made me think... I'd... like to s-start w-writing myself. I usually get... g-good marks f-for essays."

"You like writing, huh? That's a pretty good motivation."

"But I... d-don't think I'd b-be a good journalist. I'm... r-really bad with p-people."

"I did notice you're rather soft-spoken. There are some ways around that though. I've had some colleagues who were rather introverted. They usually teamed up with a more talkative partner and conducted their interviews in pairs with one doing the talking and the other observing and taking the notes. Or they let their partner do the interviews while they did the research at the office."

Lilly takes this moment to chip in.

"Perhaps being out in the field approaching people would not be the ideal occupation for Hanako. If she likes writing so much, maybe she should try become a writer instead. But is there a specific study for that?"

"Are you talking about fiction? Writing fiction for a living is nice work if you can get it, but it's definitely not the most stable career in the world. Writing non-fiction is more predictable though. There are many people who want to publish something but lack either the time or the skills to write up something themselves, so they hire a ghost writer or biographer to do the job. Then there's copywriters, whose activities are somewhat related to what I do these days, content writers, report writers, technical writers and speech writers."

"That's... a l-lot of options."

"Indeed. On the journalistic side there are the options of editing, copy editing and research or fact checking. Now, there are probably studies that deal with these areas. Let me think..."

Lilly's mother absentmindedly twirls with one of her hair locks for a moment before suddenly snapping her fingers, causing Lilly to flinch.

"Please don't do that anymore, Mother. It's a really grating sound."

"Hmmm? Oh, alright. Anyway, dear, a lot of writers here have a background in either English or journalism. There are universities here that offer a degree in English and Journalism. That's one study, mind you. It covers various topics related to media in general, its role in society and various aspects of literature. There might even be an option to take a minor in creative writing. Now, I'd be VERY surprised if they didn't offer a similar degree in Japan. You should ask when you're back at Yamaku."

"O-Okay."

"Also remember that it always pays off to practice your writing skills. Have you ever engaged in any writing other than that column and essays for Japanese classes?"

Hanako softly shakes her head.

"N-No. I r-read a lot, but..."

"It pays off to be well-read, but it's no substitute for actual practice. Maybe this week would be a good moment to start."

"S-Start? I... ah... am working on a n-new column for the n-next newspaper, but..."

"I'd love to read it when it's done, but that wasn't really what I was talking about. This may be an intimate question, but... do you keep a diary or a journal?"

"N-No."

"Maybe you should consider keeping one. At least for the time you're here. Not for peer-review of course, but simply to start some good habits."

"Good h-habits?"

"Yep. See it as writing your own little private newspaper summarizing everything that happens during your stay here. Take an hour or so a day to update it. Stick with that one hour so you train yourself to work within the bounds of a limited timespan. If you take it seriously, processing and sorting information about events as they happen and memorizing the relevant details while dismissing the unimportant clutter will quickly become a second nature to you. These are skills that both journalists and writers greatly benefit from. If you're interested I probably have an unused diary or two lying somewhere in the study or the attic. Maybe you could take pictures too."

Hanako seems to have trouble keeping up with Karla's enthusiasm, but eventually she nods with a small smile on her face.

"Maybe it's w-worth the t-try."

Lilly's mother sends us a triumphant grin and shoots a glance at the place where Hanako's handbag is lying.

"Excellent. Is that camera still in your bag, dear?"

"Umm... Yes."

"Good. Hisao, could you sit down next to her for a moment? Lilly, could you get a little closer?"

Lilly's mother takes Hanako's handbag, fishes the camera out of it and takes a few steps back to make certain that everything that's on the blanket is in frame. As Lilly and I take a seat on both sides of Hanako, Karla aims the camera at us.

"Smile people! It's essential to get front page pictures right."

04

"So,Lilly..."

If I readjusted my watch to Greenwich Mean Time correctly, it should be six o' clock right about now. Lilly and I are busy collecting the various bowls and plates that were strewn across the blanket and putting them back in the saddlebags. Hanako is still sitting in the spot she's been occupying all afternoon, gently rubbing her calves with a slightly uncomfortable expression on her face. She appeared alright during most of the picnic, but got slight cramps shortly before we decided to head back home. Lilly's mother is standing some distance away from us, engaged in a phone call on her cell phone.

"Yes, Hisao?"

"That hour-long journalism-based sales pitch... Was that all 'part of the plan'?"

Lilly puts her hand in front of her mouth to suppress a giggle.

"Would you believe me if I said it was not?"

"You'll at least have to tell me that with a straight face if you want to convince me."

Lilly chuckles briefly.

"Hanako told me about her plans for the future during one of our nights on the town a few weeks ago. I knew Mother used to be a journalist, so I hoped she'd have some advice for Hanako. That's also why I asked Naomi for an additional copy of the newspaper. But... I hadn't anticipated this."

"Not anticipated what?"

Lilly shows me a weary smile.

"You may not believe me, but before she left Japan Mother hardly ever spoke about her old profession at all. I was just as surprised by her passion as you were."

"That's kind of hard to believe."

Lilly pauses for a second, then briefly turns her head in Hanako's direction.

"Hanako must have been overwhelmed by Mother's reaction."

"Yeah she was, but she also seemed interested in what your mother had to say. That's certainly a good thing."

"I agree."

Having finished packing up, Lilly walks back to Hanako's location and sits down next to her best friend. I notice that Karla has finished her phone conversation while Lilly and I were talking and walk up to her.

"I know we're getting ready to head back, but I don't think Hanako's in good shape for another bike ride just yet."

"She's not hurting badly, is she?"

"She seems uncomfortable, but not in a lot of pain."

"We won't be riding our bikes back. I phoned Allison a few minutes ago and she's on her way to pick us up."

Lilly's mother shoots a brief glance in Lilly's and Hanako's direction.

"Light heat cramps, it seems. They'll subside on their own. All she needs is some rest, a nutritious meal and plenty to drink. She'll have all of that when we get back home."

"Good thing we had shade, ice and drinks nearby."

"True. Maybe we shouldn't have focussed our concerns on just you the way we did."

She takes another brief glance at Hanako and then looks me straight in the eyes.

"Hisao, this is probably an intimate question, but... Hanako's scarring... It's not just on one side of her face, is it?"

I'm taken aback for a second by her sudden mention of a subject this delicate.

"She really doesn't like it when people bring it up."

"I can imagine. It's not really morbid curiosity or anything. It's just..."

"Yes?"

She opens her mouth to say something, but then suddenly raises her arm and waves. When I turn around, I can see a car with a familiar trailer behind it approaching us from the west.

"I'll tell you later if you're still interested. The gist of it is that I just confirmed that I've been a total idiot today. And I sincerely apologize for that."

She walks over to the side of the road, exchanges some words with the housekeeper as she exits the car and then nods in my direction.

"Allison and I will handle the bikes and the saddlebags. You just get Hanako and Lilly in the car, okay? If all goes well, we'll be home in less than 15 minutes."

05

Chapter 27 (Hanako)

01

I'm woken from my sleep by the sunlight coming from the small gap between the curtains and the momentary stirring of the person sharing the bed with me. Letting out a yawn and rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, my attention shifts to the sleeping form of my boyfriend whom I've been using as a human hug pillow over the course of the last few nights. I cannot help but smile as I look upon his face. I was worried initially that with the combination of his jetlag and altered medication he was going to spend most of the nights wide awake, but after the first two nights he's been sleeping very peacefully. I carefully bring my face close to his until it's hovering mere centimeters above him.

If he wakes up now I'll probably startle him, and he'll end up headbutting me.

As I conclude that he's not going to wake up suddenly, I move in and carefully kiss the tip of his nose. With some amusement, I notice that he reflexively sniffs with his nose a few times in response and I giggle at this cute sight.

I turn around and look at the clock resting on one of the dressers. It appears to be eight o' clock in the morning right now. Looks like it's still early. I guess I could stay in bed and wait until Hisao wakes up so we can pamper each other a bit. Then again, there's something I've been planning to do for a while, and I've been putting it off for several mornings. I don't think I should keep postponing it, so I slowly get out of bed, get my clothes off the nearby chair, make my way over to our private little bathroom and take a quick shower. After drying myself off and finishing my daily ritual of stretching in order to get rid of my scarred areas' morning stiffness and putting moisturizer cream on them, I put on my clothes, take the photo camera out of my handbag and quietly sneak out of the room.

We've been here in Scotland for a little over a week, and so far I can say I'm enjoying our stay immensely. I decided to heed Karla's advice and start keeping a journal. I'm also aiming to take enough pictures to fill at least one of the memory cards Naomi gave me. One of the things I've wanted to take an ample amount of pictures of is the mansion we've been staying in to go with my diary, and I've been waiting for an opportunity to do so without being confronted by too many people. Early in the morning seems like a perfect time to do this.

I can photograph our bedroom at any time I like, so I decide to start with the landing outside our room and work my way to the patio from there. As I pass the door to Lilly's room, a thought occurs to me.

I'm not going to ask if I can enter the master bedroom, but maybe Lilly won't mind if I take some pictures of her room.

I take my time snapping pictures of the bathroom which, as Hisao mentioned to me on our first day, is traditional Japanese and looks quite a bit out of place in the western styled house. I make my way downstairs to the cozy living room, making sure not to miss the cello case and taking a mental note to ask Lilly if she can convince her mother to give us a demonstration of her musical talents one of the upcoming days and then proceed to the kitchen, which I believe is about as large as the kitchen at the orphanage despite this mansion having only two permanent residents. I hesitate for a moment before entering the study. Lilly's mother said it was okay for me to take pictures so it's not like I'll be violating any unwritten rules, but there's still something about the room that makes it feel vaguely off-limits. According to Lilly's mother, this is where her husband spends most of his time whenever he's at home.
02

The study itself feels very oriental and in some way vaguely reminds me of Miss Yumi's office. The floor is covered with traditional rice straw mats and the room itself is very sparsely decorated with a low table surrounded by cushions in the middle and a few modest wooden cabinets occupying the corner. Traditional Japanese shoji cover the windows, and one of the walls is decorated with several elegant wall scrolls containing carefully calligraphed kanji. The other wall is what draws most of my attention as it's almost entirely covered by a large bookcase containing what look like hundreds of books. Before I can aim my camera to take a picture of it, I'm startled by a cheerful voice behind me, and as I jump back and turn around in surprise, I can see a young woman in her twenties standing behind me. I can't recall her name, but I know she's part of the cleaning staff here. The maid gives me a curious glance, probably not having expected my reaction, and then repeats her greeting while probably trying not to stare past my hairlock. Maybe it's because she startled me and I didn't get the chance to carefully listen to her words, or maybe her accent is rather strong, but I can make neither heads nor tails of what she's saying, so I stammer out a reply.

"Ah... erm... E-excuse m-me? C-Could y-you repeat y-yours-self?"

The maid seems to have trouble picking up on what I'm saying. Would she consider it rude if I just get out of here?

"She is wishing you a good morning and hopes you had a pleasant night's rest."

A calm voice interrupts my plans for a hasty escape attempt, and the next moment a tall figure appears in the doorway behind the maid, who quickly steps aside with a quick bow.

"Ah... umm... G-Good m-morning, M-Mister Satou."

I make a stiff bow, mostly out of instinct, to which he responds with a graceful bow of his own.

"Good morning, Miss Ikezawa. I hope you do not mind if I repeat Miss Wilson's question."

Miss Wilson? Ah, the maid. I shyly nod in response.

"I... ah... slept w-well. Thank you. H-Have you?"

"Quite well, thank you."

He says something in English to the maid that I can't quite make out, but she smiles briefly, nods and then gets to work dusting the table.

"I apologize on behalf of Miss Wilson. She is originally from the countryside nearby, and her accent can be difficult to understand for those who are unaccustomed to the Highlands' dialect."

"It's... okay."

Lilly's father walks into the room, waits for the maid to finish cleaning the table, puts the laptop he was carrying down and then turns to me.

"Miss Ikezawa, I came here for the purpose of answering a few mails and verifying my schedule for today. Would it be a problem if I started addressing these matters? I am afraid I have a lot of work on my plate for today."

"S-Should I leave?"

"There is no need for you to. "

"T-Thanks."

I turn around and ready my camera to take a picture of the windows and the shoji in front of them, waiting for the maid to finish cleaning them and leave. She suddenly seems to remember my presence again, looks me over and giggles. She then strikes a pose and nods in my direction to indicate it's okay to take a picture. A photo with a person in it, a maid no less, may actually be more interesting than just a picture of an empty room, so I raise the camera and press the shutter-release button on its top to take the picture. She then walks over to another spot in the room and strikes another pose. I chuckle to myself. She seems to enjoy acting as my model, so I take another picture, this time one of her pretending to dust the cabinets. It looks like she's getting into it for this time she takes up position near the bookcase and behind Mister Satou. Before I can aim the camera however, Lilly's father turns

his head, gives her a stern look and whispers something to her, causing her to look a bit sheepish before walking out of the room, giggling to herself as if enjoying some joke I wasn't let in on.

Mister Satou watches her leave, a smirk appearing on his face for less than a second, and then his gaze turns stern again before refocusing on his laptop. I'm not quite sure what to think of what just happened. Upon realizing I'm not immediately resuming my previous activities, Mister Satou's gaze briefly shifts to me.

"I told her it may be better if she resumed her chores here at a later time. I will not pretend to know for certain what Miss Wilson found so amusing, but I have a slight suspicion."

"Ummm... W-was it me?"

He thinks for a moment as if needing some time to rehearse his answer and then replies.

"When I moved to Europe, I quickly learned that there are quite a few stereotypes about the Japanese circulating here. I have been able at times to point out that many of those stereotypes are either exaggerations or blatant falsehoods. *chuckle* One of these stereotypes happens to involve the... ah... inseparability of Japanese tourists and their photo cameras."

I blush a bit. Looks I just came across as a walking stereotype, like an obese American tourist in a cowboy hat and Hawaiian shirt asking for directions in English to the nearest McDonalds.

"I'm... s-sorry."

"Think nothing of it."

"Although I do hope she will at least still take my word for it that not all Japanese are covertly trained in ninjutsu during childhood."

I didn't quite pick up what he just mumbled to himself. His voice was too low to hear it clearly.

"E-Excuse me?"

"If you need anything, please let me know."

"O-Okay, thank you."

Lilly's father once again starts typing on his computer, and I take a moment to look him over. Mister Satou is in many ways a sharp contrast with his wife. Appearance-wise, save for his above-average height, he looks just like the hundreds of salarymen you see every day around the city's train station. Sporting silver-grey hair, bespectacled and wearing a neat business suit, he is a dignified and extremely formal man in appearance, manners and speech. He's about as tall as his wife and although he's been very friendly in his interactions with us, there's nevertheless something stern about him. His polite and reserved tone seems almost jarring compared to the up-beat personality possessed by his wife. And unlike Karla's energetic and fit appearance, Mister Satou comes across as though he hasn't slept in weeks. Unless he always has bags under his eyes, I suspect he was merely being polite when he assured me he had a good night's rest. From what I've learned this week, he's been under a lot of work-related stress lately. And despite that, he's been rapidly typing on his laptop throughout our entire conversation, his eyes barely ever leaving the screen.

I turn around and get into position to take a shot of the scrolls adorning the wall, trying to fit them all into frame. As I do so, I let out a slight yawn that I quickly stifle with my hand upon remembering I'm not alone in the room.

"Are you usually an early riser, Miss Ikezawa?"

"Ummm... M-mostly. Earlier t-than Lilly."

"Sleeping in has never been a habit in this family. Lilly seems to be the only one who occasionally has trouble getting out of bed in the morning."

"I think... It m-makes s-some sense."

Lilly's father gives me a slightly puzzled frown.

"May I ask you to elaborate on that?"

"Early in t-the morning... It's u-usually the s-sunlight that w-wakes me up. But Lilly..."

"My daughter cannot see the sunlight and thus has only her biological clock to rely on. That certainly does make some sense."

I nod quietly and walk up to the bookcase. I initially intended to merely take a quick photo of it, but when I look a little closer, I notice something I hadn't picked up before. I previously expected the books to be about management techniques or business practices, but a closer look reveals that the shelves are almost completely filled with Japanese fiction with only the occasional foreign title here and there. My interest piqued immediately, I eagerly start skimming the shelves and it turns out there are many authors and titles in there that I recognize.

"Do you approve of my collection, Miss Ikezawa?"

Mister Satou's voice drags me back to earth, and I realize with some embarrassment I must have spent nearly 10 minutes checking the bookcase without saying a single word.

"Umm... Are y-you a c-collector?"

"What you see here is mostly a side effect of Inverness Library not really possessing any fiction in Japanese. I do borrow novels written by English or American authors there, but whenever I wish to read something written by a Japanese author, I have a copy imported from Japan. I prefer reading the original material over a translated copy."

I agree completely with that sentiment. It's nearly impossible to translate something and keep all the details and subtleties intact. Unfortunately, my English isn't good enough yet to comfortably read complete novels in English as a relaxation and grasp all the details. Hopefully it will be one day. What a world that would open up to me.

"It's very impressive."

"Think nothing of it. Is there anything in there by an author that you like?"

I think for a moment.

"Ummm... Is t-there anything by Haruki Murakami?"

Mister Satou replies with a nod that seems part confirmation and part approval.

"Near the lower left corner. I have most of his works with the exception of 'Dance, Dance, Dance', 'Kafka on the Shore' and 'Pinball, 1973'. Do you have a favorite title?"

"I... haven't r-read all his b-books yet, but I r-really liked 'Dance, Dance, Dance'. It's... one of m-my favorite titles."

"Would you recommend it?"

"Ummm... Y-yes."

"If you have not read it yet, and your tastes are anything like mine, you will probably like 'Sputnik Sweetheart' a lot. It happens to be one of my favorite titles."

"I haven't read it yet. I will k-keep it in mind. I'm s-still in the middle of another book."

"Do you mind if I ask what you're reading right now?"

"The... ummm... The Ark Sakura."

"By Kobo Abe? Have you read his work before?"

"J-Just one piece aside from this. I f-found it... interesting."

Interesting and thought-provoking, but a bit depressing at times, though that's probably for personal reasons. I wonder where Mister Satou is going with this conversation. I don't think he's trying to boast to me about his collection even though he'd have every right to brag in my eyes.

"If you run out of books to read during your stay here, please feel free to borrow whatever you like here. There is no need to ask permission beforehand. All I ask is that you return a book to the place where you found it after you are done with it."

"Wow... R-really? T-Thank you."

Wow! There's enough reading material here to last a year! This vacation just keeps getting better and better!

"No need to thank me. It is the least I can do as a host. Of course, now that you know this, please make certain not to spend all your time here reading. That would be a waste."

"We're going to... t-take a small boat trip near some p-peninsula today."

"Chanonry Point, I assume. A very nice area to visit if you enjoy watching wildlife."

"Wildlife?"

"I will not ruin the surprise, but you should take along a pair of binoculars before you leave. My wife owns a pair of them. Allison probably knows where they are. You should ask her."

"T-Thanks."

Having finished taking pictures, I press the viewing button in order to see how the photos turned out. Although the camera's tiny screen won't show a great amount of detail, I can see that the angles and lighting turned out alright. Satisfied, I put the camera away.

"Umm... T-thanks for letting m-me t-take pictures."

Lilly's father smiles for a moment and then gives me a curious glance.

"If you do not mind me asking; are you interested in all the rooms in the house or merely those that stand out like a sore thumb?"

I blush a bit. I did pay the most attention to the bathroom and the study because of their sheer contrast to the rest of the house and now I feel found out.

"You would not be the first visitor to take note of the considerable difference in style between the oriental rooms and the rest of the house. We get strange looks from any visitor who is given a tour here. What can I say? I may have left Japan, but Japan has never truly left me. I find that these little touches go a long way in easing the occasional pangs of homesickness. I try to spend my time here whenever I have reading or work to do."

He turns to me for a moment as if suddenly remembering something.

"They do not have Japanese baths at Yamaku, do they?"

They don't. At least not in the dorms. We just have showers, though most of the showers have shower seats attached to the wall in order to accommodate students with mobility issues. They do have a few baths in the nursing staff building that are used for therapy, but I've never used them.

"N-No."

"You are free to use the bath while you are here. If you have not already done so, you should consider taking a soak some time. It is a great way to relax if you take the time for it - and have the time to spare."

The way he says it suggests that last part doesn't apply to him right now, and he's not particularly happy about it.

"M-Maybe."

I think it's time for me to leave here and take a few shots of the patio and outside of the house. Maybe the nearby beach too. Before I can think about saying goodbye, Lilly's father closes his laptop, gets up and curtly bows to me.

"I am afraid I will have to take my leave, Miss Ikezawa."

Taking his laptop under his arm, he heads towards the door and turns around to address me one last time.

"It was good being able to speak Japanese for a little bit outside the business environment. My wife and I usually speak English here out of respect for the staff. I am also pleased to have had the opportunity to speak with the person who has been looking after my daughter. No doubt we will get the opportunity to speak some more when I am able to take some time off. Please enjoy the rest of your day and goodbye for now."

With that he turns around and exits the room, leaving me to digest what he just said.

How on earth should I have reacted to THAT?

Chapter 28 (Hanako)

01

"I guess they're not here."

I put the binoculars down and giggle softly to myself. The idea that the "friends" I've made today would follow me all the way back to the shore near the Satou home is really childish, but a girl can dream. I take a look at my watch and notice it's half past eight. Hisao will still be busy for more than half an hour. Lilly and her mother will be gone for the rest of the evening and if last week was any indication, the same will be true for Lilly's father. I could go back to the mansion and read some more, but I kind of like it here.

This quiet place at the shore of the bay has become my private retreat spot. Karla's suggestion of keeping a diary turned out to be a pretty good idea and each day, some time after dinner, when Hisao goes up to the attic to use Karla's home trainer in order to keep his practice regimen going, I use that time to take a little private walk along the shoreline of Moray Firth, sit down here, collect my thoughts and write them down. The soft sound of the waves, the gentle breeze and the sight of the sun setting in the distance all serve to put my mind at ease.

I thumb through the pages of my little journal. I decided to reject Karla's idea of turning it into a private newspaper and go with a more personal angle. That also meant the diary's for my eyes only. Not immediately knowing anything else to write, I decide to re-read what I've already written and see if anything comes up that's worth writing down.

Day 1

This day was almost entirely spent getting from Yamaku to the Satou residence in Inverness, Scotland. We assembled in Lilly's room in the morning, took the bus directly to the train station and then the train to the airport. We made sure to plan ahead for unexpected delays, but in the end it all ran smoothly. We made sure to do our baggage checkin as soon as we arrived and wasted no time getting through security. We went for something to eat and then hurried along to the gate. It turned out they let us board the flight before anyone else in economy class.

The flight itself took a long time, nearly 13 hours. London airport was even busier than Narita and it was quite the trip to the gate of our next plane. Fortunately, the second flight only took about an hour and Inverness Airport was really small compared to the other,. When we left the building, Akira was already waiting for us. She drove us to the Satou residence. Since we had already eaten something in London, we didn't waste any time getting to bed. After a trip that took nearly a day, we'd certainly earned it.

Musings: I wasn't looking forward to this day to begin with, but my first experience with the hassles of air travel was worse than I thought. If we take a walk into the city, I can at least tell myself that those crowds aren't going to bother me if I just keep my head down and stay on the move. Not so much here. The idea that there are people at every airport who are being paid to keep a look out for travellers showing 'unusual' behavior creeps me out like nothing else. Then

there's the security gates. It's a bit depressing to have pretty much the whole world make it clear to you for nearly a decade that the sight of your face is an affront to their sensibilities, and then they still insist on you showing it completely unobscured. All in all, this was not a good day for me. I can't comment on much of the flight as I've been asleep for the biggest part of it.

Addendum: Now that I've been here a few days longer, I feel that I should mention that although I still dislike airports, I do think this vacation has been worth the stress of navigating them so far. Also, what Lilly said about how special an experience your first takeoff is couldn't be more on the mark. In fact, the second one wasn't any less exciting. It's hard to describe the feeling I got when the plane left the ground, and I could see the world slowly shrink beneath us until the only thing visible through the window was that ocean of clouds all around us. It felt... liberating in some way. As if I was leaving an old part of my life behind me and was on the edge of something new and exciting. I guess I'm doing just that - if only temporary. So I suppose it wasn't all bad though I still dread going through customs and security again when we return to Japan.

Day 2

I learned something new about myself this morning. I'm pretty much immune to jet lag. I woke up around ten o' clock feeling fit as a fiddle. It seemed I was the only one. I took a long shower, applied my moisturizer and decided to try and finish 'The Temple of the Golden Pavilion' that I started on while on the plane to London. I could have gone exploring the house, but I preferred Lilly to be there when we'd introduce ourselves to her parents. I can't afford to make a poor first impression. I finished almost the entire book AND got several ideas for my article before Hisao finally woke up. It turns out he and Lilly had been awake for most of the night. The dinner we had at the start of the evening was delicious and much, much better than the food on the plane. Akira then came to pick us up to spend the evening inside a real Scottish pub. The atmosphere there reminded me of that visit to the jazz club before Hisao and I started dating. Lilly and Akira took part in and won a pub quiz, while Hisao and I took part in and both won a billiards game. Also, we met Lilly's mother! We just didn't know it was her at first. Back at the Satou residence we tried out the wine that Lilly won, hung out together and then went to bed.

Musings: Wow, the Satou residence is really large. I wonder if it doesn't feel extremely empty with just two people living there. Maybe that's secretly part of the reason they have housekeepers. Lilly's been trying to warm us up to the idea of exploring Inverness on our own. I don't think I'm confident enough yet to try a stilted conversation with some locals in order to ask for directions, but Hisao's English isn't going to get us out of a jam either. I think Lilly's enjoying the idea of us having to practice our English skills the hard way far more than she should. The town of Inverness is really impressive. The older buildings look so different from the ones in Japan. It's really starting to feel like we're on vacation.

Lilly performed a toast. I really envy her bond with Akira. They seem so close. Also, Akira suggests their parents are both workaholics. It explains why they couldn't pick us up from the airport the other day. Interesting tidbit: Lilly learned most of her homemaking skills from their old housekeeper. I wonder if she'd be comfortable with Akira telling us that. Billiards is great fun, but much more difficult than pool. Fortunately, this was a first time for both of us playing it. I told Hisao about what I'd like to do. Hisao has already figured out where he's going to go after graduation. I wonder if there's a university in his hometown of Chiba that I could attend. If we end up studying in different towns, maintaining our relationship is going to be really difficult. Also, meeting Lilly's mother was unexpected. Looks like she was toying with us a bit. I feel a bit embarrassed for not having made the connection myself because the family resemblance is quite striking. I wonder if this is what Lilly will eventually end up looking like when she's older. If so, she's a lucky person. There'll be a picnic tomorrow, and Lilly wants me to help her prepare the food. Hurray!

Day 3

I woke up feeling extremely sick this morning. Shower didn't help much. Fresh air didn't help much. Swearing to my ancestors to never ever drink again didn't help much. I guess I really deserved this. At least I'm not the only one. Lilly and Hisao were apparently in bad shape too. Lilly got in trouble for passing out on the couch - AFTER her parents already escorted her upstairs. Hisao and I had sandwiches for breakfast, filled with meat, lettuce and tomato. It was really hard eating them while resisting the urge to throw them back up, but Hisao said they'd make us feel better. In the end we decided to sleep for a few more hours. Fortunately, I felt seriously better around noon. Lilly and I spent nearly an hour preparing picnic food which was fun and a good way to distract myself from the painful sensation in my head. Lilly's mother brought tandem bikes along. Riding them was a bit like playing that motorcycle arcade game with Hisao. It was tricky but fun. At first.

We ended up visiting some old battlefield, but I didn't quite catch most of what Lilly's mother told us about it. I got unwell during our bike ride, but it was kind of my own fault, so thankfully the picnic didn't end up cancelled over me. We learned that the company of Lilly's family makes medical equipment. And that Lilly's mother was told to come to Scotland just like Lilly was, though unlike her daughter she didn't end up staying at the last moment. I wonder how things would have played out if that had been the case. Also, Lilly's mother used to be a journalist. I got some nasty cramps near the end of the picnic, so Lilly's mother ended up calling the housekeeper to pick us up. I was given A LOT to drink during the picnic and over dinner that evening. I ended up going to bed early that night to recover from today.

Musings: I really should have remembered last night how terrible I felt that morning after I had wine for the first time, because apparently that first hangover didn't make enough of an impression to prevent me from making the same mistake again. I was worried things'd be awkward between Hisao and myself for the rest of the week, but fortunately we managed to settle things before we went on that picnic today. If I learned any lesson today it's that I should maybe worry less about Hisao and more about myself. Hisao may not take well to hot weather, but I don't either, and I was reminded of that today. Lilly's mother said it was heat exhaustion and she was probably right, but I think my body temperature was also just a little bit too high. It's been years since I've last experienced any real heat-related afflictions, so I guess I was becoming forgetful about the fact that I'm prone to them. I suppose this is what happens when you suddenly start getting out more after years of being a shut-in. I'd better be more careful in the future, lest it's me who ends up in the hospital here.

We also got to know Lilly's mother a little bit better today. She's apparently head of PR at the family company. She was relaxed enough while talking about the business, but I noticed she got tense when she talked about following her husband to Scotland. That's obviously still a sore point that she seemed eager to skip over. When my activities in the newspaper club came up, Lilly suddenly fished our latest newspaper out of her bag. What on earth? Hisao likes to say Shizune is the scheming type, but I'd say it runs in the family. If Lilly's intentions hadn't been so good, these kinds of stunts would have scared me. And Lilly's mother used to be a journalist. How neat is that? And she likes to talk about it. A lot. Her enthusiasm on the subject is a bit overwhelming, but it's also pretty contagious. She suggested me to start keeping a journal and even gave me an old diary to use. I decided to follow her advice, so from now on I'll be writing a little bit about each day I'm here, and I'm going to write a bit for the first two days as well.

Day 4

Before heading to bed last night, I was told that we'd be taking it easy for today, and I could sleep in to my heart's delight. I'm not someone who sleeps in a lot, but I did end up staying in bed until

nearly noon. Not so much because I had trouble waking up, but because I decided to wake up my sleeping boyfriend in the only way that's appropriate when you're in a large bed, it's a beautiful sunny morning and you have plenty of time to spare - lazy morning cuddling. I didn't mind the fact at all that one thing lead to another. All in all, I had a great morning.

I was given my own tour of the house this afternoon. It's a really nice place. I asked if I could take some photos of its interior. Lilly and her mother said that was okay, and I could go anywhere I wanted. Maybe I'll do that tomorrow morning. Or some other time when it's still daytime but there aren't many people around. It'll be interesting to view my photos side by side. If I show pictures of the Japanese rooms to people, they might not believe they were made in the same house as the other ones. I also found out today that Lilly's mother has a home trainer that Hisao will be using for his daily practice.

Around four o' clock in the afternoon, we took a trip into the city to walk along the river Ness and visit St Andrews Cathedral. It was a beautiful church, though we didn't really get a lot of information on its history. I suppose it's still a church first and a tourist attraction second. The warmest part of the day was already over by the time we went into the city, but Lilly's mother nevertheless gave me her sun hat and said I could keep it for the remainder of my stay.

Musings: First of all, I really love the sun hat. It has a pretty wide brim, so it does an excellent job at hiding my facial scars and during the warm months it's more fitting than my own hat. It's also really elegant, and Hisao says that I look cute while wearing it. What more could I possibly wish for?

Lilly's mother really got going when the subject of her former job came up yesterday, and I was a little overwhelmed at first, but now that I've had a night to sleep on it, I think there was a lot of useful advice in what she said. I should ask the teacher in charge of the newspaper club, Mister Hoshino, if there's a study like the one Lilly's mother mentioned yesterday. I just hope I can work up the nerve to approach him about this. Then there's the career paths. My head was spinning when Lilly's mother was rattling off job options. I think fiction writer would be a dream come true to me. I've taken in so many books - how wonderful would it be to be able to return some of that. But Lilly's mother had a point in that it might not be the most stable career, and I think I really benefit from having some stability in my life. Maybe at some point when/if I share a home with someone who has a monthly income himself. (is it too early to be hoping for something like that?)

Technical writer seems like a solid and stable career, but I wonder if that kind of writing isn't too cold and lifeless for me. There's no personality in good technical writing. Biographer or ghost writer would be exciting. Imagine working closely with some celebrity who tells you all kinds of intimate things about his life that the rest of the world doesn't know about yet. But then you'd probably need a network and contacts in order to even get someone to approach you for such a job. I wonder what it would be like to be a speech writer. Imagine seeing hundreds of people listening to someone giving a rousing speech and knowing those people are really listening to and applauding your words. In the end though, copywriter or content writer may be the jobs that are easiest to get.

I can't really shake what Lilly's mother said about working with other people in order to work around your own shortcomings. Would I be able to practice journalism if I had someone like Naomi to do the interviews with me or for me and let her do the talking while I do the writing? That might just work. Lilly uses all sorts of tricks to work around her limits. Maybe I should take a page from her book and do the same. I wonder if Naomi would be up for a duo interview some time. I could always go into editing if things don't work out.

I can't believe I'm thinking about all these things. Not too long ago I had no clue on what to do with my life after Yamaku, and now I'm trying to eliminate options that all look attractive. I guess it's about time though. Lilly and Hisao already have their career path largely figured out. I can't lag behind too much. In the end, it probably doesn't matter if I don't have one particular job in mind at this point. If I know what study to go for, I'll probably have plenty of opportunities to see where my interests lie. Like Hisao. Still, I wonder if I should have another talk with Lilly's mother about all of this. Will it look weird if I approach her? Will I even be able to pull that off without turning into a stammering mess? Maybe it's better to ask Lilly to break the ice for me. I don't think she'd mind.

Day 5

Today is the first day Hisao and I have gone out without being accompanied by Lilly. We spent last evening preparing for today. We packed our lunches, the tourist guide and a map of the city and surrounding Highlands area. Lilly's mother gave each of us a bus card that we can use to take any of the bus lines in the area without having to pay the driver. I was a bit nervous to go out there without Lilly or her mother accompanying us, but the fact that Hisao was also a bit uneasy was a small comfort. Lilly's mom told us we could always call if we weren't sure how to get back. Good thing it didn't come to that. I'm not even sure how much reception we'd have in the middle of nowhere.

Having focussed on the cultural sights over the last two days, Hisao and I decided to get away from the city and take a nature-viewing trip for a change. We took the bus from the area near the Satou residence to the bus station in the center of Inverness and then took another bus to our destination. That bus ride took quite long - almost an hour. Fortunately, the bus drivers have been really helpful so far. When we show them our bus cards and then point out our destination on the map we brought along, they usually give us a little notice when we reach the bus stop where we need to get off.

Our destination for today was the hamlet of Tomich far to the south-west of Inverness. The village was built in a very charming style. It's called the Victorian style; named after one of the queens who ruled in that era. It seems most of the village's buildings used to be part of the local nobleman's estate, though the manor itself is now a ruin. Fun fact: the first golden retriever was bred in this village. The nobleman who lived here needed a dog who could retrieve game from almost anywhere during the hunt, be it the ground or a lake. (of which there are plenty in the area) So he ended up breeding a dog breed that loves both water and playing fetch.

The main attraction around here was the awe-inspiring waterfall slightly south of the village called Plodda Falls. We spent a lot of time just staring at it and taking pictures, and then we had a little picnic (nothing big this time, just the lunch we packed) near the falls. We spent the rest of the afternoon taking strolls through the nearby woods. It was really beautiful around there and so peaceful as well. Eventually we took the bus back to Inverness. We made our way back to the Satou residence without messing up, so kudos to us. Here's hoping we can keep this going. Also, before we went to bed this night, we met Lilly's father.

Musings: Lilly's father and mother are really different. I don't think the saying 'opposites attract' applies to Hisao and me, but it certainly seems true for them. I've always pictured Lilly's father as an intimidating figure who ruled his household with an iron fist, but he's actually not that bad; just a little bit stiff and stern. Okay, maybe more than a little stiff in his manners. He's also extremely polite and formal - much, much more so than Lilly. I don't think we'll be calling him by his first name anytime soon. It just doesn't seem appropriate.

He welcomed us to Scotland when we were introduced and told us to consider his home our own for the duration of our stay. Then he excused himself and retired to his study. From what I've heard, he's going to take a few days off within a week or two to spend some time with Lilly just like his wife has been doing, but in order to be able to afford that time off during this busy period at the office, he's been working massive overtime on an almost daily basis to compensate. He made a rather tired and restless impression on me when we met him. I hope he isn't going to burn himself out for our sake. I don't think Lilly would want that.

Day 6

Hisao and I went to visit a castle today. There are several of them around the area near Inverness but the closest one, called Castle Stuart, has been turned into a hotel, so we couldn't really go there. Fortunately there was another one nearby; to the north-east of where the Satous live. It's called Cawdor Castle. The required bus trip was fortunately a lot shorter than the one to Tomich yesterday.

Cawdor Castle is really impressive. It feels like a place right out of a storybook. Speaking of which; this castle was apparently the home of the protagonist in one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. I haven't really read any of Shakespeare's works though Lilly's mother gave us a brief summary of the story this morning. It turns out that the real Macbeth never lived at this castle because it wasn't built yet when he was alive, though lots of tourists who visit this place don't seem to be aware of this.

We spent about an hour touring the castle and spent the rest of our time there walking the nature trail nearby and the castle's various beautiful gardens. I think our little walk through the flower garden was one of the most romantic moments of our vacation so far. Despite having brought our own lunch, we actually ended up buying a meal at the snackbar near the bus stop since I gave most of my sandwiches to the ducklings swimming in the nearby pond. I managed to lure a few of them close enough for a photo. They looked so extremely cute I still smile whenever I picture them in my mind. I can't wait to have that photo printed out.

Musings: While browsing through the camera's memory, I found out something embarrassing. Apparently Hisao took a picture of me while I was asleep in our bed. Perhaps he thought I looked cute while sleeping. That wasn't really the issue though. The problem was the fact that I wasn't wearing anything when he took that picture. The bedsheets covered most of me, but I could still see my face, my shoulders and the top of my back. Has he forgotten that this camera belongs to the newspaper club? What if Naomi had found that picture? I don't think she's the type to use this kind of thing as blackmail material against me, but I'd still have to deal with a spell of excruciating embarrassment.

On that note; as of this week our 'love life' seems to be back on track. I think I'm going to miss our bedroom here when we return to Japan and have to get back to sleeping in a cramped single bed, sneaking around the dorm in order to stay over at each other's place and worrying about bumping into each other's neighbors the morning after. Best to enjoy the time we have here. Note to self: don't leave my birth control pills anywhere near Hisao's collection of medication. He nearly took some by mistake. Hahaha, that'd have been awkward.

Day 7

Naomi will be pleased. A true Scotsman has been spotted and photographed. Not just that but we also got to see how these traditional Scottish garments are made. We visited the Scottish Kiltmaker Visitor Center as well as a shop specializing in Highland clothes today. In addition to the exhibition there was also a viewing area where we could see craftsmen at work creating these pieces of clothing. It turns out there is no such thing as THE Scottish kilt; each clan used to have

its own pattern as well as an accompanying belt with the clan sigil on the buckle and a decorated pouch (it has a name but I forgot what it was) to make up for the fact that kilts have no pockets. While we were at the Highland dress shop, Lilly and I also took the opportunity to try on a few Scottish dresses. I don't think anyone would ever mistake me for a local, but I the dresses looked very natural on Lilly. Hisao snapped some nice pictures of this event. There were a few nice affordable dresses there, but I don't think there'd be a point in me buying one. They stand out so much that I'd never be able to get myself to wear one in public.

Musings: I almost filled up my first memory card today and I'm thinking of having a few photos printed out when we visit the shopping center here. Of course, lots of the photos are about the same things shot from a slightly different angle, but I've nevertheless managed to capture most of my vacation on camera so far.

My vacation...

Aside from that long weekend in Hokkaido, I haven't had a real vacation in a decade. There were dates with Hisao or outings with Lilly that I enjoyed, but this feels different somehow. Or maybe I simply feel different. I'm not sure when it started; perhaps when Lilly's mother started talking about writing and journalism? Or maybe when I started keeping a journal and actively using my camera? It hit me today while I was browsing through the pictures stored on the camera already. I'm in quite a few of the pictures myself. To most people that would be logical, but that's not the case for me. I don't think there are many photos of me in existence at all. Most of the ones that existed before the fire were destroyed when our house burned down. I never liked the idea of people staring at a picture of me any more than people staring at me directly, so I've always tried to avoid being caught on camera whenever possible, even if that involved skipping class. I don't appear in the class photo of class 3-3 nor in any of the pictures from earlier years. Yet during this week I've allowed myself to be photographed more often than in the preceding 10 years combined. And I'm writing about everything that's happened too.

Photos used to be nothing more to me than a painful reminder of my disfigurement, but the ones recently taken are different. They're reminders of things I enjoyed. I realize now that that's probably also why I'm keeping a diary. I'm busy making memories. That's kind of new to me as well. When I still lived at the orphanage, I survived by focussing completely on the present. I tried to forget the events of yesterday and tried not to think about what would happen tomorrow. (both were often painful) And yet what I'm doing right now is doing what I can to make sure I won't forget what's happened here in Scotland so far, and I find myself dwelling on what the future will bring even at times when I'm trying to just enjoy the moment.

I realize I'm rambling. A lot is going on inside my head right now, and it's overwhelming and confusing me at times, but I don't think I completely hate it. I hope that by writing all of this down I can give it a place and then try to make sense of it later.

On a final note, when re-reading my recollection of the first day, I realize I maybe wasn't being completely fair. I did like the flight itself and our stay here so far has definitely been worth the stress of the trip so I'm going to try and write something positive about it after I finish this page. Maybe that's the key to sorting out my life. Writing down the precious memories and taking pictures of them in order to keep them alive that way while letting the bad memories fade with time. Hmm...

Day 8

Today was another day off. We decided to go shopping in Inverness. There's an indoor market built in Victorian style located near the Ness. It's a really nice looking place filled with all kinds of small

owner-operated shops, and the archways and colorful shop facades give the place an atmospheric old-fashioned charm. It was a little more crowded there than I would have liked, but my sun hat did a good job at obscuring the right side of my face. Among the shops we visited were candy stores, a bagpipe store (those things are really expensive), several tailor and clothing stores and a few gift shops. (I got Naomi a toy Nessie from one of them as a thanks for letting me borrow her camera. She did want to see the Loch Ness monster after all.) We also bought ingredients for tonight's dinner. Lilly and I will be making fruit cocktail tonight. Finally, we met up with Akira in a cafe located in the marketplace. It was nice catching up with her. Also, we (secretly) had a glass of wine there. Akira treated us to one after she heard that Lilly had been sentenced to a soda diet for the remainder of her stay. We made sure not to have more than one though, lest we'd be found out.

Musings: It sure was nice to meet up with Akira again, although I'm a bit surprised that it's been nearly a week since we last saw her. She and Lilly still have almost daily contact over the phone, but you'd say that this would be an ideal opportunity for them to spend lots of time together while they still can. Who knows how long it'll take before they can meet in person again after we return to Japan.

Akira says she's busy with work, and I'm sure that's true, but I also have the impression that she'd rather not visit the Satou residence or even be in the presence of her parents. I heard that she's living in a small apartment she's renting on the other side of Inverness. I feel bad that Hisao and I are staying in such luxury right now while Akira is living in such modest conditions, even though I'm pretty sure it's completely by her own choice. From what I've been able to tell, Akira doesn't like her parents and is still upset with them about the way they left her and Lilly in Japan to fend for themselves. She doesn't act openly hostile towards them most of the time, but she's definitely keeping them at arm's length. While she's been willing to let us drink alcohol before, I got the impression the main reason she treated us to a glass of wine was to spite her father. I don't think Lilly's happy with this, but she seems hesitant to try and force things. Well, that's Lilly for you. Still, it's a pity she can't spend time with both her parents and her sister at the same time. They're all really nice people on their own.

Day 9

We went to visit the famed Loch Ness today. It's not the lake in Scotland that covers the largest area, but it's definitely the lake that contains the largest amount of water (it's much deeper than any other lake around here) so you could still argue that it's the largest lake in the country. The road to our destination ran parallel to the lake for nearly 10 kilometers, so we got plenty of opportunity to take pictures. Now about that destination...

The name of our destination is Grmblwarwmx. Actually the village's real name is Drumnadrochit, but as far as pronunciation goes that's the same thing in my mind. Infuriatingly enough, Lilly managed to get it right after a few tries. Karla promised Hisao and me that we'd be flying business class back to Japan if we could learn to say the name out loud three times without mispronouncing it before the end of our stay. Lilly promised to make us lunch for the rest of the school year if we could pull it off. That told us all we needed to know about our chances. We still tried for several kilometers though. Yes, the atmosphere in the car got quite silly.

We first made a stop by the Loch Ness Exhibition Center. It was a very impressive display showing some insight into the legend of the dinosaur-like creature that was reputedly living in the lake and also contained an overview of the various scientific expeditions that made attempts to verify Nessie's existence. Ultimately none of them ever found evidence, but like the ghosts that are said to inhabit the various castles in the region, it adds a nice touch of mystery to the place. After the exhibition center we took a nice hour-long boat trip on the lake. Afterwards, we drove to one of

the sights we saw during the boat ride; the ruins of Urquhart Castle. It's a very impressive castle ruin that overlooks the lake. The view from up there was magnificent, especially from the top of its remaining tower. Lilly's mother said this place held some very special memories for her, but wouldn't elaborate further on it.

Musings: Today was another day we spent with Lilly's mother coming along. Watching her is kind of interesting. Physically she resembles Lilly quite a bit, but if I had to pick one daughter to compare her to, I'd still say she's more like Akira. (just a little bit more refined) I had always pictured Lilly's mother as an extremely refined noblewoman of some sort, but Karla is surprisingly down-to-earth and laid-back. She's also rather informal, and her casual attitude makes her pretty easy to talk to. It's actually kind of funny in a way, seeing a person with such a resemblance to Lilly talk like Akira often does.

But when I look at Lilly and her mother together, I still notice a difference. Even though Karla acts a lot like Akira, Lilly and Karla don't act like Lilly and Akira. Whenever she's with her sister, Lilly talks to her as if she's talking to a good friend. The two are spontaneous with each other and even like to tease each other whenever the opportunity presents itself, despite Akira being much older. Karla likes to tease Lilly on occasion as well, but Lilly seems unusually reserved when speaking to her mother directly. More reserved than she is around most people. I suppose it's somewhat understandable, seeing that they've been apart for such a long time, but it's still a bit odd.

Day 10

I got out of bed early this morning in order to take pictures of the Satou residence. It's been on my to-do list for days, and I finally decided to stop putting it off. Lilly, Hisao and I had a trip planned this day, so staying in bed all morning wasn't an option to begin with. While visiting the study I spent some time in the presence of Lilly's father. We've barely seen him at all during our stay here. He leaves early and comes back late most of the time, and when he comes home, he often retreats to his study or goes straight to bed. I hadn't really spent any time in the study before, so I was unaware of this before but... The bookcase covering nearly the entire right wall is nearly completely filled with Japanese fiction! I think saying that Lilly's father is an avid reader is a massive understatement. He gave me permission to borrow any book I liked in case I got bored here. I wonder if it'd be selfish of me to secretly wish for a world-wide airline strike, just so I could stay here long enough to take him up on that offer. Before I left, he told me to get some binoculars. I wondered why at the time. It didn't take that long to find out.

Lilly, Hisao and I took a bus to the village of Avoch on the other side of the bay. Just like her father, Lilly wouldn't really go into detail. Avoch turned out to be a rather small harbor village and Lilly had arranged a boat trip from there. I didn't get why we'd be taking another boat trip after having taken one on Loch Ness the day before already, but the reason quickly became clear. Three words: Seals and dolphins! It turns out they live in the very bay on whose edge I've been sitting each evening. The binoculars I borrowed came in handy when the captain of our boat took us close to a seal colony near the peninsula we were heading for. Seeing them lying on the beach and occasionally clumsily flopping around, especially the little ones, just made my heart melt. So adorable! We didn't end up needing binoculars for the dolphins. At some point several of them started swimming around and under the boat, occasionally jumping above the water surface. We made a few marvelous pictures including one with me in it. The trip itself only took an hour, and I would have liked to take another, but unfortunately there was a rather large group waiting on the shore when we came back, and we didn't want to wait another hour for another go-around, so we took the bus to North Kessock, where a dolphin and seal center is located, instead.

We spent some more time at the center watching dolphins from both the vantage point and through the underwater cameras the center set up nearby. They also had underwater microphones

installed so we could listen to the sounds they made while they were swimming nearby. One of the coworkers there seemed really eager to tell us about these animals - as if my interest hadn't been piqued enough as it was. When Lilly pried a bit, we learned he was so focussed on us because he already had us pegged for Japanese, and the center was run by the Whales and Dolphin Conservation charity organisation. He mentioned that Japan is one of the countries still engaged in the practice of whaling and Japanese fishermen kill thousands of dolphins and small whales every year, and he urged us to spread the word once we return home. That was kind of uncomfortable. I got the impression that that person thought we ate nothing but whale meat all day long, but I've never even tasted it and Lilly mentioned that the few times she had a taste, it didn't strike her as that good. Anyway, Lilly and I made the decision then and there to officially adopt one of the dolphins as a gesture of goodwill. (this was something they offered to visitors) Lilly will be paying the monthly fee to the center, and I will be paying back my share by treating Lilly to a free lunch each month. The person at the center was really impressed by our decision. So please welcome the latest member to our little family; Moonlight the bottlenose dolphin. We got a cotton bag, certificate with her name, a sticker, information guide and they gave us a really cute picture of our dolphin as a bonus. Lilly and her mother will be visiting a theater play this evening, so we decided to return to the Satou home without making any more detours.

Musings: When Lilly's father spoke to me this morning, he suggested taking a traditional bath if I had the time. It's natural for a host to go out of his way to accommodate his guest, but I wonder if that was all there was to it. I remember accompanying my mother to a public bath a few times in the past. I enjoyed it back then. I don't think I could stand entering a public bath these days anymore, no matter how much confidence I'd gain. In fact, I'm willing to bet I'd be denied entry because the owners would feel the sight of me would upset the other visitors too much. Did Lilly's father mean to imply that this would be an opportunity? The bathroom's large enough to accommodate six to eight people at once. It's kind of a public bath without the public. Should I give it a try for old times sake?

Not having anything else in mind to write down, I peer through the binoculars again to see if I can detect any movement in the water. A silly thought creeps into my mind and before I can reconsider the idea I whistle sharply on my fingers, cup my hands in front of my mouth and call out.

"Moonlight!"

I grin. There won't be any response, of course, but I just felt like trying it.

"Hanako!"

"EEK!"

I let out a high-pitched cry, spring to my feet and turn around. Standing behind me is Hisao, sporting a broad grin that would make the head nurse jealous. I quickly avert my eyes while trying to keep my rapidly emerging blush in check. It looks like he decided to look me up, heard me on his way over here and decided to sneak up on me. Hisao takes a moment to enjoy his own joke and then gives me a quick peck on the cheek to reassure me.

"So, did you spot any more dolphins?"

I quietly shake my head, still a bit embarrassed.

"I... d-don't think they c-come to this part of the b-bay often."

Hisao allows his eyes to skim the water himself and then turns back to me.

"Maybe your dolphin's busy doing typical dolphin-stuff right now. Like... you know... playing volleyball with live sea turtles."

I giggle at his words.

"Still jealous?"

While Lilly and I were talking about how cute dolphins were earlier today, Hisao had to inject a pseudo-biology lesson into the conversation, and he said that dolphins are prone to what he called sociopathic tendencies at times. Lilly was quick to playfully insinuate that Hisao was merely being jealous, which he immediately denied. For some time I joined up with Lilly playfully ruffling Hisao's feathers a bit. Hopefully he didn't take that seriously.

"If your dolphin isn't around then maybe my company will do for the evening?"

I smile softly and nod. "I'm still d-dating you and not Moonlight."

As I look Hisao over, I suddenly realize something. He's still dressed in a shirt and gym shorts. That explains why he dropped by sooner than I expected him to.

"You d-didn't take a shower yet?"

He shakes his head.

"I was going to, but then I realized that since I have no plans for the evening and Lilly and her parents are away, I might as well go with something more extensive than a quick shower."

I smile.

"You want to try out the bathroom?"

"Yeah. I mean, it's pretty large, and we have nothing but showers in the dorms at school. I don't think I should pass up an opportunity to have what's pretty much my own private bath house."

"I hope you have fun soaking."

"Well..."

From the hesitant look on his face, I can tell there's more he wants to say, but he isn't quite sure how to say it. I suddenly get what he wants to ask. He didn't come here to tell me he was going to use the bath. He came here to invite me along. As I realize this, my fading blush quickly returns with a vengeance.

"How about it? I don't think you take these kinds of baths very often. Why not take advantage of the opportunity?"

Seeing that I wrote down the very same thing less than half an hour ago, it's difficult for me to argue against that.

"I... don't really handle hot b-baths very well."

"I checked out the bath before coming here and there's a control panel for the heater that allows you to set the water temperature to whatever you like. You don't have to if you don't want to, but I'd really like you to join me. Let's make it a very special occasion."

"...O-kay then."

Chapter 29 (Hanako)

01

I guess these belong to Lilly's parents.

After we got back from the beach, Hisao went down to the kitchen to get something to drink while I went to our room to put away my diary and brush my hair to get any tangles out. Now I'm holding two bathrobes that I retrieved from the bathroom's small changing area on my way here. The changing area contained shelves and baskets for clothing, but I doubt we'll be slipping back into our clothes again after we're done bathing, so I might as well leave my clothing here. I just hope Lilly or her parents aren't going to miss the bathrobes this evening.

I walk up to the window, close the curtains, take off my clothes and put one of the bathrobes on. Both are a little bit too large for me, though, since I'm used to wearing a rather oversized nightgown, it doesn't feel too awkward. I fold my clothes over one of the chairs, leave the bedroom and make my way over to the bathroom.

Two of the changing area's walls look suspiciously like reinforced room dividers, suggesting that the bathroom and this tiny changing area used to be part of the same room before the Satous moved in. I conclude with a sense of relief that the outer door can be locked from the inside, meaning that even if Lilly or her parents were to come home early there'd still be no risk of them accidentally walking in on us. In addition to a shelf with baskets for clothing and a space for shoes along one wall there are two cabinets near the exit; one containing bottles of liquid soap and several types of shampoo and the other containing washcloths and towels. I take two of each, making sure to get a bottle of shampoo for myself that contains conditioner and suits my hair and then slide away the inner door and enter the main bathroom.

While it's certainly not as large as the public baths I've visited in my childhood, it's definitely larger than any bathroom I've ever been to before. The floor is covered with slightly rough tiles to avoid slipping. On the far wall is a fairly large window with sun blinds in front of it. The wall near the bath consists of a large tile mural depicting a few large waves in front of a mountain. The bath itself seems large enough to hold about seven or eight people. The opposite corner of the room consists of facilities to clean oneself before bathing. Two pairs of faucets are attached to the wall in that part of the room, and each pair also has a detachable shower head connected to it. There's a small mirror on the wall above each pair of faucets and a pair of wooden buckets and low stools nearby. The floor near the faucets and shower heads seems to be slightly sloped so the water can flow into the drain near the corner.

After putting the soap and shampoo near the stools and leaving the towels on the edge of the bath, I examine the bath a little closer and notice a few small buttons and a display embedded into part of the edge showing a number.

45 degrees. That's much hotter than I can probably handle. I wonder whether this is the default temperature or if Hisao set it to that level. I hope my preferred temperature doesn't feel too cold for him. I press the button with a minus sign on it a few times until the display shows 37. That's probably a more responsible level for me.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

I turn around and see Hisao entering the room wearing the bathrobe I left in our bedroom. He gives me an expectant smile and walks back into the changing area. I meekly follow him.

"Umm... D-did you lock the door?"

"When I came in. How's the temperature? There's a panel near the door we can use to turn the room's heating up."

Hisao probably used that already since it's pleasantly warm in here. When we take off our bathrobes, it probably won't be the temperature that'll make me feel uncomfortable.

"It's... probably w-warm enough."

"How about the light? I noticed that the light switch has a dimmer."

"Hmmm..."

That might make things easier. I play around with the slider a bit until ultimately simply turning off the lights, leaving the changing area in near pitch blackness.

"Err... Hanako... I think we're going to need *some* light, or we'll be setting ourselves up for some very painful pratfalls."

I feel my way over to the inner door and slide it open. While the changing area is pitch black, the bathroom itself is only moderately darkened due to it still being light outside and the sun blinds in front of the window letting more than enough light through to make out the room's interior.

"I guess we'll be okay after all, at least until the sun sets completely."

He puts a hand on my shoulder.

02

"So... Shall we?"

"G-Go ahead."

I hear some rustling next to me, and a few seconds later Hisao, now completely naked, strolls past me, heads over to the washing area, sits down on one of the stools next to the faucets, reaches forward and starts filling up the wooden buckets, occasionally testing the temperature of the water inside them with his finger. I find myself staring at him for a moment, then let out a soft sigh. I guess it's too late to start having second thoughts. I remove my bathrobe, slowly approach Hisao and sit down on the stool next to him. I appreciate the fact that he's been considerate enough to let me sit on his right so my scarred side is facing away from him.

"Is this close to the right temperature?"

Without looking at me, Hisao moves one of the buckets to his right and I dip my finger in to check the temperature. It could be a little hotter; I don't want to start feeling chilly when we're in here for a little while. I add hot water until the temperature is acceptable, pour the contents of the bucket all over myself and then start refilling it while quietly watching Hisao do the same. We repeat this process a few more times, and when we're both completely drenched, Hisao turns in my direction.

"Can you hand me a bottle of soap and shampoo?"

"O-Okay."

I take a bottle of each from the small shelf nearby where I put them earlier, pass them to Hisao and then take of bottle of both myself. I guess I'd better get started quickly, because something like this usually takes a long time.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"When you're f-finished, you can go ahead and enter the bath."

"Even when you're not finished yet?"

"Washing my hair usually takes a long time."

"Yeah, I bet it does."

A slightly uncomfortable silence follows. What do you talk about in situations such as this?

"Hey, Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Can I help you... you know... wash your hair? I can wash your back too if you don't mind. I'll let you wash mine in return."

"Ah..."

I blush a bit. I didn't expect him to offer that. It might not be a bad idea, provided we can limit ourselves to just washing. It might actually be enjoyable.

"Ah... O-okay then. But c-can I... w-wash you first?"

"Be my guest."

I get up from my stool, kneel down behind Hisao and ready my washcloth before deciding it might be more fun to proceed without it. I unhook the shower head from the nearby wall, turn it on and briefly spray his back and his hair. I then put some liquid soap into my hands, rub them together for a moment and start soaping his back.

I tenderly stroke his shoulders and upper back, occasionally pausing for a second to apply some more soap to my hands.

He exhales sharply as I move my hands down and playfully stroke his sides and armpits with my fingers.

"H-Hey! No tickling."

I giggle at the cuteness of his response.

"Just remember I'll be in a position to return the favor later."

"Okay then."

My knees start hurting a bit from kneeling on the rough tiles, so I move my stool behind Hisao, sit down on it and put my hands on his shoulders.

"Hisao... could you... l-lean back a bit?"

"Huh?"

He seems puzzled for a moment, but then complies and carefully starts leaning backwards. I use my hands to guide him until he's leaning against me with the back of his head resting against my chest. We both let out a slightly nervous laugh.

"Is this really okay?"

"J-Just relax."

It's a bit of an odd feeling to be in this position, but it's also rather intimate. I carefully get some shampoo from the bottle nearby, apply it to my hands and then start running my hands through his hair, gently massaging his scalp in the process. We stay like this for several minutes, neither of us saying a word the whole time, but the silence doesn't feel uncomfortable. I'm just happy carressing him like this, and he seems content to let me. Eventually, after deciding I'm done, I get a shower head and wash the shampoo out of his hair. Afterwards he sits up and looks at me from over his shoulder to indicate it's my turn. Suddenly feeling a little self-conscious, I cover my genitals with one hand and use my other arm to cover my breasts as much as I can, drawing a small amused smile from him.

"Hanako, could you turn around and face the other way?"

I do as he asks, separate my long hair into two halves and drape it over both shoulders, exposing my back. With my hair no longer partially covering the scars on my back I feel even more exposed than before, but my anxiety slowly starts ebbing away when Hisao kneels down behind me and starts rubbing soap on my back and shoulders. My upper back hasn't been very sensitive since my accident, but his touch nevertheless feels good in the places where I can feel the sensation. After finishing my back and shoulders he gently pulls me backwards until I'm leaning against his chest. I turn my head a bit so I can listen to his heartbeat - something that always manages to put me at ease. I close my eyes and try to relax as his hands start rubbing and stroking the top of my head.

"Uh... Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"I... uh... don't really have much experience washing hair as long as yours."

I giggle at his uneasiness.

"Shall we... s-split the workload?"

"Split?"

I take the half of my hair that's draped over my left shoulder and swing it back. He carefully takes the ends of it in his hand.

"I guess I'll do this part then. Wow, it's kind of heavy when it's wet. Doesn't that strain your neck?"

"I'm used to it."

I can't help but smile. I have to admit that his sudden curiosity about my hair is more than a little endearing.

"I'll just watch and do what you do then."

I take the ends of my hair in my hands and start massaging the shampoo into them, carefully working my way up from the bottom. I've done this often enough to be able to do it in my sleep, but this time I deliberately slow down a bit so Hisao can see how it's done. If he messes this up, I'll have two distinct halves of hair tomorrow. That'd be a real problem.

"Man, long hair can be a real chore to maintain."

"You get b-better at it after a while."

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering... Have you always had your hair this long even before your... accident?"

"It... used to be just a little bit shorter when I was little, but I had my hair longer than shoulder-length even as a child. My..."

I hesitate for a moment, not sure whether to smile or feel sad at the resurfacing memory.

"My m-mother r-really liked my hair. She h-had hair j-just like mine. We'd always bathe together and she'd take her time washing it and telling me how b-beautiful she t-thought it w-was."

"I think it's very beautiful as well. It's pretty eye-catching too."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah. That day when Mutou introduced me to the class, you were the first student in class I took notice of. Your hair was probably the reason why."

I'm not sure how to feel about that. I don't really like any part of me to be considered eye-catching, because trying to avoid standing out has always been part of my survival strategy, but to hear Hisao say that I was the first person he took notice of in class and to hear him say that he considers my hair beautiful nevertheless makes me very happy.

"Umm... T-thanks."

Truth be told, I really like my hair as well. Covering myself up with it makes me feel safe, as if I have my own personal protective cloak. Well... hardly completely safe but just a little bit safer.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"This may be a weird question, but... About your hair, do you... err...?"

I suppress an amused giggle at his awkwardness. I think I have a pretty clear idea of what he wants to ask.

"In the o-orphanage, one of the staff would cut my hair, so I w-wouldn't need to go to a barber. Eventually, I l-learned how to cut it myself."

"Wow, really?"

"Yes."

What I don't say is that it was out of necessity. Going to the barber and exposing my facial scarring would be one of those things I could lose sleep over for days in advance.

"You're a girl of many talents, Hanako."

He drapes the hair he was tending to back over my left shoulder, embraces me from behind and kisses me on the cheek. Then he just holds me for a little while. Eventually, after determining that the conditioner must have had enough time to do its thing, I take the shower head and use it to rinse the shampoo away. I guess this is the point where we'll soap up the rest of our bodies. Or maybe...

"...Hanako?"

Just when I'm about to dismiss the thought I just had, Hisao puts his hand on my shoulder. I'm willing to bet he had the exact same thought I just had and unlike me he didn't think it was too inappropriate to suggest.

"Y-Yes?"

03

"Can I... soap your front as well?"

"M-My f-front?"

"I... liked washing your back."

"...If... If I can w-wash y-your f-front as well."

"Sure."

I think I can see the traces of an awkward smile on his face as sits in front of me, using his hands to cover himself in order to prevent things from being too awkward. I retrieve the soap, put some of it in my hands and start running my hands up and down his legs and feet, then continue on his arms. While I'm busy soaping his shoulders, I suddenly become aware of his gaze trained on my chest, making me a little uncomfortable. Since I can't cover myself up and wash him at the same time, I gently nudge his chin up with my finger and place my lips on his. Keeping him occupied this way, I reach down, pour some more liquid soap into my cupped hand and then start on his chest, paying special attention to the

scar in the middle. I feel his breathing speed up as my hands go lower and lower, rubbing his abdomen before stopping at the place his own hands are covering.

I break off our kiss and exchange an awkward look with him. I wonder if this is one spot he wants to do himself.

"Uh, Hisao... D-do you... uh...?"

My boyfriend lets out a nervous laugh and then moves his hands away. My eyes grow large, and I barely manage to suppress an uncomfortable giggle. The sights and sensations of our act have left his manhood completely erect and my mere glance is enough to make it quiver a bit.

"I guess this was kind of inevitable..."

"Uh..."

"Hanako, could you... uh... help me with this before we get into the bath?"

I blush heavily, but nevertheless find myself nodding. We get on our knees, I apply some extra liquid soap to my hands and then I take hold of him, wrapping my other arm around his neck. I start kissing him once more, moving my hand as I do so. I consider slowly building things up, but by the way he's thrusting his hips I don't think he's in need of a warm-up at this point. I tighten my grip a bit and move my hand up and down his length in tandem with his thrusts. I think I'm getting pretty excited myself from the reactions my caresses are drawing out of him.

Hisao probably had a point just now. When a girl and a boy who haven't been together for all that long get together in a bathroom, stuff like this is pretty inevitable. I'm actually a little bit surprised that he didn't suggest doing it with me right here and now. Maybe he was thinking the same thing I was: the only options we'd have here would be doing it on the bathroom floor or in the bath itself. The first option probably would have been rather uncomfortable and the second option would have been a really bad idea.

I can tell from the way he moves that he's nearing his limit. Deciding to end things with a bang, I get behind him, hug him tightly from behind and start pleasuring him using both hands while rubbing myself against his back. Since he's still covered with soap, it goes really smoothly, and I have to admit it feels pretty good to me too. Both his breath and his movements grow faster and faster, and I enthusiastically adjust the speed of my own movement to his until he suddenly exhales sharply and makes several jerking thrusts with his hips. I wait until his climax has subsided and then hold him in a tender embrace until I can feel him relax. After letting go of him, I take one of the nearby showerheads and use it to wash my hands. Then I place my hand on his chest until his nod tells me that he's alright and use the showerhead to get the soap off, wash the evidence of our activity down the nearby floor drain and clean him from head to toe.

As I turn off the water, my boyfriend smiles at me.

"Thanks, Hanako. That was really good."

I fidget a bit upon hearing his praise and then simply nod my head. This is not a subject I want to get into a back-and-forth with him over.

I guess it's my turn next.

I'm not really sure what to do now, so I simply sit here and wait until Hisao comes over to me, sits down on my left and embraces me from the side.

"You can lean into me a bit, Hanako."

I do so and try to relax as much as possible as he takes the bottle of soap, pours some into his hands and starts rubbing it onto my arms and shoulders. I barely manage to hold back a giggle when he playfully tickles my left armpit. I don't think a simple washing is all Hisao wants to give me.

"Can you move your right leg just a little bit, Hanako?"

Feeling a little bit flustered, I open my legs a bit and let him wash them though I quickly cover up my intimate area with one of my hands when he approaches my inner thighs. He moves on to my tummy and sides without breaking stride, but pauses for a moment when he gets near my chest. Then he gently tucks my chin up with his finger.

"Hisao..."

My voice is cut off when his lips lock with mine, and he starts kissing me. His initial kiss is so intense it actually makes my head spin, and I barely even notice how his hands are massaging my breasts, covering them with soap. Not content with just that, his hands proceed to caress my chest, first tracing my breasts with his fingertips, then holding them in the palm of his hands before fondling them and kneading them, his fingers feverishly stroking my nipples.

"Mmmmmmm!"

Encouraged by my muffled moan, he slowly, but steadily moves his hand downwards. He has almost reached my private area when I suddenly think of something and quickly grab his hand.

"W-Wait!"

"You... eh... don't want me to...?"

"There's... uh... s-soap on your hands..."

Soap I'd rather not accidentally have forced inside me.

"Oh... right."

He takes the showerhead that I used to clean him, turns on the faucet and washes the soap off his hands. Then he sits behind me and hugs me, softly kneading my breasts for a second time.

Now his hands are covered in soap again.

"Uh... Hisao?"

I hear him chuckle.

"Yeah, I know. Maybe I should simply do it without using my hands."

Huh?

Still fondling one of my breasts with one hand, he picks up the showerhead and aims the water spray at my chest. I gasp for a moment when one of the jets of warm water hits my nipple for a moment. Looks like I'm still pretty sensitive from his touch earlier.

His hand slides downward and gently spreads my legs.

"H-Hisao?"

His only response is a quick peck on my cheek. Just when I'm about to ask him what he meant with that earlier comment, his other hand moves downward as well and the warm sensation that was focussed on my chest earlier is now emanating from between my legs. My body jumps a bit as my most intimate place is suddenly stimulated by several narrow streams of water at the same time.

"H-Hey!"

This is... a pretty new sensation. It's different from when he uses his fingers. The fact that the stimulation is continuous is... not bad at all.

Hisao's other hand moves up again and goes back to fondling my breasts. I try to focus on the feeling in my chest since it's the more familiar one...

"Mmmm..."

...which is getting harder and harder as the sensation from the water continues and starts feeling better and better, and I start getting more and more aroused because of it.

And then he turns the switch on the side, disabling the smaller jets and turning on the stronger stream from the holes in the center, which intensifies the sensation even more.

I start panting, my body reacting strongly to the stimulation.

The place between my legs starts feeling extremely warm, hot even, but it's not due to the temperature of the water.

I can't believe this is happening.

He moves the showerhead even closer to my sensitive spot, making the sensation even more overwhelming than it already was. A moan of pleasure escapes from my lips.

I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a showerhead again without blushing.

My legs and thighs have now started trembling from the pleasure. My breathing comes out in sharp gasps as the non-stop sensation rapidly drags me towards my limit. My moaning is starting to get audible above the sound of running water.

"Mmmmmmm!"

I squeeze my eyes shut and grit my teeth in an attempt to brace myself.

And then the climax hits me; several jolts of intense pleasure that cause my body to shudder uncontrollably. It's like a white light flashes brightly in the back of my head. I let out a whimper of ecstasy before I can control myself.

After the last shock has passed through me, I instinctively push the showerhead away and let out a long, deep sigh. Hisao turns off the faucet and just sits there holding me for several minutes until my heartbeat and breathing have returned to normal. Then he turns the showerhead back on and washes me all over. When the last traces of soap have been rinsed off, he turns off the water, gets up and looks at me.

"Hanako, can you stand?"

"Y-Yes."

He extends his hand towards me, I take it, and he pulls me up. My legs are still a bit shaky, but the small distance to the bath shouldn't be a problem. Hisao gets in the bath ahead of me and takes my hand. He helps me in, and then we sit down and huddle together in one of the bath's corners.

We let out a long mutual sigh as the warm water envelops us.

This feels so good.

I lean against Hisao and let my head rest on his shoulder. I'm suddenly starting to feel really sleepy. Today was a long and eventful day. I got up early in the morning, we took a trip that lasted for most of the day, and then there's the overload my senses experienced minutes earlier. All in all, I'm pretty tuckered out right now and slipping into a warm bath feels like the epitome of relaxation.

I close my eyes and try to empty my mind, focussing only on the comfort of every single muscle in my body relaxing in the warm water. I feel Hisao's head tilting and leaning against mine. I guess he's pretty worn out as well. That's fine though. We can stay in here as long as we like. There's nobody else around, and we have all the time in the world right now. What more could I possibly want?

For a long time, my mind keeps floating in the place between slumber and awareness, content to just relax and enjoy the warmth all around me and I find myself losing track of time.

When I feel Hisao shifting a bit, I open my eyes and the first thing I notice is that it's slightly darker than before. I wonder how long we've been in here already.

When I take my head off Hisao's shoulder, I feel him turning towards me.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

"I... wasn't asleep. Just... relaxing a bit."

"I might have dozed off myself a little as well."

"I think it's a little darker outside than it was before. Do you know what time it is?"

"I don't know... or care. I don't have any further plans for the evening, so we can stay in here as long as we like."

"I'd like to stay here for a bit longer. The water's really comfortable."

"Glad to hear that."

"Ummm... Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"Is it... comfortable for you too?"

"Sure."

"But... y-you like your baths hotter, don't you?"

"Only a little. That doesn't mean the current water temperature is uncomfortable. Far from it."

"S-Sorry."

"Hey, don't be like that. Like I said, it's still a very nice temperature. And the last thing I want is for you to get unwell again."

"I'm... s-sorry about last week."

"I'm sorry too."

"Huh? W-Why?"

"When we came back from that picnic last week and you went to get some rest after dinner, Lilly's mom approached me and asked me if you were prone to heat illnesses, because she said... uh... burn victims are sometimes more vulnerable to them than most people. I... ah... didn't really know how to answer that. She then told me that I should keep an eye on you during warm days so you wouldn't get unwell again."

I already thought it suspicious that nobody ever brought the subject up again after that day. I shouldn't have been surprised that it was discussed without me present.

"I'm sorry. I d-didn't mean to cause trouble."

"It's fine. I felt a bit stupid though. I always overlooked the fact that maybe your... injuries came with some catches of their own. I kind of feel I should have made an effort to learn about them. Either by reading up on the subject or by simply asking you."

"W-Why?"

"Well, you're keeping an eye on me too. You even followed a first aid course to be better suited to watch over me. I feel I can't do anything less."

That's not a bad point. We're supposed to look out for each other. I never really talked to him about my burn injuries because I don't like talking about them in general. But after hearing what he said just now, I feel that it's not him who ought to apologize for dropping the ball, but me.

"You d-don't need to apologize. I... probably should have told you."

"I'm willing to listen at anytime you're willing to talk."

"N-Now?"

"Only if you're comfortable with it."

I don't think I'm very comfortable with it, but I would like to get it out of the way, and I'm feeling fairly comfortable right now.

"There's... n-not really that much to tell. There are a few minor things like... ummm..."

I think for a moment.

"My scars are usually r-really dry and stiff in the morning. I often have to do a few... stretching excercises after I get out of bed."

"Because scarred skin can't produce sebum?"

"Is... that's what it's called?"

"Uh, yeah."

"I... often use m-moisturizing cream to make them a bit more supple."

"Yeah, I noticed the bottle in our room. But you usually don't put it on until you're ready to get dressed, do you? I mean, we've slept in several times this week..."

"S-Sometimes it's more noticeable than other times. I only put it on immediately if it itches too m-much when I wake up."

"Speaking of your scars being dry... That's kind of what that incident last week was about, wasn't it?"

I nod.

"Scars... c-can't sweat either, so when the weather's warm or I... exhaust myself, it takes me longer to cool down again."

Though my physical condition really could have been better that day as well. Lilly's mother was probably right and part of the problem was the fact I wasn't even properly rehydrated to begin with.

"What happened that afternoon, has that happened to you before?"

"A... few times... in the past. But it hasn't happened in a long time, not counting last week."

"Hmmm..."

"Y-Yes?"

"Hanako... maybe this is a silly question, but is there any risk of you... uh... 'getting overheated' when we sleep together?"

I giggle. Is this how it's going to be from now on? Two people exchanging an 'are you alright' after each time they sleep together?

"I've b-been fine so far. I think... if you can handle what we do, I can handle it as well. So please don't worry about me. Besides... c-cooling down just takes me a little longer. It's n-not like I can't s-sweat at all anymore..."

"Yeah, good point."

There's a brief silence that's slightly uncomfortable. At least Hisao was diplomatic enough to stick with a generic answer. I suppose I should be grateful that I still have enough functioning sweat glands to engage in modest physical activity without fainting or killing myself, but the annoying thing about having less sweat glands than usual is that the ones I do have have to work overtime in order to compensate, which can lead to some extremely unladylike results. Hisao surely must have noticed already that during our activities in bed, part of me always remains almost completely dry while the other part is sweating like a pig. Thank goodness we always do it without any clothes on.

"Umm... you know... I used to like my baths a little hotter than this too, but ever since... my accident... I've been a room-temperature person. Hot and cold temperatures just quickly feel... uncomfortable to me now. Umm... S-scar tissue doesn't isolate as well as normal skin."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"That's m-most of it. If... it wasn't for my appearance, the s-scars would probably only be a minor inconvenience in everyday life."

"Okay. Thanks for telling me."

"P-Please don't go worrying about me."

"I won't if you promise not to worry about me too much."

"O-Okay."

The conversation having reached its end, we fall silent again, though the silence is comfortable this time. I feel Hisao's hand sneaking up my arm and shoulder, and he starts running his fingers through my hair. I sigh contently and snuggle up to him a little more.

"It's still really nice in here, isn't it?"

"Yes."

My boyfriend chuckles.

"Maybe we simply ought to spend the night here."

I giggle.

"W-We shouldn't. Lilly and her parents would think we're strange."

"If they'd even notice. Lilly's mom's usually away from the home the whole day unless she's taken a day off, and I've barely seen Lilly's dad at all."

"I... spoke with him this morning. In his study."

"You had a conversation with him?"

"Not for very long. But... he did tell me that if we wanted to read any of his books, we could borrow them."

"You mean the contents of that bookcase in the study? I figured they were books on business or heart equipment and stuff."

"No, almost all of it is fiction. And it's all in Japanese too. He has a very impressive collection. You should have a look at it tomorrow."

Hisao grins at my failure at hiding the excited tone in my voice.

"So he's your hero now?"

"N-No, but it's a very generous offer."

"Yeah, it is. I might check it out when I have the opportunity. Did he say anything else?"

"He told me I should make use of the bathroom if I liked an opportunity for a traditional soak. I was actually already c-considering giving it a try before you came and invited me to have one together."

"Well, that was some good advice then."

My thoughts return to the last words he said.

"H-Hisao..."

"Yes?"

"He also... t-thanked me... f-for looking after Lilly."

"Huh?"

"Y-Yes."

"Well, that's kind of ironic, seeing that she's really been looking after us, in a manner of speaking."

"That's what I thought too."

"I suppose you didn't... correct him?"

Are you crazy?

"N-No."

"You didn't tell Lilly about what he said, did you?"

"No. I think she'd be upset, and I d-don't want to complicate things between them."

"There was a similar thing during that picnic last week, wasn't there?"

"You noticed that too?"

"Uhuh. Well, Akira *did* say that Lilly wasn't very independent when their parents left Japan. Still, seeing them be this out of touch with Lilly kinda suggests some estrangement with a capital E, don't you think?"

"I... d-don't know. I think the situation is... just r-really complicated. Lilly's parents seem... v-very busy all the time, Akira is... rather hostile towards them and is k-keeping them away and Lilly's... floating somewhere in between them."

"Sounds like she has her work cut out for her, huh?"

"Yes. I wonder if there's anything we can do to help."

"I don't think we should meddle in this. Obviously a lot of stuff happened in the past, and we don't know anything about that, so getting involved would just mean getting in over our heads."

"I know..."

"I don't think Lilly came here expecting to undo six years worth of estrangement in only a few weeks. I think she simply meant this to be a beginning of something. Something she wants to maintain with weekly phonecalls while she's in Japan. This is probably a long-term thing to her. At least, if she's realistically-minded, it should be a long-term thing to her."

"Yes, you're probably right."

"Her mom's already taken quite a bit of time off to spend with her, and her dad said he'd try to get some time off at the end of the week. It's a modest start, but it's still a start. I don't think we need to do anything. Well, except maybe hang out and have fun with Lilly whenever she feels like it. But we're already doing that. And we'll just keep doing that, right?"

"Yes! We will."

"In the meantime, seeing that Lilly's not here right now, there's no point in worrying about her. Let's focus our attention on something else, shall we?"

I smile as he wraps his arms around me waist and pulls me onto his lap.

"Umm... l-like what?"

He snickers and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

"We could... I don't know... go out onto the beach and count how many pebbles there are..."

I turn around and smilingly shake my head.

"...or we could... like... go to the yard, draw some squares on the ground and play a game of hopscotch..."

I giggle, shake my head again, and we share a kiss. Ever since he embraced me, my desire's been steadily rising.

"...or we could simply return to our room and have a good time together."

I smile, eagerly nod my head, and we share another kiss. Then I let my forehead rest briefly against his. A quick peck on my lips seals the deal and I get off his lap.

I feel a bit dizzy upon getting up, so I quickly sit down on the edge of the bath until the feeling passes. We get out of the bath, dry ourselves off with the towels I left nearby and then carefully, walking hand in hand, make our way back to the changing area. The bathroom itself was already pretty dark, but the changing area is pitch-black. Nevertheless, we manage to find the bathrobes we left here with relative ease, and after putting them on, we quickly walk back to our bedroom.

We enter, and I waste no time in locking our bedroom door. Not that I expect anyone to come in here unannounced, but better to be safe than sorry. When I turn around, I notice Hisao has already turned on a small lamp on one of the nightstands, bathing the area in a light that's just bright enough to see clearly, but still dim enough not to make me feel too uncomfortable. I notice there's a bit of a nervous expression on his face as he sits down on the edge of the bed. Feeling a little awkward myself, I sit down next to him on his right side and wait for him to initiate the next step.

"..."

"..."

"H-Hisao?"

"Uh... Want to cuddle a bit first?"

That's a bit odd. When we were getting ready to get out of the bath, the atmosphere was such that I expected him to jump on top of me the moment we set foot in this room, and yet he seems hesitant right now. Nevertheless, I've never said no to a cuddling session before, and I have no intention of breaking that habit. I get a little farther onto the bed and wait for him to make the next move.

"Okay."

He gets closer to me, pulls me into a hug and then lets himself fall backwards, causing me to end up on top of him. The feeling of his hands stroking my scalp and shoulders and the sensation of his ankles rubbing against mine are very pleasant indeed, but every time we make eye contact and I give him an expectant look, he merely gives me a sheepish look back. He's definitely stalling for some reason.

Come to think of it, this situation actually feels familiar.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"Ummm... it's not like this doesn't feel good, but... this... feels a little like last week, d-doesn't it?"

'Last week' in this case referring to the evening he convinced me not to go with the usual way of him lying on top of me and give spooning a try, which I actually ended up enjoying quite a lot.

The half-guilty look on his face all but tells me I was right on the mark.

"Heh, perceptive as ever, I see."

"What... were you thinking about?"

"Just a passing thought."

"..."

"Promise me you won't laugh."

"Okay."

He leans in, kisses my ear and then whispers something to me.

I don't laugh, just like I promised. That was hardly going to be my first reaction anyway. I merely fall prey to one of the most luminescent blushes I've ever experienced. He wants to do... *that*?

Hisao's awkward look shows that he's already sorry he said anything.

"Eh... On the other hand, never mind."

"Ummmm..."

"..."

"..."

"W-Why?"

"Uh... curiosity, I guess. And we just got out of the bath. And... uh..."

"Y-Yes?"

"It's also supposed to feel really good."

That's as good a reason as any, I suppose.

In fact, it's probably a better reason than any other.

It's still extremely embarrassing though.

But if it feels really good to him...

It might be worth it.

If it feels really good...

As long as I don't mess up, of course.

"Uh... W-what if... What if I m-mess up?"

There's a surprised silence on his end. He probably didn't expect me to even consider it.

But if it feels good to him...

"If you mess up, we'll just go back to sticking to what works, and I'll do my best to make it feel extra good to you. And we'll just deny that it ever happened."

Denial? Yeah, I guess denial works for me.

04

"O-Okay..."

Another awkward smile. Let's hope this isn't going to result in mutual regret.

"So... uh... it's probably going to be easiest to take turns, right?"

"Y-Yes. Uh...w-would you l-like to g-go first?"

"...okay."

I get off him, and we both sit up. I start fumbling with the belt of his bathrobe, taking several seconds to get it loose. He allows the bathrobe to slide off his shoulders and then starts loosening mine as well.

"M-Me too?"

"If it's okay with you."

I'm not completely comfortable, but I nod nevertheless. As I let my bathrobe slide down as well and then drop both robes over the edge of the bed, I only hope that the atmosphere isn't going to remain this awkward the whole time.

When I turn back towards Hisao, I see an expectant expression on his face. I'm not really that confident myself.

"Ummm..."

"Yes?"

"I... d-don't really know h-how to do this."

He lets out an uneasy chuckle.

"I don't either, but... I think it's simply... using your hands... without using your hands. I'm not sure if that makes sense."

"I... I think it does."

"That's probably a good way to go about it."

"Okay."

At least I have a general idea now. I give a hesitant nod to Hisao who lies down on his back and then beckons me to lie on top of him. I do so and we share a few kisses and cuddles until my nervousness starts to die down a bit.

I suppose it's up to me now.

Use my hands without using my hands.

Okay then.

I give him one more peck on the lips and then move sideways until I reach his ear. He shudders lightly as I take his earlobe between my lips and start kissing it. His hands wrap around me and stroke my back as I move from his earlobe to his neck and let my tongue do what my fingertips have done several times before. Before moving further down, I suckle gently on the most sensitive part of his neck, making sure not to leave a suction mark. I quietly smile to myself when I think of what comes next.

His chest has been a source of fascination for me ever since he revealed his chest scar. There might be other heart patients at Yamaku, I neither know nor care about that. But as far as I'm concerned, that light horizontal line there is a sight that is truly unique to him. His chest may easily be my favorite part of his body. I love stroking it with my hand or laying my head on it and listening to his heartbeat. Perhaps these acts are my way of reminding him of my acceptance.

And now my head is hovering a few centimeters above his chest, the scar in the middle nearly touching the tip of my nose. I give his chest a loving stare and then start planting kisses on it, first slowly, but then faster and faster. Every so often, I briefly pause to listen to his heartbeat before resuming my pampering.

Eventually, I look up and see an encouraging smile on his face. He seems to like it so far. Emboldened a bit by this, I move my attention back to his chest and stick out my tongue, letting it travel from his chest scar to his right nipple. I teasingly circle it a few times before flicking it with the tip of my tongue and am pleased by the gasp that follows. I let my tongue wander from his right nipple to his left and start caressing it in the same way. Rewarded with another sharp breath, I decide to step up the pace a bit, I lick one nipple, then move to the other, then back again, sneaking in little kisses near his armpit, side and collarbone on the side. By this time his entire body has started moving underneath me, shuddering at each contact with my tongue and his breathing has grown quick and shallow.

I don't think I'd mind going on like this for a long time, but when he gently puts his hands on my shoulders and gives them a few short taps with his fingers, I realize that he's ready for the main event. I giggle a bit as I playfully rub his erect nipples with the tip of my nose and give him one last kiss on the scar located in between them.

Then I move downward a bit and kiss him again, lower myself even more and kiss him once more. Laying a trail of kisses in the process, I work my way from his chest, past his tummy and finally down to his abdomen.

When I finally come face to face with his member, I can't help but swallow a little lump in my throat. I've seen it plenty of times before, but never from up close like this. I'm not supposed to... put that in all the way, am I? I'll choke for sure.

It's also supposed to feel really good.

I shoot an uncertain glance at Hisao's, who's watching me with a mixture of embarrassment and anticipation on his face.

"Just... take it slowly, Hanako. And just stop if you don't like it."

I think back on what he said earlier. Use my hands without using my hands. Most of the time, I'd start by simply running a finger or two along. I could do something like that now as well. Leaning on my elbows, I lower myself to his base, my face hovering mere centimeters over his length. I giggle briefly when I see his length twitching ever so slightly whenever I breathe on it. That actually looks kind of cute.

I finally take a deep breath, take his member between my fingers, stick out my tongue and touch it against his base. Then I run it along its length, stopping just as I reach the head. I hear a pleased sigh coming from Hisao. It sounds like he likes this and doing this isn't so bad, so I run my tongue along the length of his member again.

And again.

And again.

His breathing has started running in tandem with the caressing of my tongue. Having gained some courage from his reactions so far, I take his member in my hand and gently pull it upright. I notice that the tip is glistening ever so slightly. Forcing my hesitation aside, I lower my head, place a gentle kiss on it and then give it a quick flick with my tongue. As I do so, a faint, foreign smell enters my nostrils. Trying to avoid thinking too hard on this, I start licking the tip some more, each flick of my tongue slightly more forceful than the previous one.

While I'm busy tending to him, I suddenly feel a strange sensation in the back of my head, and when my gaze shifts up for a moment, I realize why. Hisao is looking straight at me. He's looking at what I'm doing and how I'm doing it. My head instantly goes into tomato-mode, and my gaze starts jumping between random points in the room in an attempt to evade his.

"Uh... You were doing really well just now, Hanako. It's been great so far."

"H-Hisao... P-please don't look at me."

"Huh?"

"It's... r-really embarrassing."

He briefly opens his mouth to say something, but then seems to reconsider and merely nods his head.

"Okay, Hanako. I'll keep my eyes closed."

As he says this, he indeed lies back and closes his eyes, leaving me to pick things up again. Feeling a little more at ease now that he's no longer watching me, I lower my head again, part my lips and carefully wrap them around his tip. Not sure how to proceed, I tilt my head a bit and let it rub against the inside of my cheek. I carefully start moving my head a little and get a soft sigh in response. I move my head a little faster in response until I suddenly hear a loud yelp which causes me to quickly pull back.

"Ah... B-be careful with the teeth!"

"S-Sorry!"

It sounds like his tip accidentally brushed against my teeth. I didn't even notice it myself, but he must have gotten extremely sensitive and just that little touch was painful for him.

"S-Should I...?"

"If you like..."

I lower my head again and take him in my mouth once more. This time I try to keep it in the middle of my mouth and away from my teeth. I attempt to keep my jaw as relaxed as possible as I slowly slide up and down. This is hardly the most comfortable act in the world as I have to brace myself at the end of every downward motion in order to prevent myself from letting it slide in too far. I wonder if I'm even doing this right. Hesitantly, I start moving my tongue around a bit. It seems to get him even more aroused than he already was, but my initiative quickly comes to bite me when he suddenly bucks his hips ever so slightly and his member goes in just a little bit past my comfort zone, causing me to immediately pull back again just before I have a sharp coughing fit. He immediately sits up and opens his eyes, a worried expression visible in them.

"Hanako! Are you alright? I'm really sorry."

"I'm... o-okay..."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to do that. It just... happened automatically."

"It's... okay. I'm p-probably just not any g-good at this."

"...Hanako, I... realize this is kind of selfish, but could you try one more time and just focus on the tip this time? Maybe you could get a little more comfortable too."

"How?"

"Maybe you could lie down on your side?"

I was about ready to throw in the towel, but the look in his eyes convinces me to give it one last shot. It's not like actual intercourse was something I immediately got right. I nod, and he lies down again. I lie down on my right side and lay my head on his belly as if it's a pillow. I gently take hold of him again with my left hand and wrap my lips around the head once more. This position is a lot more pleasant than the previous one and I soon become comfortable enough to make little nodding motions with my head while suckling on his tip as if it's an ice cream cone. He lets out a pleased sigh.

"That's... really... good, Hanako."

Suddenly, I feel his hands on me, and for a moment I'm afraid he's going to grab hold of my head, but then a warm sensation spreads across the left side of my face and I realize he's stroking my cheek with his fingers while his other hand is gently running through my hair. I'm amazed at how tender and loving his caresses are and how good they make me feel. If we can keep doing things this way, I can probably keep this up until the end.

With newfound enthusiasm, I start nodding my head a little faster, using my left hand to rub and stroke his base and my tongue to dance and slide around him. Ever since I first started using my tongue on his tip, a slightly odd taste has been spreading through my mouth, but to my surprise it hasn't even been

unpleasant. His taste is slightly salty with just a little hint of sweetness, and while I'm not really sure whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, it's much too mild to really bother me.

He keeps caressing my cheek, and it makes me feel so content that I snuggle up against him. I notice that his breathing has become labored, with more and more gasps and sighs in between breaths. I eagerly keep going, the tenderness of his touch and the arousal in his voice filling me with happiness and lust at the same time. I close my eyes to better concentrate on both.

"H-Hanako..."

I love the way he's cooing my name. It makes me want to pleasure him even more.

"H-Hanako... aah... I..."

He's nearing his limit. The way he breathes, the way he moves, the strain in his voice. He's almost there.

"...almost..."

But what am I supposed to do now? Should I keep going? Should I stop? Should I pull away at the last moment? Is he telling me to pull away or to brace myself?

If I pull away at the last moment, that stuff will inevitably be in my hair for the rest of the night. It'll be a nightmare to get it out tomorrow, and I don't want to shower again this evening.

If I stop to ask him with him being this close, I'll kill the moment and might ruin his finish. I'm not even sure if I'd be able to get the question out of my mouth.

If I keep going until the end and he doesn't want me to, I might gross him out.

But if I stop prematurely, I'll have disappointed him, and that's much, much worse than grossing him out.

Boys like it when a girl keeps going, don't they?

"Hanako... I..."

Anything but disappointment. I already have his taste in my mouth anyway. Judging from his voice, he's extremely close to the edge. My mind made up, I speed up the pace and go all out on him. My lips and tongue dart across his tip again and again, my left hand moves furiously up and down, and I stretch out my pinky finger for the finishing touch.

Just when my pinky lightly tickles the area underneath his base, several things happen at once. Hisao lets out a loud and prolonged groan, his member starts throbbing violently, his entire lower body starts jerking uncontrollably, his upper body rises slightly despite my head still resting on his belly and my eyes fly open in surprise when the mild taste that was in my mouth before is suddenly replaced by a much different, much stronger taste.

My initial plan had been to just swallow it, but I quickly decide against that now. What's overpowering is not so much the taste. It's a lot saltier than what I tasted earlier with just a touch of bitterness, but it's nothing I can't handle. What makes me a little queasy is the texture. It's surprisingly thick and a bit slimy, and I can't shake the feeling that if I swallow it, it'd either get stuck in my throat or crawl its

way back up. As soon as the spasms in Hisao's lower region have died down, I get up and quickly spit the contents of my mouth onto his stomach. Hisao's still too engaged in his subsiding climax to even notice.

Staying true to tradition, I lie next to him and place my hand on his chest, feeling his frantic heartbeat slowly return to normal and keeping an eye out for palpitations. Eventually, Hisao's dazed eyes start regaining some focus, and after recognizing the look on my face he gives a careful deliberate nod. I give a reassured smile and a quick peck on the cheek back.

"I'll... go and get something to clean you, Hisao."

Without waiting for a response, I walk over to the bathroom area and get some tissues from a box on one of the shelves. We have some tissues in our nightstand drawer too, but I also wanted an excuse to clean myself a bit. I don't think Hisao's going to kiss me like this. I get myself a glass of water and drink it, slowly weakening the odd taste in my mouth until it's gone altogether. I return to the bed and kneel at Hisao's side, using the tissue to wipe his stomach clean. After having cleaned up the little puddle, which was barely large enough to fill a teaspoon, I turn to him and notice he's gotten his bearings back and is now looking at me.

"Hanako?"

"Hisao... Did you... like it?"

"Yeah. It's just..."

He looks lost for words for a few seconds.

"Why did you keep going?"

"Huh?"

"I kind of assumed you were going to pull away at the last second when I was about to... I was kind of surprised that you kept going."

"I... t-thought that's what you w-wanted. D-Don't b-boys... like it that way?"

He laughs.

"Did you read that somewhere?"

My shoulders droop, and my smile instantly drops. So it turns out that I guessed wrong after all, and now he's weirded out or even grossed out by me.

"S-Sorry. I thought... I'm r-really sorry."

"Hey, don't get all apologetic on me. If anything, I should probably apologize to you for not having been clearer. I... uh... don't know if this is a consolation to you, but..."

He takes my hand and holds it tenderly.

"...as embarrassing as it is to say this, what you just did probably felt better than anything I've ever felt before. It was really, really good."

He does look a little awkward upon saying this, but my mood instantly jumps from gloomy to elated and, wearing a huge smile on my face, I lean forward and grab him into a tight, almost savage, hug. He merely chuckles a little at my reaction and then looks into my eyes.

"The least thing I can do is return the favor. If you're up for it."

I'm not completed sure if I'm ready to be on the receiving end or not, but I don't want to keep Hisao waiting any longer, and I'm admittedly a little curious after having witnessed how much he got into it, so I ignore the feeling of my heart beating in my throat and lie down in the place where Hisao was lying earlier. I feel a warm sensation all over when Hisao lies down on top of me and mouth a silent 'okay' in response to the expectant look in his eyes.

"Don't be afraid, Hanako. Just... lie back, relax and let it happen."

He kisses me and lets his forehead rest against mine for a moment. I giggle as he playfully rubs his nose against mine before letting his lips wander towards the right side of my face. I can't feel him kissing my cheek, my neck and my shoulder, but I can hear it. Even though my body no longer picks up those kinds of sensations there, him kissing or touching me there still makes me feel warm inside. It's the gesture that matters. The gesture that he's not repelled by my scarred skin.

I reflexively close my eyes when he brings up his hands, brushes my fringe away with his fingers and kisses the spots above my eyebrows. It tickles a bit, and I squeeze my mouth shut in order to suppress a laugh. Then he moves to the left side of my face, and I gasp as I feel his lips and tongue proceed to caress my earlobe. What starts out as a few cautious pecks soon becomes a barrage of kisses with a few playful nibbles thrown in. When he moves his head slightly down and starts relentlessly kissing and licking my favorite spots on my neck, I let out an excited cry and wrap both my arms and my legs around him. My body has started moving on its own, driven into a higher state of arousal with each flick of his tongue.

This is so good.

He whispers in my ear to let go of him for a moment, and as I do so, his tongue starts working its way down again, creating a wet trail from the back of my ear across my neck all the way to my chest. He places a wet smooch on my collarbone and then pulls his head back. His gaze wanders from my eyes to my bared breasts, and the look in his eyes is a mixture of excitement and something that almost resembles hunger. He lowers his head again, and I shiver as I feel his breath tickling my nipple. Unable to resist the anticipation any longer, I gently hold his head to my chest. I let out a sigh as his tongue comes into contact with my right breast and starts drawing ever-shrinking circles around its center. He licks my rapidly hardening nipple for a moment and then repeats the process with my other breast. Then he starts using his hand, kneading and groping one breast while licking and suckling the other with his mouth. The sensation feels so good that I arch my back and sway my upper body in ecstasy.

"Ah... Hmm..."

The experience is such a turn-on that I actually feel a pang of disappointment when he pulls away. I feel his tongue on my collarbone again before he draws a thin trail of saliva between that point and my tummy. He places several playful kisses on my belly button and then lowers himself more. He puts his hands on my upper legs and gives me a look as if asking for permission. I feel the sudden sting of self-consciousness, but manage to keep it at bay for long enough to stiffly nod my head.

I cringe visibly as he takes hold of my legs, lifts them slightly and spreads them wide before lying down on his stomach with his face merely centimeters away from my entrance. I squeeze my eyes shut in

sheer embarrassment, but I can nevertheless feel his gaze sweeping across my secret place, getting a closer look at it than he's ever gotten before. I've never felt so extremely vulnerable in my entire life, and I struggle against the temptation to close my legs or cover that place up with my hands. I wonder how I smell or taste to him. Will he find it unpleasant? The moment seems to take forever with no sound except for our shallow breathing and no sensation except the maddening feel of his breath against that place. Then, finally, his arms wrap around my upper legs, and I feel something warm and wet press hard against my most sensitive spot.

"Hhhhg..."

I grit my teeth as an intense sensation shoots through my lower body. I thought this was going to feel like the attention he gave my chest earlier, but it's much, much stronger than that. Even to the point of being overpowering.

"Just relax, Hanako."

A reassuring whisper from Hisao and then his tongue proceeds to jab against the tiny button above my entrance. I try to relax my muscles, but the sensation is much too strong for that.

Is this how it's supposed to feel?

I hold still, doing my best to get used to it, but the sensation is so strong it's bordering on pain.

My hands edge downward until they reach his head, and I let out a sigh of relief when I softly, but firmly push his head away. Hisao looks at me with a worried expression.

"It didn't feel good?"

"I'm... n-not sure... It... s-started getting unpleasant."

"Maybe I was too forceful?"

"M-Maybe."

"Could you... tell me... how you think you'd like it?"

"..."

I blush and merely shake my head. I'm already at my limit as far as awkwardness is concerned.

"Can I try something else?"

I give a silent nod. I didn't get it right from the start either, so it's fair that I give him a second chance too. My body jumps a little when I feel the wetness of his mouth again, but this time it's merely a kiss on the inside of my right thigh, followed by one on my left. He gently works his way to the center again, and I hold my breath when he reaches my lady parts once more, but this time, the intense pressure stays away and what comes in its place is a gentle lapping.

As his tongue gently keeps caressing the area around my entrance, my tension slowly starts ebbing away. The sensation feels a little like his hand, except softer, more fluid and... slightly better too. I close my eyes again and try to focus on the sensation once more. This act is still extremely embarrassing, but the feeling is really nice. I feel my pelvic muscles tense up and relax every time his

tongue runs up the length of my entrance and a wonderful shudder each time it gently flicks the little place at the top.

"Mmmmm..."

My hands take hold of his head once again but without the intent of pushing him away this time. Instead, I start running my hands through his hair, gently pulling him close now and again in order to make it feel better. My breaths get heavier and heavier.

"Mmg...mmmg..."

A moan escapes my lips as one of his hands wanders up my body and playfully strokes one of my breasts. My arousal is rising by the second and my breathing can barely keep up with the tempo of his lapping. An intense heat has started building up between my legs and is now spreading through my entire body. My thought process is getting fuzzier and fuzzier. The embarrassment of our act barely seems relevant anymore.

"H-Hisao..."

Encouraged by the way my body is reacting to the stimulation, he moves in closer and wraps his mouth around the upper part of my entrance, massaging it with his lips while his tongue is dancing around my pleasure center, creating a sensation that nearly drives me crazy. Almost my entire body is flushed red at this point.

"Ah...."

I can feel my limit approaching as his tongue takes me past the point of no return. I grab the bed sheets tightly and arch my back in pleasure as I lose control.

"Ah...ah..."

I reach the edge, but instead of going over it immediately, I keep dangling for several seconds. His arms grab hold of my hips tighter and continue holding me in place as I start squirming uncontrollably and start letting out squeals of delight.

"Ah...ah...ah..."

I instinctively grab his head and press it against me. Then all muscles in my lower body forcefully tense up at once, my legs involuntary squeeze themselves together and my upper body lunges forward. The intense pleasure causes me to squeeze my eyes shut and open my mouth to scream, but a quiet, prolonged whimper is all that leaves my throat.

And still he keeps going.

My body relaxes for a moment and then immediately tenses up again.

And again.

And once more.

Finally, the spasms are replaced by small aftershocks of ever diminishing intensity, and then my body relaxes completely.

"Ow! Ow!"

Without warning, the sensation of his licking, which he kept up while I was experiencing my climax, becomes painful again and I reflexively push his head away. I faintly hear him apologize, but I'm beyond the capacity to reply. I close my legs completely, roll on my right side, draw my knees up to my chest and let out a long sigh as a profound feeling of bliss descends upon me. My mind wanders in random directions as I recover from the experience I just had.

I hear him getting off the bed and heading somewhere. I briefly hear the sound of running water, but it seems to come from very far away. I become vaguely aware of the lights being turned off and then I feel him get back in bed, cover me with the bed sheet and hug me from behind. I slowly start becoming more aware again as I feel his breath against my neck. Eventually, I manage to recollect myself enough to open my eyes and turn my head towards him.

"Hanako?"

"Hmmmm?"

"...how was it?"

"...very good."

It's pretty dark in the room now, but I think I can see him smile. He tenderly starts running his fingers through my hair.

"No bad taste in your mouth anymore?"

"N-No. You?"

"Naw. It didn't taste bad to begin with. My tongue's kind of tired now, though. Kind of like that time last week when we were trying to find out how long we could keep a kiss going."

I giggle at the memory of that little game we played back then. The comparison is surprisingly accurate.

"M-Mine too."

My jaw's a little tired as well. Still, for a first time, I don't think we did that badly. We're lacking experience right now, but I wouldn't mind doing this again in the future.

"So we should probably take it easy with the kisses?"

I don't say anything back. Instead, I slowly rub myself against him, use my feet to play footsie with his and reach back to lovingly stroke his hair. Hisao's all too eager to respond in kind, letting his hands run across my cheek and tummy.

Even though my experience left me tired, I still love cuddling like this. I'm feeling content, satisfied and very happy right now. As our caresses slow down and we start drifting into a peaceful slumber together, my thoughts return on the events of the day and the days that came before it. I'm having a great time right now, and we still have nearly two weeks to go before we have to go back. I don't think this vacation can get any better, but I'm nevertheless hoping that it will.

As I drift off to sleep in Hisao's arms, one last thought remains in my mind.

I'm really looking forward to tomorrow.

05

Chapter 30 (Lilly)

01

"Check!"

"Hrmg..."

I smile as I hear these two conflicting reactions from my friends. I haven't been following the game between them very closely, but Hanako's exclamation, voiced in a slightly sing-song tone, as well as Hisao's frustrated grunt leave little doubt as to who is currently winning.

"Is Hanako giving you trouble, Hisao?"

"It's okay, Lilly. Nothing I can't handle. Who needs a queen anyway?"

That last part is spoken in a soft mumble, but I can hear it anyway.

It's been one and a half weeks since we first arrived in Inverness, and so far I can say that the vacation has been very enjoyable. Hanako and Hisao have even taken a few trips together without Mother and me around. They're still a little bit reluctant to travel around the area together due to their English being less fluent than mine, but this does happen to be the ideal way for them to improve it. I also think they enjoy spending some time together now and then. It must be wonderfully romantic spending your vacation in a part of the world that's completely new together with someone you love. I think I even envy Hanako a bit.

Today has been a rather uneventful day. Hanako and Hisao slept in, or at least didn't come out of their room until it was nearly noon, and since we had some rain early in the afternoon, we decided to spend the day here at my parents' home, reading and talking. Right now it's just Hanako, Hisao and me here, hanging out in the living room. The cleaning staff have already left, Mother's currently visiting her older sister and won't be back until tomorrow and Father's still at work.

I feel a bit bad for Father. Apparently the final negotiations for the acquisition of another company by Father's company are only a few weeks away, and things are extremely hectic at work. I have a feeling my visit here has been rather ill-timed. Mother and Father have both promised to spend at least a few days with me while I'm here, and so far Mother has already come through. Father is set to spend three days with us the day after tomorrow. Akira mentioned a few days ago that she wouldn't be surprised if he ended up calling our time together off, since he can't really afford to take these days off at this point, but so far I haven't heard him confirm that. Apparently he's been trying to finish as much of his work that was originally planned for the upcoming week as possible, but as a result I've barely interacted at all with him. He tends to leave the house early and works until very late. Since he's apparently partially doing this for my sake, I don't really feel in a position to complain.

To be honest, Father has always worked very long hours for as long as I can remember. I suppose as the son of the company head he felt he had to set the good example. But Akira said that over the last few weeks he's been looking like a 'burnout sufferer in denial'. I'm not sure what to make of that, but even Hisao and Hanako said that he didn't look like he was sleeping very well. I hope that when he takes a few days off, he'll be able to relax a little bit. It's probably too much to hope for, but surely he realizes that having a breakdown at this point in time might sink his whole deal.

Rrriiinnnnnggggg

My thoughts are interrupted by the phone on one of the sidetables suddenly springing to life. After some hesitation, I pick it up.

"Good evening, Satou residence. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Hi Lilly."

"Oh, hello Mother. Have you already arrived at Aunt Stella's place?"

"Yeah, I arrived here half an hour ago."

"Aren't you tired? Driving all the way over there after work..."

"Only a little. It's been a long day, but I promised her I'd come see her before your father and I leave for the US, and I think the upcoming weeks are only going to get busier. And I won't have time the upcoming days either when your father takes a few days off and I get back to work. Speaking of which, is he already home?"

"No, not yet..."

I think those two work way too hard.

"Mother..."

I'm a little worried about them, but I don't really think it's a daughter's place to admonish her parents about the way they live their lives.

"Yes?"

"Ah... I don't mean to speak out of line, but..."

"Heh, don't worry about that. Just say what's on your mind."

"Are you and Father still... holding up? Things have been stressful for you, haven't they?"

"I'm still doing okay. It's been hectic, and will continue to be for a few weeks, but I still feel fine. I'll be glad when it's over, but I still feel able to handle things."

"How about Father? Akira, Hisao and Hanako said he looked... not well."

Mother lets out a weary sigh.

"Well, I won't deny he's been a little under the weather lately. He's been having trouble sleeping, he mentioned having bouts of indigestion, and earlier today he even mentioned repetitive strain injury in his shoulder and arm. It's just one thing after another."

"Shouldn't he take it easier then?"

"I suggested that too, but it's not that simple. To me, this whole thing is just crunch time for the company I work for. It'd be great if we could pull it off, and I'll be sure to do my part, but in the end it's still just work. To him, this is his legacy. His grandfather expanded the company, as did his father. Now it's his turn. It's what he's studied and worked for. Wouldn't you feel enormous pressure? Would you take it slowly just a few inches before the finish line?"

"Probably not, but it doesn't sound like a very healthy situation to be in."

"I know, but it's only a few more weeks, and he said he was still fine, so I'll take his word for that. After we travel to the US and finish the deal there, I intend to stay there for a bit and take him on a little trip. See some of the national parks, maybe the Niagara Falls too. Take it easy, see stuff, just relax. That'll fix him right up, you'll see."

"...I hope so."

"When he's taking time off to spend with you, just try to do whatever you can to take his mind off the business, okay? I'd appreciate that even though it may be a losing battle."

"I will try."

"Great. By the way, the reason I'm calling is to ask if either Hanako or Hisao happens to have an allergy to nuts or almonds."

"Not as far as I know. We had both as a snack during our flight."

"That's good to hear. Stella was thinking of baking you a dundee cake. That's a traditional Scottish fruitcake covered with almonds. I find it kind of filling, but really tasty too."

"That sounds delicious. I can't wait for us to get there so I can have a taste. How is she doing these days?"

"She doesn't really get out of the house much yet, and she has the occasional spells of sudden tiredness, which is probably partially due to her medication, but all in all she's doing a lot better than two months ago."

"Please give her my regards."

"Will do. I'm going to hang up now. Be sure to let your father know that I've arrived safely when he gets home, okay?"

"I will. Until tomorrow, Mother."

"Bye."

I put down the phone with some mixed feelings. I still feel a little awkward talking to Mother. What's more, what she said about Father didn't exactly reassure me. Even though Father's been a hard worker his entire life and wasn't home very often except on Sundays, this is the first time I've heard of his work taking a physical toll on him. I don't like the idea of him overworking himself even more merely because I wanted to spend a few days with him. If I had known things were this hectic for him already, I wouldn't have asked to begin with.

I put away the phone and refocus my attention on my friends' game of chess. I can't hear any direct reactions, but I notice from the pauses between the taps that one side is taking a lot less time to plan the next move than the other. Eventually, the verdict is called.

"Checkmate!"

"Congratulations."

"Congratulations, Hanako."

"Thanks. Ummm, do you want to go again, Hisao?"

"Well, okay. This time I might try to stick more to the tried and true stuff."

"Your opening was a bit unusual this time."

"Yeah, I tried to do one of those exotic openings I read about in a chess book before we went on vacation, but either I remembered it wrong or I bungled it up somewhere along the way. I don't usually lose this quickly."

"Unpredictability is usually a good thing in chess."

"Yeah, but only if you know what you're doing.

I hear the sound of chess pieces being placed in their starting position, and moments later, the first piece is moved.

"Lilly?"

"Yes, Hisao?"

"Where exactly was your mother staying again?"

"Edinburgh, Hisao. Her older sister lives there."

"Is this the same sister you and Akira visited in July?"

"It is. Mother promised her that she'd stop by before she and Father left on their business trip to the US. Since it's about a 3 hour drive from Inverness to Edinburgh, she decided to spend the night at her sister's place and drive back very early tomorrow morning."

"Are she and your mother close? Like you and Akira?"

"I don't think they've ever been extremely close. Mother had very little contact with her family while she was living in Japan. She was a bit of a late arrival in the family and didn't form an extremely close bond with her siblings. There are 10 years between her and Aunt Stella."

"There are also 7 years between you and Akira."

"That's true. I suppose it's different for everyone. I was lucky my sister paid so much attention to me when we were younger."

"Did you say that we were going to go there ourselves?"

"Yes. When Father takes a few days off, he'll be taking us to Edinburgh. We'll visit my aunt when we're there, but for the most part we'll be sightseeing - so to speak."

"Were you there last time as well? What's the city like?"

"I was there only briefly during my last stay, but the city feels different from Inverness. Bigger and more crowded. Mother said it's literally ten times as populated as Inverness. Of course, Edinburgh is the capital of Scotland and the most populated city in the country after Glasgow, so it's quite unlike Inverness. I'm rather curious about your impressions of it."

"You mentioned sightseeing. Any further information on where we'll be going or is it going to be a surprise?"

I open the drawer of one of the sidetables and pull out what I know is a tiny folder on Edinburgh's main tourist attractions, which I give to Hisao.

"You could take a little look in here and see if there's anything you like."

"Thanks... ugh, it's all in English."

I grin.

"Of course. But if you don't understand the meaning of certain words, just read the corresponding sentence to me and I'll tell you what it means."

"If I do that, are you going to correct my mispronunciations again? The last time we did something like this, you turned it into a miniature English lesson."

I give a disappointed pout. Why is he so resistant towards improving his language skills?

"But... it's a pretty important skill to have in order to make yourself understood around here and surely an upcoming scientist must have some adequately honed skill in the language, especially since many scientific documents and websites are in English. Isn't it better for me to give you a few pointers now instead of having you picking up the wrong habits?"

The only immediate response I get is a muffled giggle from Hanako. Hisao must have rolled his eyes or made a face in response to my words. I'm probably fighting a losing battle here, so I decide to drop it.

"Anyway, Edinburgh has quite a few museums that make for an interesting experience. There are also other places of note that Father said would be worth our while, such as the Edinburgh Zoo and the National Library of Scotland."

"Library?"

Hisao and I both chuckle at Hanako's immediate reaction.

"Yes, Edinburgh has quite a few libraries, and the National Library of Scotland is the most prominent among them, because it's this country's legal deposit for books. They have quite a few old documents and maps there as well. I think a visit there would be most educational and given the fact that Father

has quite a fondness for books himself, I'd be extremely surprised if a visit to the National Library wasn't on the program."

"It sounds like an interesting place to visit. I've never visited a national library before. Have you, Hanako?"

"No. I'd like to go there, even if it's not the national library of Japan. It sounds interesting."

"Well, then one destination is already set."

"Hmmm, those koalas in that picture look really cute."

I smile at Hanako's words.

"It sounds like we have another addition to our to-do list."

"But Lilly, aren't these things kind of boring for you? This doesn't look like the petting zoo you and Hanako went to before."

"I think I can still enjoy myself there, Hisao. You and Hanako can describe the animals to me and I can still hear and smell them."

"Smell? I've always felt that all zoos smell alike. Is there a big difference between the smell of elephant droppings and the smell of gorilla turds?"

"Well, ah..."

"Pfffff!"

While I'm still wondering whether that question deserved a serious answer, I hear Hanako trying desperately to hold her laughter, and I realize Hisao was having a little fun at my expense. I sigh and give Hisao an admonishing pout before turning to Hanako.

"Hanako, it's probably not necessary to go easy on Hisao this match. I don't think he deserves it."

Hanako lets out a conspiring giggle.

"Okay."

"Hey! That's not very nice."

I smile sweetly at Hisao.

"Any more suggestions, Hisao?"

"I don't know. There seem to be a lot of museums in Edinburgh, but I'm not sure which ones would be most interesting to visit. I'd rather not go to ones that require a lot of knowledge about the local history."

"How about the Museum of Childhood then?"

"The Museum of Childhood?"

"I've heard there's a museum in Edinburgh that's dedicated to children's toys throughout the last two centuries. Apparently it has an exhibition containing many dolls from several generations."

"Hmmm, Hisao?"

"She caught your interest, didn't she?"

"It sounds like a fun place to visit."

I can't help but smile at Hanako's elated tone. Yes, this place definitely sounds worth visiting, if for no other reason than to witness Hanako's reaction.

"I'll bring it up with Father. Are there any other museums worth visiting in the folder, Hisao?"

"Hmm, City Art Center, Museum of Edinburgh... I don't know if visiting art displays is really something you'd enjoy."

"Any musea about specific subjects?"

"This one may interest you. The Writers' Museum. It's dedicated to three well-known Scottish writers."

"Hmmm, which ones?"

"Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson."

"Burns is probably not very familiar to you, seeing as he was a poet, considered by many as *the* Scottish poet. You may not know about Scott either, unless Ivanhoe sounds familiar to you."

"I'm afraid it doesn't."

"Surely you must know Stevenson though. Have you read 'Treasure Island' or 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'?"

"I haven't, but I know the general plot of both."

"Me too."

"Then this will be my request for the day. It's not a location an aspiring English teacher can afford to pass up."

"They might not have much information printed in Braille."

"Then surely I'll be able to rely on the two of you to read it to me and..."

As I reply to Hisao, I suddenly pick up a sound coming from outside the house.

"Lilly, did you hear something?"

I think I hear a car outside. Is that Father coming home already? Seems that way.

"I think Father's home. What time is it right now?"

"Half past 8. I don't recall him coming back this early since we arrived here."

"That's true, he's unusually early, though I certainly won't complain about that."

A few minutes later, I hear footsteps slowly approaching followed by the voice of my father greeting us.

"Lilly, Miss Ikezawa, Mister Nakai... Good evening."

"Good evening, sir."

"G-Good evening."

"Welcome back, Father. I'm happy to see you could make it back here sooner than usual."

"I... am afraid I still have a few things to do. I will be retiring to my study. Please do not disturb me while I am working..."

"..."

"..."

"Ah... Of course, Father."

"Good evening then."

I'm taken off guard by the abrupt tone of Father's voice. He usually takes the time to properly greet us when he comes home. Is he in that much of a hurry? As Father's footsteps head into the direction of the study and I hear a door being closed in the distance, I turn to Hanako and Hisao.

"I... apologize. He's usually not that curt with others."

"It's okay, Lilly. To be honest, he didn't really look like he was up for a chat anyway."

"Hmmm?"

"I don't know, he looked a bit pale. Maybe he came home because he was getting sick."

"Mother already said he had trouble sleeping and had been complaining earlier about bouts of indigestion and repetitive strain injuries. I wonder if it's a good idea to force him to take a few days off while he obviously can't afford it. Would you be very disappointed if I suggested canceling the trip to Edinburgh, so Father would have a bit more breathing room?"

"Of course not, Lilly. Heck, this trip could end right here and now, and I'd still call it a grand success."

"I agree."

"That is good to hear. I'll go and talk to him about it."

I take my cane and slowly make my way to the study. I open the door just a little bit and hear the sound of someone typing on a keyboard. I knock a few times to announce my presence.

02

I'm greeted by a tired sigh as I enter.

"Yes?"

"Ah...Father?"

"Lilly, did you not hear what I said earlier?"

"I know, Father. This won't take long."

"Go ahead."

I walk further into the room until I'm standing near the table where Father is working.

"Father, is it... wise to keep working right now despite the fact that you were plagued by RSI earlier?"

"Hmmm? Ah, my shoulder? Did your mother tell you about that?"

"She did. Are you... feeling alright?"

"I am fine. Why are you suddenly so concerned about me?"

"Hanako and Hisao said that you looked a little pale when you came in."

Another weary sigh. He's obviously not pleased with my insistence.

"I felt a bit unwell at the office, so I decided to return home earlier than planned. The sensation disappeared when I left the building. It has not returned since. I am fine right now."

"I've been thinking, Father. Perhaps we should call off our trip to Edinburgh. Or at least postpone it until a more convenient time."

"A more convenient time?"

"When you're... no longer under so much pressure."

"I have already made you a promise, have I not?"

"There will be other times."

"I do not like to go back on my word. It is a matter of honor."

"B-But..."

"Lilly, a proper lady... respects the will... of her elders."

"Father, is anything wrong?"

"Perhaps... you could get me a glass... of water."

"Right away, Father."

I make my way out of the study and back to the living room and let out a tired sigh.

"It seems you were right, Hisao. Father did feel unwell earlier and decided to go home earlier because of that. Whatever he felt disappeared before he could get behind the wheel. Fortunately. But I still think he's falling ill. There was just... something off about his breathing."

"..."

"Wow, you actually notice these things?"

"Only because I was paying close attention to it. But despite everything, he still won't take my offer of calling off our trip to Edinburgh. It is a little disheartening."

I navigate over to the kitchen and probe the shelves of the cupboard with my hand until I feel an empty glass against my fingers. I take it, feel my way over to the tap and fill it with fresh and cool water.

"L-Lilly?"

Just as I finish filling up the glass, I hear a soft voice coming from the doorway.

"Hanako. Are you already finished with your chess match?"

"Ummm... If your father is feeling ill, w-wouldn't it be good to... call a doctor?"

"A doctor?"

"Y-Yes."

I'm about to brush aside Hanako's suggestion, seeing that Father would probably not go along with that, but then I realize that Hanako following me here and telling me this are kind of unusual for her. She's not exactly the most proactive person in the world. She probably wouldn't bother approaching me like this without good reason. But what reason is that?

"Do you really think so, Hanako?"

"It's... p-probably nothing, but... better safe than sorry, right?"

It's probably nothing, but better safe than sorry...

What's probably nothing?

Does Father really look that bad?

I really wish I'd be able to look at him with my own eyes.

"I'll talk to him about it, Hanako."

"Okay."

I carefully make my way back to the study, wondering how on earth I'd be able to convince Father to go see a doctor.

A proper lady respects the will of her elders...

The hint was clear. He wants me to stop worrying about him.

But still...

"Father, I brought you your drink."

"Thank you."

He takes it from my hands and takes a few careful sips. This should be the moment where I take my leave, but I manage to stop myself from walking away.

"Lilly, is there something else?"

He must have spotted my fidgeting.

"Father... are you really feeling fine?"

"This again?"

"It's just... m-maybe it would be a good idea to call a doctor if you're feeling unwell."

"A doctor?"

"You say you're fine, but... I noticed... t-that your breathing is a bit more shallow than usual."

"Lillian, that is quite enough!"

I cringe at his stern tone. I overstepped my boundaries, that's obvious.

"I... apologize. I'll be on my way. But..."

"Yes?"

"You told Mother you were fine, and she said she took your word for it. Would you... also give me your word that you'll be fine?"

"My word...?"

"Yes, please promise me that you'll be okay. Since keeping your word is a matter of honor, I will trust it."

"..."

There's a long silence. I wonder if he's going to scold me, but to my surprise he eventually lets out a resigned sigh.

"If I talk to a doctor... on the phone... will that be enough to reassure you?"

"It will."

"The phone in the living room should contain our general practitioner's phone number. His name is Thompson."

"Thank you, Father."

"Hrm..."

I walk back to the living room as quickly as I can and hand Hanako the phone.

"Thompson?"

"Yes, Father said the number should be in the phone's memory. I suppose it's listed as either doctor or Thompson."

I hear a long series of beeps as Hanako starts browsing through the phone's contact list.

"Here it is. Shall I call it?"

"Yes please."

I hear one more beep and then the phone is handed back to me. Moments later, I hear someone on the other end of the line picking up.

"Thompson speaking."

"Doctor Thompson, good evening. This is Lilly Satou speaking. I hope I'm not intruding on you. I'm terribly sorry for calling you this late."

"Not a problem, Miss... Satou?"

"Yes, you are my father's general practitioner, are you not?"

"Why yes, I am. Is there something wrong?"

"Father's been extremely busy with work lately. There's a very important event in his business coming up, and he's under a large amount of pressure right now. It seems to be... taking a toll on him."

"Are there any specifics you can give me, Miss Satou?"

"Just... several things. He's been having trouble sleeping as of late. My mother said he complained about RSI in his shoulder earlier today. There's been talk of... hmmm... indigestion. He actually came home earlier today because he felt a little unwell and my friends said he looked rather pale. I noticed his breathing was a bit shallower than usual. I'm... probably worrying about nothing, but I was wondering if you would..."

"Just a moment, Miss Satou. Did you say he felt unwell earlier?"

"Yes, but the sensation disappeared eventually."

"What kind of sensation? Localized somewhere?"

"He didn't say."

"..."

A long silence.

"Doctor?"

"Miss Satou, is there someone present with a driver's license aside from your father?"

"Ah... there isn't. Mother is out of town this evening. I could perhaps call the housekeeper. She might be willing to take him to your place. But is there a reason why it'd be irresponsible for him to drive himself?"

"There is no need for him to come by my place, Miss Satou. But I think it would not be a bad idea to quickly stop by at Raigmore and have someone there take a look at him. It's not very far from where you live, is it?"

I let out a surprised gasp.

"The hospital?"

First Hanako and now the doctor...

"Yes. I'm going to make a quick phone call there and tell them to expect you. Have you been to Raigmore before? Do you know where the cardiology ward is located? Ah, then again, your father probably knows where it is, given his profession."

I feel my blood freeze in my veins and a heavy sensation in the pit of my stomach.

03

"C-Cardiology?"

"Yes. The person on duty there will either be Doctor Morrison or Doctor McElroy."

"Doctor... What's going on?"

"...could I speak briefly with your father, Miss Satou?"

"Of course..."

A bit unsteadily, I head back to the study again.

"Father?"

There's no response. That's strange. I thought I heard a sound coming from the study while I was on my way there.

"Father, are you there?"

Nothing. Not an acknowledgement, nor a typing sound. Not even a breath. Did he leave?

"Father, where are you?"

I walk further into the room and almost immediately my foot hits something. Something on the floor that wasn't here before. I kneel and reach out to examine it. As my hand makes contact with it, I feel a shiver running down my spine. It's a person, lying on the floor near the door.

"Father?"

Not an acknowledgement, nor a typing sound. Not even a breath.

NOT EVEN A BREATH!

04

"FATHER!"

"Miss Satou!"

The sound of the doctor's voice on the phone reminds me that I was on my way to hand over the phone.

"Miss Satou, I'm going to hang up and call an ambulance to pick up your father this instant. Do not leave his side until they arrive."

What's happening? What's going on? Is he...?

"Lilly? Is something wrong?"

I hear Hisao's and Hanako's footsteps hurriedly approaching, probably drawn here by my shout. As they come in, I hear two gasps.

"Mister Satou! Lilly, what's happened here?"

"I... I d-don't know. I c-can't hear him breathing."

Somebody do something! Please!

Hanako's breathing, on the other hand, is becoming more pronounced by the second. I'd probably start worrying about her if I wasn't on the verge of panic myself.

"Damn, should we give him artificial respiration? Does he even have a pulse?"

"I... I don't know. J-Just d-do something, please."

I'm not sure what's more unsettling; Hisao's panicked tone or Hanako's ragged breathing.

"I can't feel any pulse in his wrist. Is there a better way to do this?"

She's almost hyperventilating.

"I don't know!"

"Aah!"

"Hey!"

Hisao and I let out a surprised cry as we're suddenly violently being pushed aside, and I nearly hit my head on the table in the process. When I catch my bearings, I become once again aware of Hanako's breathing, but it's different this time. Instead of the hyperventilating gasps she was letting out earlier, she's now letting out a steady stream of short, sharp breaths.

Huff - huff - huff

"H-Hanako?"

Huff - huff - huff

"What are you doing?"

"She's pressing down on his chest. I think she's doing CPR, Lilly. Hanako, is there anything I can do?"

Huff - huff - huff

"Hanako, can you hear me?"

Huff - huff - huff

No answer. Hanako's breathing is so steady it's almost robotic. I wonder if she knows what she's doing. But what choice do we have? What's taking that accursed ambulance so long?

"Doctor Thompson said he'd call an ambulance. They... They should be on their way."

"Then I'll go and open the gates and the front door, so they'll be able to get here as quickly as possible when they arrive."

"Y-Yes, thank you Hisao."

Huff - huff - huff

I hear Hisao running off, leaving me alone in the room with Hanako - and Father. It doesn't happen often, but right now I'm cursing my blindness. My friends are both doing their part, and here I am, unable to do anything.

"Please d-do your best, Hanako. Let me know if you need anything..."

Father...

Seeing how close to the door he was, I think he was trying to get out of the room before he collapsed. Did he call out for help, and did I fail to hear it?

Huff - huff - huff

What's taking that ambulance so long?

Am I going to lose him, just like Hanako lost her parents?

Is that exasperated sigh he let out when I walked out of here going to be the last thing I'll ever hear from him?

That's too cruel.

Huff - huff - huff

Please hang in there, Father.

"Hanako, please hang in there."

Is that the best I can come up with? I used to have no trouble finding the right words to encourage Hanako. And now, now that it matters more than ever, I find myself lost for words.

Huff - huff - huff

Hanako's breathing is getting less steady. Is she getting worn out? What she's doing must be pretty tiring.

What if she gets too tired to continue and the ambulance hasn't arrived yet?

How will she feel?

What's keeping that ambulance?

Huff - huff - huff

A wave of nausea washes over me as I hear a soft crunch coming from the place where Father's lying. It's barely audible yet it chills me to the bone. Is this the sound of someone's ribs being fractured? That sounded really painful.

"Hanako, be careful!"

I manage to get a hold of myself just in time to refrain from making the terrible mistake of grabbing Hanako and yanking her away from Father. At this point, it seems stupid to worry about broken ribs.

Huff - huff - huff

Hanako didn't even seem to have heard my scream. She just keeps going as if there's nobody else in existence.

I squeeze my eyes shut in order to hold back the tears and let out a tortured whimper as I hear a second crunch. What if one of those ribs punctures his lung? What if they manage to revive him only for him to drown in his own blood moments later? No, don't think that way. Don't even start thinking that way.

Damnit, where's that ambulance?

Huff - huff - huff

I wonder if there isn't a defibrillator somewhere in the house. Father's company sells them after all. He might have taken one home at some point. But where would he keep it? And would any of us be in a condition to operate it?

Before I can ponder my thought further, my attention is drawn by a distinctive sound coming from outside. Is that a siren?

"Hanako, I think I hear a siren!"

Huff - huff - huff

Trying to keep focus through the sound of my own rapidly beating heart, I try to concentrate on what I heard earlier. Somewhere from outside I can clearly hear the distinct wail of a siren.

"Hanako, the ambulance is arriving!"

Huff - huff - huff

"Hold on for just a little while longer, Hanako. Please. Hang in there..."

The sound of the siren is now joined by the sound of a car screeching to a halt.

Then footsteps. Many footsteps. And voices.

"Lead the way, lad."

"The doctor who called said it was probably a heart attack. Bruce, you do the compressions!"

"Will do!"

Huff - huff - huff

I hear several people bursting into the room. I just sit there in a daze as everything plays out in front of me, unable to figure out how to act or what to say.

"Alright, lass, you can stop now. We'll take over from here."

Huff - huff - huff

"Hey, didn't you hear me? You need to give us room to work!"

Huff - huff - huff

"Damn, we don't have time for this. Ian, get her away from him so I can get started!"

"Sure."

"Aaaaaaaah!"

"Whoa! Hey, no need to freak out. We're here to help!!"

"Hey! Get your hands off of her!"

"What's he saying?"

"Hanako! Come on, Hanako. I'll get you to our room. Just... there... just come along with me, okay?"

"Bruce!"

"I'm on it! Neil, get that adrenaline injection ready."

"Hey lass, maybe it's better if you go and check up on your... uh... friends."

"Lass, you with us?"

"Ah, I apologize. I'd... like to stay here if possible."

"Just don't get in our way, okay?"

"Okay, I'm giving him an adrenaline shot."

"Ian, get that defibrillator ready. Hopefully we get lucky and get a shockable rhythm."

"Man, what was with that girl? Why did she go nuts like that?"

"This is probably her dad. Can't blame her. I've seen worse reactions."

"Whadda you think that guy who let us in was saying?"

"Dunno, it sounded like Chinese or Japanese. Heck, look at this room. It's completely Asian style."

"Neil, one more injection."

"Gotcha."

"Keep going, people."

"Come on, come on!"

"Did you guys see that girl? That was one nasty burn on her face. Wonder how she got it."

"Hey, keep it down Neil!"

"Sorry."

"I think I'm getting something."

"Keep going, Bruce."

"Give him another shot?"

"Might not be necessary. Get those electrodes in place!"

"Right away!"

"That's a beat alright. Ian!"

"Okay, get back Bruce."

"He's all yours."

"Clear!"

"And...?"

"One more time."

"Clear!"

"I think we got a pulse. Get the respiratory device and ready the stretcher."

"Got it!"

"Hey lass. We're about to move out."

"W-Will my father make it, sir?"

"We've done all we can here. It's up to the doctors at Raigmore to make it stick."

"Keith! Radio the Emergency Department that we'll be there in 8 minutes."

"Right!"

"Sir, would it be okay with you if I... came along?"

"...only if you come along with us right here and now. We can't wait for you."

"I understand."

05

I get up and feel out the shoulder of the ambulance worker who addressed me. We hurry outside and he quickly helps me into the front seat.

I didn't get the opportunity to explain this to Hanako and Hisao, but I'm sure they'll understand.

I hurriedly fasten my seat belt as both the engine and the siren spring to life, and the driver sends the ambulance down the driveway and onto the road with a speed that would make Akira's driving seem subdued.

During the short ride, I pick up a remark from the ambulance driver mentioning we're lucky that our house is so close to the hospital and a little bit later I hear the voice of someone on the radio giving us the number of the operating room Father will be taken to, but I'm barely able to process all of these things as my brain is still trying to digest what's happening.

Just a little while ago I was still sitting in the living room, relaxing, talking with my friends and planning our trip to Edinburgh without a care in the world.

How could this suddenly turn into such a nightmare?

My thoughts are interrupted by the ambulance making a sharp turn and coming to a standstill. The ambulance workers quickly get out, and I hear the sound of many voices and many footsteps followed by the sound of a stretcher being pushed down a nearby corridor. The driver then gets out as well, I hear him walk off and then return with someone else in tow. He helps me get out of the car and then gives an awkward cough.

"I have to get back on the road, but... uh... right in front of you is a nurse who'll be happy to look after you for a bit. Her name's Sally."

"Hello, Miss. What's your name?"

"Ah, L-Lilly. About my father..."

"They're taking him to the operating room as we speak. We're going to do everything we can to help him, so try not to worry, alright?"

"I'll... try."

"I'm going to take you to the waiting area. We're going to inform you the moment we know more."

"Yes, t-thank you."

I place my hand on her arm and let her guide me through several hallways. We finally reach an area where I hear several other people around me.

"You can wait here. There's a seat right in front of you. Is there anything I can do? Perhaps get you something to drink?"

They probably don't have a white cane lying around here. There wasn't time to retrieve my own, and I feel really disorientated and vulnerable in the middle of an unknown environment without even my cane to navigate. No, there's probably no point in asking. But maybe...

"Would it be possible... to make a quick phone call? My sister and my mother don't even know what has happened yet, and I left my own cell phone behind when I came here."

"If it's just a very quick call, you can make one in our office. Let me take you there."

"Thank you."

I'm taken to an office room nearby, and the nurse asks me for the number. I realize that I don't even know Mother's phone number by heart yet, but I fortunately have Akira's cell phone number memorized. The nurse dials the number and then hands me the receiver.

"Good evening, this is Akira Satou speaking."

I'm taken back by Akira's formal tone before realizing that she doesn't recognize the number I'm calling from.

"A-Akira, it's me."

"Hey Sis, I didn't recognize the number. This isn't the landline at our folks' place, is it?"

"I'm at Raigmore right now. The emergency ward. You... I need you to come over immediately!"

"The hospital? Sheesh, Lils, what's happened? It's not Hisao, is it? Are you...?"

"It's F-Father. I... I don't know what happened. He just... collapsed. The doctor called an ambulance. They're... operating on him right now. Please Akira..."

"I'm on my way. I'll be there in 15 minutes."

"Please hurry... and call Mother. Let her know to come back here too."

Akira hangs up, and I hand the phone back to the nurse.

"Thank you. Could you... take me back to the waiting area, please?"

"I will."

The nurse takes me back to the seating area and then leaves me alone with my thoughts. The voices of other people in the room join the thoughts that whirl around my head.

How could this have happened?

"Daddy, it hurts! When can the doctor see us?"

And why?

"Just a little while longer, Mary. There are other people here who also need help. Let me get you a glass of water."

Just when I finally had an opportunity to spend time with him.

"I don't want a glass of water! Why can't we see the doctor now?!"

To get to know him.

"Hey mommy, that girl sitting over there is staring really strangely."

There were so many things I still wanted to tell him. And ask him.

"Shush Kevin, don't be rude!"

Will I ever get the opportunity now?

"Mister McAdams, the doctor will see you now."

I've never felt so alone and miserable as I'm feeling right now.

"Thank God. Come on, dear."

Father...

Please make it through this.

Please.

Please...

...

I lower my voice to a whisper.

"Our Father in heaven,"

"hallowed be your name. "

"Your kingdom come,your will be done,on earth, as it is in *sniff* heaven."

"Doctor, is there any news about my wife?"

"Give us this day our daily bread,"

"and forgive us our debts,"

"Please have a bit more patience, sir. My colleagues are doing the best they can."

"as we also have forgiven our debtors. "

"And *sniff* lead us not into temptation, "

"but deliver us from evil."

"Lilly? Lilly!"

A familiar voice suddenly calls out to me and I quickly rise to my feet.

"Akira? Akira! Thank God you're here..."

My older sister walks up to me and tenderly wraps her arms around me and despite me feeling a bit embarrassed about being hugged in public, I feel a sense of relief. How long has it been since Akira last comforted me this way? It must have been quite some time ago, but it still feels as soothing as ever. My loving and reliable big sister who always knew what to do. It feels so good to know she's here now.

"Jeez, you look about ready to faint, Sis."

I nod weakly.

"I... I'll manage, I hope. I really don't do very well under pressure."

"Let's find ourselves a quiet place to sit down. I noticed a vending machine on my way in here that dispenses drinks. I'll go and get you some."

"Yes..."

Akira takes my arm and guides me down one of the hallways and through a few automatic doors until I feel fresh air on my face. She helps me get to a nearby bench and walks off, only to return later with a paper cup she hands to me.

"I got you some tea. Take care not to burn your tongue."

I meekly nod and take a careful sip as Akira sits down next to me and puts an arm around me.

"Now... Just take a bit of time to get your bearings back, and then tell me what happened."

"..."

What happened... That's a good question. Things went so quickly all of a sudden. Two hours ago I was still planning our upcoming trip with my friends. And now I'm here, wondering if my life will ever be the same again.

"He left the office earlier than usual today because he wasn't feeling well..."

"By the time he made it home he was already feeling better, so he resumed his work in his study."

"I spoke to Mother earlier this evening, and she already said he wasn't feeling well, but apparently Father blamed indigestion and repetitive strain injury in his shoulder. When he came home, both Hisao and Hanako noted he looked pale, and Hanako even suggested calling a doctor."

"Father wouldn't hear of it at first, but then he gave in and allowed me to call his general practitioner. When I told the doctor about Father, he immediately suggested we take him to see a cardiologist at the hospital. But when I returned to the study..."

I sniffle as I recall what happened next.

"I found that Father had collapsed while I was away. Before..."

"Before he hung up, the doctor said he was going to call an ambulance. And eventually, one arrived."

"Heart attack, huh? You described some of the warning signs just now."

"...it seems like it. I suppose the writing has been on the wall all along, and we just didn't pay attention to it until it was too late."

"It won't be too late if he makes it through, Sis."

"I... completely froze up when I found Father lying there. If it hadn't been for Hanako..."

"Hanako?"

"I believe she performed CPR on him until the ambulance arrived."

"So that first aid training paid off, huh? Bet she didn't expect someone other than her boyfriend to be the beneficiary."

"...I wonder how she and Hisao are doing right now. When the ambulance staff took off with Father, I had no choice but to come along immediately."

"You can use my cell phone to get in touch with them after I've dropped Mom a little call. It might help to take your mind off things."

"Y-You haven't called her yet? W-Why not? I...I asked you..."

"Relax, Sis. If you're gonna ask someone to drive all the way back to Inverness from Edinburgh late in the evening, they're gonna demand a reason, and your phone call didn't exactly shed a lot of light on things. I figured it was better to come over here first, calm you down a bit and then find out exactly what happened."

"You're right. I'm sorry for reacting this way, Akira."

She gives me a pat on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, Sis. You've had an extremely frightening experience this evening, so it's understandable that you're still rattled. I don't blame you in the slightest."

"Thank you, Akira."

"I'll go and call Mom now. I'll be right back."

Akira walks off again, and I'm left to ponder the situation. Akira's explanation made logical sense and yet I still feel I would have acted differently in her place. I'm really thankful that my older sister's here for me right now, but something has felt a little off.

...that my older sister's here for me...

Ever since she arrived, Akira's been the kind, strong and reliable big sister that she's always been for me. The strong person who's lending me her shoulder to lean on. But... how does *she* feel? She's barely mentioned Father at all. It almost seems like...

...like she's more worried about me than about him...

No, I don't want to think of Akira that way. She's simply keeping a brave face for my benefit right now.

Still, our parents are a very touchy subject for her. I don't think she's completely adapted to the fact that they're suddenly a big part of her life again yet.

"Well, Mom's on her way. I told her not to drive like crazy and that I'd call her when we know more."

"How did she react?"

"It's probably still sinking in."

She sits down next to me, and we stay like this for a very long time, neither of us saying a word. Eventually, she pushes her cell phone into my hand.

"You know how to operate this thing, don't you?"

I think I do. I've used my sister's phone before, and I have Hanako's number memorized.

"I do."

"Good. I'll go back inside to see if they already know more. I'll be back soon."

I listen to Akira walking off into the building and prepare to dial Hanako's number when I realize she might already be asleep. This must have been very stressful for her too. I don't want to intrude on her. What if I call my own number first? I left my cell phone in the living room, so they certainly won't be resting if they pick that one up. I quickly dial the number of my cell phone and cross my fingers that someone'll pick up. Eventually, I hear Hisao's voice on the other end of the line.

"Ah... Akira... This is Hisao. Lilly isn't here right now, and she left her phone behind. Umm..."

I quickly speak up in order to save Hisao from having to come up with a proper explanation.

"Hisao, it's me. I'm using Akira's phone."

"Lilly... How... is your father?"

I let out a depressed sigh.

"They're still operating on him as we speak. I'm praying that he's going to make it through."

"So are we, Lilly..."

Hisao's voice is barely audible, and he sounds extremely tired. I'm obviously not the only one rattled by what happened.

"Hisao, how are you and Hanako? Is she there as well?"

"No, she's resting right now. I only got downstairs a few minutes ago. I spent the rest of the time keeping her company and trying to comfort her. It took a long time before she was finally able to relax a little. I don't think any of us will be getting much sleep tonight."

"Are you doing okay?"

"I've been better. This... hit really close to home. I was kinda glad I got the opportunity to help Hanako get to our bedroom, because if I had stuck around and watched that emergency team get to work on your father, my own heart might have started acting up as well. I'm still shaking a little even now."

"I can imagine how you must feel. How about Hanako?"

"Hanako got hit even harder. I mean... Her own parents died in front of her 10 years ago. Heck, I nearly died in front of her as well. Whatever memories she's been forced to relive this evening were probably extremely traumatic ones. I haven't been able to get a single word out of her."

"And yet... Hanako came through. While I was unable to think of what to do, Hanako did what she could to keep my father alive. She acted where I couldn't, and I'm extremely proud of her, Hisao."

"Yeah, she acted. But... You didn't see her."

"What do you mean?"

"On the day that you and Hanako reconciled, I spoke to Hanako's therapist, and she proposed sending Hanako to that training to help her deal with the situation in case my heart gave out again with her nearby. I asked her if that was really going to prevent another panic attack, and Miss Takawa said that a panic attack was probably unavoidable."

"Then why the training?"

"To delay the anxiety. She believed that as long as Hanako could keep her mind occupied during an emergency and distract herself by performing first aid rather than sitting there and feeling helpless, she'd be able to delay her panic attack. I heard that during that training she repeated the CPR procedure until it was almost a reflex to her. That's... I think that's what happened. She was holding off her own panic - in the only way she could. She just kept going, maybe even without being aware of what was happening around her. Even when those ambulance workers arrived and told her to let them take over, she just kept going and going."

"What happened then?"

"One of those people grabbed her and tried to drag her away from your dad. She reacted very badly to that. I was able to take her to our room... I'm still not sure how. There, I just held her in my arms - probably for nearly an hour - until she finally stopped trembling."

Poor Hanako.

"Even if it was just a reflex on her part, I'm still really grateful for what she did, Hisao."

"Yeah."

We let out a mutual sigh and remain silent for a long time. I've been so overwhelmed by what happened that I didn't even stop to think how personal this experience must have been for both Hanako and Hisao. My heart goes out to both of them.

Suddenly, I hear footsteps approaching, and I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Lilly?"

"Akira, do you... have any news?"

"Are you still on the phone?"

"Hisao here. I'm still listening, Akira."

06

"I just got word from the doctor. They finished the operation. He said it was still too early for a damage report, but they've managed to stabilize him. He'll live, Lilly. And I'm sure he'll be okay eventually."

My last bit of restraint broken, I return the phone to Akira and hold my face in my hands, sobbing uncontrollably, both in order to get rid of the fear, tension and stress as well as to express my relief. Akira gives me a gentle squeeze in the shoulder, but doesn't respond. Finally, the silence is broken by Hisao's voice over the phone.

"Thanks Akira. I'm really relieved to hear that. I'll... be sure to tell Hanako. Maybe... just maybe... we'll be able to get some sleep tonight after all."

07

Chapter 31 (Akira)

01

"Miss Satou!"

I turn my head and look at the reception desk where a woman in her early 30's is beckoning me.

"Good morning, Miss Satou."

"Good morning... erm... Wendy?"

"Jenny."

Crap.

"Sorry, I'm still in the process of remembering everybody's name. Please humor me for a little while longer."

"Not a problem. How is your father doing? Is he still sick?"

Most of the employees still don't know why Dad hasn't shown up at the office in two days straight and assume that it's a common illness, but it's probably not my place to spill the beans. I can see how the truth could create a fair share of commotion around here.

"Yes, I'm afraid he's still a bit under the weather."

"Hopefully, he'll be better soon. It feels rather odd not to see him come in here each morning."

"Here's hoping."

"Anyway, Mister Ferguson wanted to see you before you start this morning."

"Thank you for telling me. I'll go and pay him a visit then."

I leave the reception area and head over to the office of the person who's in charge of this branch after Dad. I haven't really spoken with him much since I arrived here. As I knock on the door of his office, I hear a soft 'come in' and enter. I think I already know what this is going to be about.

"Ah, good morning Miss Satou."

"Good morning, Mister Ferguson. How are you doing?"

"As well as I can, given the circumstances. Have you been managing to get settled in a bit already?"

I still feel a bit like a fish out of the water at times. Dress code is all over the place. Lots of people come to work in their casual attire, rather than a business suit. The higher ups still dress formal as usual, as do the people from sales and marketing, although even those show up every now and then in their casual clothes, presumably on days when they don't have any activities planned that involves contact with customers or business partners. Most people are also on first-name basis with one another, though there are some exceptions here and there too. It's still a bit confusing at times. The Japanese branch's corporate culture may have been overly traditional and formal, but at least it was consistent.

"I think I'm doing fairly well with that. My direct colleagues have been very helpful. I'm still trying to convince people to address me by my first name though."

"Are you comfortable with that?"

"I think I could easily get used to it. Everyone around me uses first names to address the others. I can't fall behind."

Mister Ferguson gives me a sheepish smile.

"One of the first things we teach employees here who get to deal with people from your former branch on a regular basis is to always address Japanese co-workers by their family name even after having built a working relationship with them."

"Hmmm, does that also apply to Japanese who gain Scottish citizenship?"

"That is up to you to decide. People will learn as long as you're not afraid to keep correcting them."

"If I may ask, how do you address my parents?"

"I always address your mother by her first name. She'd probably think something was wrong if I called her by her last name, especially since she also plays bridge with my wife and two others every two weeks, so I also know her socially a bit."

"Mother really seems to be living an extremely busy life. Not only has she been working a full-time job, but she's also on the neighborhood committee and goes on bike rides with friends. I sometimes wonder if she's ever at home at all."

Mister Ferguson chuckles.

"I sometimes wonder about that too. She once told me that she occasionally gets involved in various charity events and that she's also been working on rebuilding and expanding the old network of

contacts she had when she was still a business reporter. I believe she regularly submits columns to various local magazines and newspapers. Personally, if I had that kind of life, I'd burn myself out in weeks. But she seems to handle it just fine."

Seems like it. And the only thing that had to go was her interaction with her children. Small sacrifice, really.

"How about my father?"

"To be honest, we tried first names for some time, but I could tell he wasn't very comfortable with it, so eventually we switched back. I have to admit interaction became stilted from time to time whenever he called me Norris and then gave me a look as if apologizing for insulting me."

He smirks.

"I've always been fascinated by how different your parents are as people."

"Different?"

"Your mother's an extraverted woman, always on the go, involved in a hundred things at once and with a knack for quickly spotting and immediately pouncing on opportunities that present themselves. Your father's more of an introvert, content to sit in his study and read through his book collection in the little free time he permits himself, and I've never seen him make decisions on a whim... He always tries to get to the bottom of whatever issue he faces before deciding on it and he usually pays a large amount of attention to the long-term consequences of whatever action he takes. More than anyone else I've ever met."

"I see."

A gloomy expression appears on his face.

"Which is why this came as such a shock. I could see your father brushing off warning signs with explanations like 'rsi' or 'indigestion' in order to avoid worrying others, but I find it impossible to believe he failed to consider the possibility of a heart affliction himself. Especially since he, like many of us at the office, has taken the same first aid training we also offer our larger customers as part of our service. He must have known. And yet he kept going."

"He probably thought he would be able to hold on for a few more weeks. Mother had a vacation planned afterwards that he could use to get his bearings back. I don't think she'll have much opportunity to take it easy any time soon. We don't even know when he's going to be released from the hospital yet."

"How is he? Have you spoken to him already?"

"My mother, my sister and I dropped by the hospital yesterday, but he was asleep while we were there, and they wouldn't let us see him. We have an appointment with his cardiologist later today. Perhaps we'll get lucky afterwards."

"Give him my regards, and tell him not to worry too much about the company. We're going to do our best to succeed in the next few weeks, even if he's not there to participate."

"If I may ask, has there already been word from the board of directors in Japan on what they want to do with the delegation that is heading for the US in a few weeks?"

"Not yet. I think they will send a few people from the Japanese branch along. Just between you and me, I just hope those people aren't going to end up getting in the way. The Japanese branch has focussed completely on the local market during the last 6 years and has barely been involved in the expansion process at all. That's been head office's task. Part of me is hoping your mother will still come along. She's just as familiar with the involved parties as your father is and could partially compensate for his absence, but the board is not going to put a PR manager in charge of an operation this major. They'll want someone higher up the chain of command to act as the leader."

"Kojima?"

"Probably. Has your mother said anything about what she intends to do? I wouldn't blame her if she decided to stay by her husband's side. Of course, it would have been rather inappropriate to ask her about that when she called yesterday, but perhaps you've picked something up."

"I'm afraid I haven't really spoken to her much."

"I just wanted to let you know that nobody here would question your loyalty to the company if you followed your mother's example and decided you need some time off to deal with this. We'd be happy to accommodate you."

I don't think there'd be much of a point in me taking time off. If Mom needs comfort, she still has Lilly around. And Lilly has Hanako and Hisao... for the time being. Mom decided it was probably best for them to return to Japan ahead of schedule, since Dad's incident pretty much put a permanent damper on their vacation. They're set to take a flight back in three days. If Lilly wants me to spend more time with her afterwards, I can always take a day off or so, but I think I know her well enough already to know she probably wouldn't want me to take a leave of absence purely for her sake.

"I think I'll be fine, sir. But I appreciate your concern. I'll be sure to let you know if I change my mind."

He nods.

"Good. I won't claim any more of your time. I hope the cardiologist brings good news this afternoon. You and your family have my well-wishes."

"Thank you, sir. Good day."

I leave Mister Ferguson's office and hurry to my own place. If I skip my lunch break and work extra hard, I'll be able to leave earlier for that appointment without getting behind in my work.

I check my watch as I walk through the entry hall of the hospital for the third day in a row. I'm a little later than I should be due to me having to take a phone call a minute before I was supposed to be leaving. Spotting a pair of elevator doors slowly closing in the distance, I hurriedly sprint towards it and stick my hand in between them before they close completely, counting on the sensor to detect my arm and reopen the doors.

As the elevator door does indeed open, rather than amputating my hand on the spot, they reveal the elevator's sole occupant: a wrinkled old man dressed in pajamas and a bathrobe holding a pack of cigarettes in one hand while holding onto a movable IV pole with the other. He gives me an annoyed

glare for briefly stalling the trip back to his room, and I mutter a quick apology in return. As I look at the elevator's control panel I notice that my fellow-passenger has already pressed the button leading to the floor where I need to be as well.

The elevator doors close again, and as the elevator starts rising, I sneak a quick look at the old man. I'm not sure what makes him a more pitiful sight: that IV pole he's dragging around or his slumped posture in general. I wonder if this is what Dad'll look like in a few weeks, assuming all goes well. Heck, the guy sharing the elevator with me might have been a strict patriarch himself before some illness did a number on him.

After arriving at my destination floor, I hurry over to the cardiology ward's waiting area and am relieved to see Lilly and Mom still sitting there.

"Yo!"

"Oh, hello Akira."

"Akira! I'm glad that you could still make it. How was your work day?"

"Okayish. Aside from a few exceptions, people at the office haven't caught on yet, though I had to bite my tongue a few times. With both Dad and Mom suddenly absent, several people suddenly remembered that another Satou recently moved in, and I had to feign obliviousness several times. I can't say I like doing that."

Mom gives a nod.

"I'm planning to drop by the office tomorrow and let people in on the situation. I wanted to hold that off until after our appointment today. I want to at least know what to tell people."

"Are you coming back to work tomorrow?"

"I don't know about that yet. I kinda feel like I *should* be at your father's side throughout this ordeal."

I'm not sure what irks me more: Mom's hypocritical statement or Lilly's understanding nod that follows it, but before I can determine whether or not to react to it, a young nurse comes walking in and takes a look around the room.

"Satou?"

Mom gets up and nods.

"That's us."

"Doctor McElroy is ready to see you. This way, please."

Lilly gets up as well, and I allow her to take hold of my sleeve. As we head for the doctor's office, I whisper to her.

"And how are you, Sis? You look a bit better than two days ago, with the emphasis on 'a bit'. Are you still holding up?"

Of course, when I met up with her in the hospital the day before yesterday, she looked about ready to break down. It makes sense that she's managed to compose herself a bit since then. She gives me a tired smile.

"I'm doing okay, given the circumstances. Still, I'd feel a lot better if the doctor were to reassure us that Father will make a full recovery."

"How are Hanako and Hisao doing?"

"The whole situation was as much a scare for them as it was for me. What happened hit a very raw nerve with both of them."

Yeah, that's not particularly surprising.

"Maybe we'll have some good news today, and they'll be able to return to Japan with a sense of optimism."

"I really hope so."

02

We follow the nurse and Mom into the doctor's office, and I quickly guide Lilly to one of the chairs. As the nurse leaves the room and Mom and I sit down, the doctor gives us a quick look-over and then addresses Mom.

"Good afternoon. I am doctor McElroy."

"Good afternoon. I am Karla Satou. These are my daughters Akira and Lilly."

An inquisitive glint appears in the doctor's eye.

"Satou isn't exactly a common name around here. Are you perhaps related to Satou Medical Technology? I don't deal with them directly, but I've heard that it's a family company."

"My husband actually runs that company. I'm an employee myself as well. Raigmore is a very valued customer of ours. Particularly this ward."

"Yes, our ambulance team probably even used one of your AED's to correct your husband's heart rhythm. Hmm... Perhaps he can appreciate that."

Mom smiles sadly.

"He probably would. Or rather... He'd probably be very troubled if it had been the competition's equipment that saved his life..."

She sighs before continuing.

"The CEO of a company specializing in heart equipment suffering a heart attack... It sounds unreal, doesn't it?"

Doctor McElroy chuckles briefly.

"Not to me, to be honest. I've worked in a hospital in the past where I worked alongside another cardiologist who ended up suffering a minor heart attack himself. One of my old friends from university

is a respiratory physician who's also an avid smoker whenever he's not on duty. And plenty of dentists have cavities from time to time. All of us are still only human, Mrs Satou. It's not uncommon to be knowledgeable about illnesses or conditions and still fall prey to them yourself. In fact, sometimes merely being knowledgeable about something helps us fool ourselves into believing it won't happen to us..."

His expression turns slightly more serious.

"...even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. But we can talk about that later. It's probably best if I give you an update on his condition first."

"Yes, that would be appreciated."

"The gist of it would be that your husband has been extremely lucky. Lucky that an ambulance was called immediately and that the ambulance crew was warned beforehand that it was probably a heart attack. Lucky to quickly receive CPR. And lucky that you live so close to the hospital."

Lilly immediately perks up at the doctor's words.

"Doctor, are you saying that my father will probably make a full recovery?"

"From what we've been able to see, he doesn't appear to have suffered any brain damage. He can truly thank his lucky stars for that. I'm not sure if I can call his upcoming recovery process a 'full recovery' though. His fractured ribs will hurt him for some time, but they will heal completely eventually. His heart is a more complex story. A heart simply cannot get away from an event such as this completely unscathed. Under the right circumstances, such as a healthy lifestyle, he will be able to avoid this sort of thing from ever repeating itself, but the fact remains that someone who suffers from a heart attack will run an increased risk of further heart attacks in the future. That is something he cannot afford to ever ignore."

Mom nods.

"A healthy lifestyle - stress-free, I presume?"

"Yes. A heart attack caused by stress-related high blood pressure is a worst-case scenario, but as you have learned even worst-case scenarios take place from time to time. I understand that your husband has been under a lot of stress?"

"I'm afraid so. We're on the verge of taking over a company abroad, and there's been a second interested party who hasn't completely left the picture yet. All in all, it's been a very trying time. We were planning a vacation after this was all over, but until then things would be extremely busy. The knowledge that he couldn't afford to fall ill right now may even have been an additional factor of stress."

"Your health starts faltering, you start worrying about what happens if you were to be put out of commission, you become more stressed, your health starts dropping more, so you start worrying more, etcetera, etcetera. That sort of thing can indeed create a vicious circle that is quite hard to get out of."

Lilly sighs.

"And despite everything he also committed to a trip with my friends and me, despite the fact that it required him to squeeze his workload into an even smaller timespan. If only..."

The doctor scrapes his throat to cut off Lilly's remark.

"Please do not oversimplify the situation, Miss Satou. Maybe what you mentioned was the straw that broke the camel's back, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe he could have lasted until that vacation your mother spoke of or maybe something else would have caused things to fall apart. I think the right thing to contemplate on right now isn't that last straw, but all the others that were already there."

"I think the doctor has a point, Lilly. The responsibility for this ultimately lies with Dad and not with you. He must have had at least a minor suspicion of where he was headed. I mean, when you spoke to his general practitioner on the phone, the man immediately told you to have a cardiologist look at Dad. That's a pretty quick conclusion to jump to without any context, so my gut says he knew about Dad's situation. It may have been going on for some time."

The doctor nods his head.

"We spoke to his general practitioner to get his account of things too. The last time he saw your father was quite some time ago, but your father was somewhat of a risk case even then. According to doctor Thompson, your father has had high blood pressure for years. The only thing that surprised doctor Thompson was how long your father still managed to last."

Son of a bitch! Years? I shake my head in disbelief. How stupid can a person get? How important was this company expansion for him to go this far?

Lilly barely manages to conceal a shocked gasp. Mom's face, on the other hand, is completely neutral. I wonder how much she knows. It feels inappropriate to ask with the doctor nearby, so I swallow the remark I was about to make. After a moment of silence, Mom speaks up.

"I suppose your comment about how tempting it is to believe these sorts of things only happen to others is particularly true here."

"...I suppose so."

"So... What will happen now? And when do you think he can go home?"

"He is going to need a lot of time to recover. If you like, it's okay for you to go and visit him after you leave here if he's awake. How long we decide to keep him here will depend on how well his recovery progresses. It's still too early to make an accurate prediction."

"He'd probably feel more comfortable recuperating at home than in a hospital room. We could hire a private duty nurse to keep an eye on him while he recovers. We live very close to Raigmore, so dropping by for a daily checkup would not be impractical."

"We can consider that once he has recovered a bit. At this point, we still like to keep a close eye on him ourselves. We will reevaluate his situation in a week or two."

"Of course."

"We can make an appointment next week to discuss the future. We will probably have a better idea of when he can leave the hospital. When you schedule a new appointment with the desk workers down the hall they will be able to provide you with some pamphlets about how to adjust one's lifestyle in order to prevent further heart attacks."

"I'll be sure to read them. But doctor..."

She pauses for a moment, almost as if not entirely sure if she's prepared for the answer.

"...will he be able to return to work eventually, or is this the definite end of his career?"

"Given how far he's gone, I can only imagine that his job is very important to him."

"It's a bit complicated. He runs a family company, and family companies don't stop being part of one's life after retirement, voluntary or otherwise. In fact, I think the company's always been part of his life, even when he was still attending school."

"We try to encourage people who are recovering from a heart attack to try and lead a life that's as normal as possible after their recuperation. Having a daily rhythm and interaction with colleagues is part of that. But the lifestyle your husband used to live cannot be described as normal or healthy. That lifestyle will have to change. He will have to pay more attention to his own needs from now on. It will be up to him to determine whether his current job and a healthy and stress-free lifestyle are two things that can be reconciled with one another or not."

"We will keep that in mind. Thank you for your time, doctor."

03

We leave the office, and Mom heads over to the information desk to schedule a new appointment. I look at Lilly and notice she has a troubled look on her face. I give her a subtle nudge.

"I bet I know what's bugging you, Sis. This whole meeting was pretty run-of-the-mill, except for that one revelation."

Lilly nods sullenly.

"He knew... for years..."

"He knew he was a risk case for years, but the question remains whether anybody else besides that general practitioner knew about this. Well, I'm curious about one person in particular. She put on one hell of a poker face just now."

"I... don't want to believe that she knew... and did nothing. When I spoke with her on the phone that evening, she even said..."

"Yeah, if she knew then that's a real problem. But would it really be a relief to you if she didn't know, Lils?"

"What do you mean?"

"If she didn't know, that has implications too. You might not like those either."

"..."

"How much do we really know about Mom and Dad? It's been six years, and back when we were living with them, we were living in a completely different environment. Things have changed. They've changed too, that much is obvious. Especially Mom. Maybe... that new start they talked about earlier wasn't just about patching things up between us and them. Maybe.."

"Maybe...?"

"She's coming back. We might as well ask her now."

"I'm not sure if now is the appropriate time."

"Well, I'd sure as hell like to make sense of all this."

As Mom comes back from the desk, she has a weary expression on her face.

"I've made an appointment for next week. You can come along again if you like, but I won't force you to."

"So what now, Mom? We're gonna walk out of here and pretend the elephant in the room is just part of the furniture? The doctor played along just now, but that's not gonna work a second time. What the hell is going on here?"

"What indeed..."

"Mother, do you remember that phone call we had on the evening of...? You said things would probably be fine. That he'd be able to handle a few more weeks."

"If Lilly had taken your words at face value back then instead of calling a doctor, we'd probably be arranging a funeral right now. How much did you know about Dad's condition?"

"If I had known that your father's had high blood pressure for years, do you really think I would have told Lilly not to worry? What kind of person do you think I am?"

Lilly breathes a soft sigh of relief, but I'm not done with Mom yet.

"I'm not sure what kind of person you are. I believe you when you say that what doctor McElroy just said was new to you, too, but that does beg the question why you didn't know and how you couldn't have known about it. The two of you lived in the same house and worked at the same office. When he went to see doctor Thompson, didn't you bother to ask why he went or what the doctor said?"

"I would have, if I had known he went there in the first place. He must have gone there at a time I was away from the home."

"Well, he certainly wasn't hurting for opportunities in that case."

Mom folds her arms in a slightly defensive manner.

"Akira, what is this about?"

"I haven't been here for very long, but one thing everyone at the office who knows you agreed upon is that you always seem to be involved in a thousand things at once. Committees, social events, charity work, you name it. But I also got the impression that there's one thing you weren't very involved in at all and that was your interaction with Dad outside the office. You two have been living completely separate lives over the years. So it's not that surprising that he didn't tell you. Why would he? You've been just as neglectful of him as you've been of us."

Lilly's expression becomes pained upon hearing my harsh words.

"Akira... Please, not now."

Mom averts her eyes for a second.

"I'm not gonna try and justify the lack of contact between the three of us, but your father... was actually okay with the way we lived our lives. He knew that... if he ever needed me to be there for him... I'd drop everything else immediately. I swore a solemn oath to him, and I have reminded him of it... several times."

I shake my head in disbelief.

"You'd drop everything else and be a wife to him as long as he asked you? What kind of sorry marriage has agreements like that? Was that part of your wedding vows? Heck, why did you even marry Dad to begin with? Did you even like him, or did you just want to marry into a wealthy and prestigious family?"

"Oh, shut up Akira!"

I might have gotten carried away a bit. Mom's eyes narrow, and she clenches her right hand into a fist. From the shaking of her hand, I get the impression she's at least playing with the idea of punching me. She holds back, but she shoots me a death glare that is intense enough to send a shiver up my spine before spitting out a vicious retort.

"Stop ignorantly lecturing me on things you know nothing about!"

Even though Mom limited herself to merely hitting back with words, Lilly reels as if someone slapped her in the face.

"M-Mother, Akira... Please... just... stop this."

The distressed look on Lilly's face makes my anger fade a bit and replaces it with embarrassment. Judging from the expression on Mom's face, she's probably feeling the same.

"Sorry Sis."

"Yes, sorry dear. *sigh* Let's not make a scene here, okay?"

"Okay."

She hesitates for a bit.

"If the two of you want to pay him a visit, now's probably a good time."

"Yes."

"Akira, you don't mind dropping off Lilly afterwards, do you?"

"Excuse me, but... You're not coming along, Mother?"

"I'll pay him a visit this evening. Right now, I need to think about a few things. I don't want to end up saying something to him in front of you two that I might regret later."

"..."

"...Fine. I'll give her a ride afterwards."

"Alright. I'll talk to you later then."

She gives us a nod and then walks off. As we start walking towards the hospital room where Dad's staying, I take a look at Lilly and notice she looks extremely troubled. I sigh.

"Do you believe her?"

"I... I do. She seemed sincerely offended at your words."

I notice a slightly accusing tone in her voice. It's only barely noticeable, and I might have missed it if I wasn't so used to the subtleties of my sister's way of speaking.

"You think I went too far?"

"It... wasn't very respectful."

"Maybe not. But they're probably already used to this kind of thing from me."

"I don't think that's true or Mother wouldn't have sounded so angry."

"Listen, I get that I'm being confrontational, but *someone* has to call them out on their actions, Sis. And if I'm doing this that means you don't have to. Anyway, this kinda confirms that you made the right decision earlier, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You came this close to giving up your life and new little surrogate family at Yamaku under the assumption that at least you'd get your old family back in return. Now it turns out that instead of a family, there's just two people here who were doing whatever the hell they wanted without paying much attention to what the other was up to. That wasn't worth giving up your life at Yamaku for, Sis. Not by a long shot. In the end, it still would have been you and me here, just like back in Japan six years ago."

"I... I need to let all of this sink in. I need to think... about things."

"There'll be time for that later. We're here."

Just as we arrive at room 702, I see a nurse walking out of it.

"Excuse me, miss. Is Mister Satou awake right now?"

She nods.

"He is. You can go and visit him if you like."

I look at Lilly.

"Well, here goes nothing."

04

As we enter the room and close the door behind us, the bustling of the hallways fades away and is replaced by an almost oppressive silence that's only disrupted by the steady high-pitched beep of a nearby EKG monitor. I get a strange feeling of déjà vu as we walk further into the room and towards the bed housing the room's only occupant. I remember visiting Hisao while he was hospitalized together with Lilly, Shizune and Misha and feeling a similar atmosphere when I entered his room. That feels so long ago, despite it only being like a month away. Hisao did look a lot less sordid than the person lying before us here. Unshaven, an IV needle sticking in his arm and the movement of his chest betraying a strained breathing, Dad looks at least a decade older than he really is. The expression in his eyes is less sharp and probing than it usually is, probably due to the painkillers he's on, but he's definitely conscious as I can see his gaze following us as we make our way over to the bed. He gives a short sigh as an indication that he's aware of our presence.

"Hello Father."

"Nice to see you're awake, Dad."

"..."

05

There's a soft sound, but if it was a mumble, it was too soft for even Lilly to comprehend. That familiar worrying expression appears on my sister's face in response.

"Father... Are you in a lot of pain?"

"I... fine."

Those fractured ribs of his probably make even taking deep breaths painful, and his first reaction is to claim he's fine. I shrug.

"His definition of 'fine' is still the same as it was just before this whole mess started, Sis. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether you want me to describe what he looks like, but 'fine' is not a word I'd use right now."

Lilly merely smiles sheepishly and then goes back to her worrying tone.

"You don't have to talk, Father. If you really need to say something, just whisper. Please don't strain yourself."

"Your... mother... not here?"

Lilly smiles and shakes her head.

"Mother will be keeping you company this evening."

That's leaving out one heck of an important detail.

"Maybe in the meantime you could think about what you're gonna tell her. We just had a talk with your cardiologist who in turn had a talk with your general practitioner. Turns out he knew you were a risk case, and you knew that too. What on earth were you thinking?"

A long silence. I wonder if he expected us to find out about this. I can see Lilly fidgeting a bit. She obviously doesn't really like where this is going, but at the same time I bet she's curious herself.

"I... could not... just stop... just before... the... end. My... honor... was at... st-stake... here."

"Honor? Give me a break! You think you're some sort of samurai who'll be fondly remembered by everyone who knew him if he bravely dies in the line of duty while serving his lord or something? I bet most people at the office here would have thought of you as a fool. Heh, maybe those guys on the board of directors would have put a memorial plaque in place in your honor at the Japanese branch, assuming the ambulance crew wouldn't have ended up thwarting things."

"What... do... you... mean?"

"You ever thought of what would have happened if Hanako hadn't been there to give you CPR on the spot, but the ambulance team would still have arrived just in time to save some of your basic brain functions? You would have spent the next decade or two mumbling random gibberish at your wife and daughters while they're busy changing your daily diapers. The board members would have denied your very existence out of embarrassment. If you think that's an exaggeration, then maybe we can take a look around here at the hospital. They may have heart attack victims here who weren't as lucky as you've been."

"..."

I can see that his medication hasn't left him fuzzy enough to miss the implication of my comment and he looks uncomfortable upon imagining that scenario. Looks like that wasn't part of his risk calculation after all.

"Besides, this isn't about the last couple of weeks or the last couple of months. You were told you had high blood pressure years ago. Why on earth didn't you take it easier back then?"

"Could... not... afford to... yet..."

"Could not afford to? Even a couple of years ago, you could have retired and lived out the rest of your days in comfort. This was simply about your ego."

"...no way... to... speak to... a parent... Akira. You... show... respect... for once... This was... about... your... education... and... financial future... too. And es... especially... Lilly's."

That excuse again. Lilly looks a bit distressed upon hearing Father's words.

"My financial future, Father?"

"We... have been... setting... trust fund... for your... cial future... during our... time here."

"A trust fund?"

"Yes... so even... in... the long run... you will... always be... well... provided for. Even... if you... would not... find a... husband... at some point, you... would still... be able... to live... without worry, L-Lilly."

Well-provided for? I wonder if he realizes how extremely patronizing he's sounding. Lilly certainly realizes it, too, and I can see an angry expression on her face. She's making an active effort to keep her

composure. The sight of her hurt expression suddenly pisses me off to no end, and I sling an angry retort back at the old man.

"She doesn't want your damn trust fund."

"But... she... will... probably... need... it."

Lilly doesn't answer, but I can see the corner of her mouth twitching slightly, and just when I start expecting her to either give Dad a piece of her mind or send him a fake smile, she turns around and walks out of the room without saying a single word. I recover from the surprise sooner than Dad and give him a dirty look.

"When Mom comes here this evening, it'd be smart to treat her with more respect, or you'll burn what might be the last bridge you have left."

And with that, I leave the room and go after my sister who's already half-way down the corridor before I catch up with her.

"Sis?"

Lilly doesn't immediately respond and merely sighs. For a moment I think she's going to turn around and walk back to Dad to apologize to him, but that doesn't happen.

"I'll take you to the car, okay?"

"Yes..."

I allow her to take my sleeve, and we walk back to the parking lot. I notice she seems to move with a little bit more hesitation than before, but she doesn't stop walking for a single moment. We make our way to the car, but before I start the engine I give an exasperated sigh.

"Well, this was certainly illuminating. I wonder if what happened just now is courtesy of those painkillers he's on."

"Do you mean to say he may have... not been himself."

"He wasn't completely out of it or anything, but he was probably a little too fuzzy to be able to carefully choose and weigh his words like he usually does."

"The mindset behind it is still the same though, isn't it? Whether it's sugarcoated or not doesn't really matter."

"Yeah. Crap with cream on top is still crap."

I start the car, and after a short ride we reach our parents' home. Lilly hasn't said a single word the entire time, which is a bit worrying.

"Okay, we're back. The front door is at twelve o' clock when you get out."

"Thank you."

"Hey Sis, you've been kind of quiet. You... uh... want to talk about this?"

"...Thank you, Akira. But I'd like to think some more first."

We get out and we say our goodbyes, but as Lilly turns around and heads for the front door, I suddenly think of something and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey Sis, I've been thinking... Have you considered the option of accompanying Hanako and Hisao back to Japan? I could drop by the airport and see if I can secure an additional ticket for that particular flight. It might be better than having to put up with stuff like what just happened for an extended amount of time. A premature departure might just send a hint with enough impact to last."

Curiously enough, Lilly doesn't immediately react. Just when I'm about to repeat my question, she unexpectedly shrugs off my hand in an almost mechanical way, and her parting words, uttered just before she opens the front door and walks in, sound cold enough to send a tingle down my spine.

"...have a nice evening, Akira."

The fact that my younger sister gave me the cold shoulder, probably for the first time in her life, takes a moment to sink in, and when I get back in the car I feel exhausted and just a bit unsettled as well. As I start the engine, I let out a weary sigh.

"This situation is getting messier with every passing moment..."

06

Chapter 32 (Hanako)

01

My gaze wanders back and forth between the book in front of me and my boyfriend sitting next to me on the couch in the Satou family's living room. Every now and then, I also glance at the doorway leading to the stairway though said doorway is empty every time I look at it.

Earlier this week the incident with Mister Satou cast a permanent shadow over our vacation.

Part of that evening is a bit hazy in my mind. I remember exchanging a scared look with Hisao when Lilly spoke to a doctor on the phone and dropped the word 'cardiologist'. When Lilly went back to the study and we heard a scream, that sensation became ominous, and when Hisao and I followed her and saw her father lying motionless on the floor, somewhere between the table and the doorway, the feeling became something much, much worse.

For just a second it wasn't Lilly's father I saw lying on the ground, but Hisao. And suddenly my mind was filled with the same intense panic and helplessness I felt when Hisao was lying there on the street after accidentally colliding with someone. The flashback only lasted a second or so, but the sense of maddening fear remained even afterwards. The sight of a rapidly panicking Lilly kneeling down at his side managed to reach deep into my own mind, grab a firm hold of my own traumatizing memories and drag them out kicking and screaming. As a result, I became unable to move as my mind started clouding slowly but steadily, even as Hisao rushed to Mister Satou's side.

Things could have taken a turn for the worst there. Lilly's father could have died in front of us with me just standing by, despite my first aid training. If that would have happened, I don't think I'd ever be able to face Lilly again. The fact that that didn't happen was a coincidence I still have trouble wrapping my mind around. As I was trying to fight off a rapidly impending panic attack, I saw Hisao taking Mister Satou's arm and pressing his thumb against the inside and suddenly I heard the voice of my first aid teacher again as he lectured me on that first training day.

Don't use your thumb to take someone's pulse. Your thumb has its own pulse, so you won't get a clear reading. And be sure to press down harder when you're doing compressions. If you have to focus on doing one thing right, focus on the chest compressions.

Hisao was doing it wrong.

That little disconnect from the current situation turned out to be just enough to shake me out of my anxiety-induced paralysis for a moment, and I did the only thing my mind was able to come up with. Shove Lilly and Hisao aside (I later realized I easily could have given Hisao an episode of his own this way) and focus on the motions I painstakingly practiced at the training before my anxiety could take over again. Push 15 times, breathe once, push 15 times, breathe once. I was on the edge of a breakdown the entire time, but as long as could keep these motions going, I wouldn't feel that crushing sense of helplessness, and I could keep teetering on that edge instead of going over it entirely. So I tuned out everything around me in a desperate effort to keep myself together. I vaguely remember hearing Lilly yell something at me and someone, not Hisao, forcefully grabbing me and his face suddenly being close to mine and his shocked stare, and... I think I screamed in fright and flailed my arms at the time as I tried to get away from him.

The next thing I remember that wasn't some fevered blur was me sitting on the bed in our room with Hisao holding me in his arms. Despite the fact that his presence helped, it still took me a long time to stop shaking and calm my nerves to the point where my mind was capable of understanding what Hisao was saying and respond to his words with quick nods and shakes of my head. After convincing himself that another breakdown probably wasn't around the corner, Hisao left the room after telling me to get some sleep. Sleeping was the last thing I felt like doing despite being extremely tired. Nobody has ever gotten nightmares while staring at the ceiling.

Eventually, Hisao returned to tell me he had been on the phone with Lilly who had told him that the doctors at the hospital managed to stabilize her father's condition. Of course, we both knew from experience that 'stabilized' meant nothing more than the fact he wasn't going to die immediately. Still, it was a relief.

The following days were completely spent around the house. Neither Hisao nor I felt it was appropriate to go on any more trips, but we also started feeling that our presence was becoming a burden here. So we spent most of our time in our bedroom reading our remaining books unless Lilly and her mother were out in which case we'd move to the living room. We've been slowly running out of books over the last two days and neither of us felt really comfortable entering the study again. It turned out that Hisao was almost as rattled by what happened to Lilly's father as I was. Given his own heart condition, I can't blame him.

One evening during dinner, Lilly's mother told us that while she wouldn't force us to leave, she saw little point in us sticking around if all we were going to do was sit in our room all day long and read our books. If we had no objections, she'd be able to arrange an earlier flight for Hisao and myself so we'd be able to enjoy what was left of our summer break back in Japan. It was a painful decision since we both really wanted to support Lilly during her moments of need, but on the other hand we were still aware of the fact that Lilly came to Scotland in order to reconcile with her family, and times like these might cause a family to rally together. Our presence might hinder that process.

On the other hand...

I can't shake the feeling that what happened hasn't really done much to bring the family closer together. If anything, the opposite has happened.

Lilly's mother went back to work yesterday. She's spent most of yesterday at the office or at the hospital, and today will probably be similar. Akira told us Karla hadn't known about her husband having high blood pressure either, and she seems very upset with him. I can't say I blame her.

When Lilly went to the hospital together with her mother and Akira to speak to the doctor there and visit her father, something happened that severely upset Lilly. (she didn't give us the details though Akira later summarized it as 'Dad acting stupid') Ever since, Lilly's been very withdrawn, spending most of the day in her room and only coming out to eat dinner with us. I can tell that she's troubled, but whenever Hisao and I went to see her she'd wave off our concerns and tell us that all she needed was a bit more time to think about things.

I'm really worried about her.

I glance at the doorway once more, but as expected Lilly's not there.

I'm starting to get second thoughts about the idea of flying back to Japan tomorrow.

I wish she'd tell us what exactly it is that's troubling her so much.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg

"Ah!"

My thoughts are interrupted by the sudden ringing of my cell phone. As I look at the display, I see Akira's name. I share a puzzled look with Hisao.

"It's Akira."

"I wonder why she's calling."

Somewhat curious, I pick up the phone and put it to my ear.

"H-Hello? Akira?"

"Yo!"

"Ummm... How are you?"

"I'm okay. I have a little question. Are you busy right now?"

We haven't been really busy since this whole mess started.

"N-No. I'm not. Why?"

"Mom called me and asked if I could come and pick you up. This may come a bit as a surprise, but the old man said he wanted to see you before you leave. And since you and Hisao will be heading back to Japan tomorrow, she said now may be the best moment for that."

"Y-Your father w-wants to see ME?"

"Apparently. If it's not too inconvenient for you guys, I'll be here in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes? Ah... O-okay."

"See ya then."

I give my boyfriend an uneasy look as I put down the phone.

"He wants to see me..."

"Well, since we're heading home tomorrow that's not too surprising. Let's go tell Lilly, okay?"

"Yes."

We put away our books and up the stairs to Lilly's room. Hisao knocks three times and, upon getting no immediate response, gently opens the door to reveal Lilly sitting on her bed, her head slowly turning in our direction as we peek in.

"Lilly?"

"Umm... Lilly?"

Upon hearing our voices, Lilly offers us a gentle smile.

"Hello Hanako, Hisao. I already thought it was you from the way you knocked."

"Hey, Lilly. Aren't you... uh... getting bored from sitting here all day long?"

Lilly gives us a slightly playful smile.

"I could ask you two the same. If things had turned out differently, we'd probably be in Edinburgh right now. I feel really bad about this vacation having taken a turn like this."

"It's okay. We had a lot of fun regardless."

"Yes."

"I'm happy to hear that. I hope the return trip will not be too troublesome for you, Hanako."

"I'm... trying not to think about it too much."

"Has any of you been... homesick while you were here?"

"Not me. We haven't had a great deal of opportunity for that."

"I... surprised myself a bit, but I haven't really felt homesick either."

"That's good to hear."

Hisao, realizing the conversation really has gotten derailed, softly scrapes his throat.

"Ahem, the reason we came here was to tell you that we'll be heading for the hospital as soon as Akira gets here. She just called Hanako."

Lilly frowns slightly.

"Akira... called Hanako?"

"Akira said... t-that your father wanted to see me."

Lilly is silent for a moment, but then smiles and nods her head.

"I see. It makes sense that he wants to express his gratitude to you before you leave tomorrow."

"Yeah. Akira said she'd be here in ten minutes, so we'd better hurry up and get ready."

Lilly nods.

"Hanako, Hisao... May I ask you a favor?"

"Of course."

02

"Could you... tell me how he's doing when you get back?"

I exchange a flabbergasted look with Hisao. Neither of us expected this.

"Y-You're not coming with us?"

"He asked for you specifically, didn't he?"

"Akira s-said she'd be here soon if it wasn't too inconvenient for us, so she probably wasn't just talking about m-me."

It's possible she meant Hisao and me, rather than the three of us, but I find that hard to believe.

"I believe that Mother has also visited him today. Having too many people there at the same time would probably be tiring for him."

I shoot Hisao a helpless glance, but he makes an 'I don't know what to do about this either'-gesture. We remain silent for a while, but since Lilly doesn't say anything else, there's probably no point in pressing her. Eventually Hisao sighs softly.

"I guess that's a good point. We'll be going then. We probably won't be gone for very long. We'll be sure to tell you afterwards how he's holding up."

"Thank you, Hisao."

03

Still a bit disturbed by what just happened, the two of us exit Lilly's room and make our way to the front door. After a minute or two, a car comes up the driveway, and Akira beckons us to get in from behind the windshield. Akira gives us a friendly nod as we get in and then turns the car around before driving back onto the road. After a moment of silence, Hisao speaks up.

"Hey, Akira, was the idea for Lilly to come along, or was it really supposed to be just Hanako and me?"

"I wouldn't have left her standing on the driveway if she had been waiting there along with you guys, but I'm not going to push her into coming along either."

I notice a sad look in Akira's eyes for a moment.

"So, Akira... Where is this headed?"

"I could be a smart-ass and say Raigmore Hospital, but... I really don't know either how this is gonna play out."

"By the way, why did your mother ask you to pick us up?"

"Apparently there's someone with her, and she has to accompany him to the office immediately afterwards."

She shrugs.

"Probably from the Japanese branch. That upcoming deal in the States is getting lots of people really nervous around here, especially with Dad completely out of the running and Mom barely showing up at the office."

After a short while we arrive at the hospital's parking lot, and we get out of the car and follow Akira inside. As we make our way through the hallways and ride the elevator to the proper floor, I can feel the atmosphere slowly becoming more oppressive. When we get out of the elevator, we see several people in pajamas walking down the corridor, two of them dragging IV poles along with them. I briefly look at Hisao and notice his face has gotten a bit pale.

Despite the hospital atmosphere making me really jittery as well, I take his hand in mine, give it a reassuring squeeze and make an attempt to give him my most encouraging smile. He gives my hand a little squeeze in return, and we share a brief look of mutual understanding. I think it's a good thing Hisao is here. As long as we don't get anywhere near the burn ward (assuming this hospital has one), I'll probably be okay as long as Hisao stays close by.

Akira continues to lead us down the corridor until she suddenly stops and softly whistles between her teeth. Ahead of us is an older Japanese man in a neat business suit who comes walking up to us upon noticing Akira. As he reaches us, he makes a quick bow to which Akira responds with a deep bow of her own.

"Miss Satou. It is a pleasure to see you again. I am terribly sorry for your family situation."

"Mister Kojima. It is good to see you again. Welcome to Scotland. I apologize profusely on my father's behalf for this inconvenience."

"It is not a problem. I apologize for not being able to have made it here sooner."

"We are greatly honored by your presence here in Inverness. I assume that your presence here means that you have been placed in charge of the delegation heading to the US."

He nods gravely, and I see the corner of his mouth twitch ever so slightly.

"That is indeed the task that has been entrusted to me by your grandfather and the rest of the board. I could never hope to match up to your father's capabilities, but things are the way they are. It cannot be helped."

"You will do fine."

"Ah... Akira. And Ikezawa and Nakai too. Good afternoon."

We look past the businessman to see Lilly's mother walking up to us. She bows to us, and Akira responds with another graceful bow. Hisao and I look at each other and then bow as well. We're both taken off guard a bit by the sudden formality of the Lilly's mother.

"Good afternoon, Mother. I picked up Ikezawa and Nakai as you asked."

"I appreciate it, Akira. Mister Kojima, these are Ikezawa and Nakai: two friends of my youngest daughter. They've been staying with us for a few weeks along with Lilly. They were with my husband when... it happened. Miss Ikezawa was the person who performed CPR on my husband until the ambulance arrived."

Upon hearing that the man bows again, this time a lot deeper.

"Then you have our everlasting gratitude."

Lilly's mother picks up my nervous fidgeting and steps forward.

"Mister Kojima, I'm terribly sorry, but we should probably go. Mister Ferguson is waiting for us."

"Yes, let us be on our way."

Karla and the man in the business suit say their goodbyes and then walk past us in the direction of the elevator hall. As they walk off, Akira watches them go with a sympathetic look in her eyes.

"I wouldn't wanna trade places with that guy right now."

Hisao scratches his head.

"Who was he? One of the company's bigwigs?"

"My former boss. His name's Koji Kojima. He's in charge of running the Japanese branch. His father's a friend of our grandfather. He and Dad have known each other for a looong time. He occupies the highest position in the company that's not filled by a Satou and ranks directly below Dad. I guess now that Dad's out of the running they told him to finish the job. But this expansion is apparently a process that's been a long time in the making, and the Japanese branch hasn't been heavily involved in it. Yet now he's expected to suddenly pick it up at the last stage. I bet he's facing some tremendous pressure right now. Japanese business culture is all about taking your time to get to know your business partners before you go out and make deals with them. He's pretty much out of his element here."

"You think he can handle it?"

"Let's hope so. I never worked directly under him, so I don't know him very well. He looked kinda nervous when the takeover came up. Oh well, guess we'll find out soon."

"That was kind of jarring, by the way."

"Huh? What was?"

"You... suddenly talking like that. And then switching right back as soon as he's out of earshot. Your mother too."

Akira gives a non-committed shrug.

"I don't know about Mom, but... even though I'm a Satou, I still have to mind my manners at work, just like everyone else. Heck, as the boss' daughter I may even be facing additional scrutiny. If I went around being my usual self around coworkers and superiors, my family name wouldn't save me from being tossed onto the street. So I play my part, just like everyone else."

"It's still a pretty big difference."

"It's called professionalism, kid. You'll find out when you enter the workplace yourself."

We leave it at that and follow Akira down the hallway until she strolls into one of the rooms. As we peer through the doorway, we can see that the curtains around the bed are closed, and we can hear a female voice from behind the curtain.

04

"There, I think we're done for today. It might itch a little bit, but please try not to touch it."

Akira gestures us to stay put, walks into the room and opens the curtain a bit.

"Yo!"

Akira's greeting is met by a tortured cough.

"Ah, it seems you have a visitor, Mister Satou."

"Is this an inconvenient time to drop by?"

"I don't think it is. I just finished changing the dressing of his incision and checking the incision for possible infections. Everything seems to be in order, so I'll be on my way."

"Okay."

A middle-aged nurse appears from behind the curtain and leaves the room. I make sure to partially hide behind Hisao as she walks by. Akira now steps behind the curtain so we can't see her anymore, though we can still hear her.

"You look a little sharper than before, but also a bit more uncomfortable. Have you cut back on the painkillers?"

"I... will... take some... more this... evening."

"Mom and Kojima were just here, weren't they? Will you even be able to handle more visitors right now?"

"Never... mind... that... Lilly... not... here?"

"Nope. Why? Have you already thought up an apology then?"

"A-Apology?"

"For insulting her. Lilly came to Inverness to repair the family bond that you two shattered and you reward her by insulting her independence. How do you think she feels about that?"

"I... did... not... insult her..."

"If you really believe that then you're even more out of touch with her than I thought. Heck, how many years has it been since you gave some serious thought about how *she feels about things*?"

"What... do... you... m-mean?"

"Why on earth did you summon her here, asking her to give up everything important she had in Japan, after keeping her at a comfortable distance for six years? Maybe because you thought you could use her to act as a glue for your fledgling marriage?"

"Our... marriage... is... fine..."

"Nonsense. You two were hardly part of each other's life outside of working hours. I've learned that much already."

"And yet... we... were... fine. And what... mean... by... comfortable... d-distance?"

"You and Mom were bothered with Lilly's blindness. Her disability was a source of shame for you. When you and Mom came here, you had to keep up appearances and play the perfect high-class couple. A blind child would have tarnished that image, so you callously left her behind. Your reputation was more important to you than your own daughter's well-being."

Akira's harsh words have barely left her mouth when the heartbeat monitor in the room suddenly starts beeping faster and louder, and for a moment I consider running off to get a nurse.

05

"AKIRA... SATOU! *cough* TAKE BACK... THOSE WORDS *cough* OR LEAVE... MY... SIGHT!"

I cringe as I hear Lilly's father react to Akira's accusation. Lilly told me that he suffered several rib fractures. Breathing must be painful for him, let alone speaking. Raising his voice like that must be excruciating. And yet, despite the tortured tone, his voice carries an air of authority that manages to even silence Akira for a moment.

"..."

"Well...?"

"So you deny it?"

"If there... is... a s-source... of shame... for... me... right... now... it is... you for m-making... these a-accusations... against... a parent."

"Then why did you have Mom join you here while you left Lilly behind, huh?"

"Your... mother... needed to... be here... and Lilly's... education... was... important... like I... told you... a hundred... times."

"That's just an excuse."

"If I... truly... valued my... reputation... over her... well-being... I would have... taken her along."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You will... understand... in time."

"I don't believe you."

"I... stake my... personal honor... on it. Now... t-take back... what you... said."

"Hmph."

"Fine. Then... cling to your... conspiracy... theories. No doubt... you have... been poisoning... Lilly's mind... with them... for years... as... well."

"Believe it or not, but she's always been unreasonably loyal to you."

"No doubt... you have... shared... your impressions... with her... many times."

"That doesn't mean..."

"I think... I know... enough."

It's kind of striking how quickly Akira's father turned the conversation around and put his daughter on the defensive.

"You don't know anything about her or me. That's your problem."

"This is going... in circles."

"Fine, I didn't come here to argue anyway."

"Then why... did you... come?"

"Huh? You don't know? You asked Mom about Hanako."

"So I... did."

"Mom called me and asked me to take her to you."

I'm startled by a sudden spike in the sound of the heart monitor, but before I can determine what to do, a hand suddenly covers my mouth and Hisao quickly pulls me back and around the nearby corner. A few seconds later, I hear the sound of a curtain being forcefully yanked back. Hisao takes his hand off of me, puts his finger to his lips and lets out a soft 'sshhh' in order to reinforce the point. I quickly nod to indicate I understand that we're supposed to be quiet. After a short while, we can hear the beeps of the heart monitor slowing down. We're still close enough to the doorway to pick up Akira's voice.

"Uh, she and Hisao are in the waiting area."

I hear a sigh of relief coming from the room.

Hisao nods and we quietly sneak off towards the place Akira mentioned. We both sit down and wait for our hearts to stop racing. That was really close. A little while later, Akira comes walking into the area with an uneasy expression on her face.

"Hey! How long have you guys been here?"

Hisao gives her an annoyed look.

"We decided to go and wait here a second or two before your father pulled back that curtain. You're very lucky I realized in time what your father was going to do. I hope you're able to appreciate that."

Akira looks a bit ashamed and nods.

"Yeah, thanks a lot. You really saved my ass back there. Anyway, he's ready to see you."

I get up to follow Akira back to her father's room, but Hisao remains seated while giving Akira a large frown.

"Uh... Akira. It's probably not my place to lecture you on this, but..."

"I have a pretty thick skin, Hisao. If you want to speak your mind then go ahead and tell me what you want to say."

"Well uh... I don't think that discussion between you and your father was really something Hanako and I were supposed to be part of. I don't really understand what you were trying to achieve by starting that argument with him with us nearby. I mean... if your father would have found out that we were listening in all the time, he probably would have been extremely upset. Without wanting to take sides or point out who's right or wrong, one thing the doctors probably told your father was that he had to avoid stress for the time being. Ah... Speaking as a heart patient, your actions were probably kind of rash."

"Hmmm..."

"Uh... Please don't take this as me accusing you of trying to kill him or anything."

Akira grins her familiar grin at Hisao's last remark.

"Hehehe, that's probably a little bit dramatic, don't you think?"

She runs a hand through her hair and shrugs.

"To be honest, I wasn't trying to achieve anything. I just screwed up. That's the best explanation I can offer. I promise I'll keep my mouth shut while you're talking with the old man. Is that enough of a reassurance?"

"Yeah, it'll do."

I nod to indicate my agreement.

"Then it's a deal. Let's go see him then. He's probably wondering what's keeping me."

06

We head back to Mister Satou's room and this time follow Akira inside. With the curtains opened, I get my first look at him since that dreadful evening.

It's a day and night difference.

I've only ever seen him wearing a neat business suit and glasses, and he carried an air of formality wherever he went. Wearing old-fashioned pajamas, not having his glasses on and with a bandaged chest barely visible underneath his night attire, he looks anything but formal and dignified. Making it even worse are the drops of sweat on his forehead, perhaps the result of his verbal stand-off with Akira. The one thing that remained the same about him is the sharp look in his eyes.

Is this what Hisao looked like when he was hospitalized? I shudder a bit at the thought.

Hisao and I stand in front of the bed and make a polite bow. Lilly's father gives an appreciative nod to acknowledge our presence.

"Miss... Ikezawa... Mister... Nakai."

"Hello sir. How are you feeling?"

"H-Hello."

"I... apologize... cutting... vacation short. This is... not... my... best... moment... as a... host."

"It's okay. This vacation has b-been very special to me."

"To me as well. We'll both treasure the times we had here, even without Edinburgh."

"That is... good t-to hear. Before... you... leave... tomor... row, I wanted... to wish you... safe journey... back."

It's hard to see him make such an obviously painful effort to speak.

"You d-don't have to talk if it hurts to speak."

"I will... get to... the point then. I... have heard... what... happened... from the... doctors... and from... my wife. The doctors... called me... lucky, but..."

This time his eyes look directly at me, causing me to flinch.

"...It...would be... an insult... to you... to... credit... just... luck, Miss... Ikezawa."

"I... didn't really do much. The people you should be thanking are the d-doctors and ambulance people."

"Your... humility... does you... credit... Yet... it was... you who... asked Lilly... to call... a doctor. And... it was... you who... kept my... heart going... until the... ambulance... arrived."

"They arrived p-pretty quickly, b-but..."

"But... probably... not soon... enough to... prevent... b-brain damage. The... idea... of being... in a... vegetative... state... and a... permanent... b-burden on my... family... is more... terrifying... than death. If you... did not... save my life... you saved... something... more... important. You saved... my... dignity."

I'm not really sure what to say in response to that. I've never handled praise very well, so I merely fidget in place while staring at the floor.

"It seems... I now... owe you... a great... debt. I believe... repaying you... in some... way... is the... right thing... to do."

"Repaying m-me?"

Akira sighs.

"How on earth do you repay someone for a life?"

Mister Satou gives Akira a short stare.

"You... should... already... know... after all... these years."

"Hmph."

Then he turns his head back to me.

"It is... true. Something... like... this is... difficult to pay back. But... certainly... there is... something I... can do... back."

"I... c-can't really think of anything."

"There is... no need... to... answer... here... and now. Take... your time... and do... not... be humble. I am... not lacking... in... means."

I'm not really sure how to answer. I get the impression he's expecting me to ask for something big. Am I really supposed to come up with something? And will I insult him if what I'd ask for isn't expensive enough? Like if I asked for a flashy laptop, would he feel like I insinuated that his life's not worth more than a mere laptop? How complicated.

Besides, there are important things that money can't buy. Things like happiness and a family. He of all people should be more than aware of that right now.

If Lilly's upset with him, I doubt any amount of money would cause her to change her mind.

Lilly...

I wonder if I could simply ask him to apologize to Lilly as a way to thank me. If he insulted Lilly's independence like Akira claimed then she's probably angry with him, but since she came here to bond with her parents, I doubt she'd reject an apology. I suppose he really is out of touch with his daughters, but perhaps out of touch is all he is, and he still cares about Lilly and Akira in his own way. He did reschedule an already busy week just to take us to Edinburgh.

But then again, wouldn't he be insulted if I told him to apologize for a family matter I'm not even supposed to be involved in? I suppose an apology for a life is a bargain, but then again he did say he valued his dignity more than his life. Ugh.

Maybe I could be more subtle about it. Open the door for him, but leave it up to him to walk through.

Would that even be enough?

Maybe.

07

"Ummm... Uh..."

"Yes?"

"I... uh... d-don't really n-need anything in r-return. Because... y-you being alive is... already enough of a r-reward."

"Even... though we... barely know... each other?"

"I k-know... ah... I k-know... I... I... k-know..."

Suddenly a big lump in jumps into my throat, and I breathe in and out several times before I can continue. This is something that really hurts to say out loud.

"I k-know... what it's l-like t-to... l-lose p-parents..."

He looks at me with an expression that either contains sympathy or pity.

"My... condo... lences... for... your... loss."

"That's why... T-that's why I'm... really happy that Lilly doesn't h-have to go t-through that herself."

"You... are... quite close... to my... daughter, are... you... not?"

"She's a very special person to me. I... l-love her very much."

"I see."

"Ummm... C-can I p-please ask y-you a f-favor?"

"Have you... already... though of... something?"

I meekly shake my head.

"N-No, but... I would... like to t-talk to you about Lilly a bit. Will you... listen t-to me?"

"I will."

"Ummm..."

I rack my brain in an attempt to figure out what I should tell him about my best friend.

"Lilly is... the k-kindest person I know. I didn't know her during my f-first year, because I don't interact with m-many people. But then she c-came to live in the dorm room next to m-mine, and one evening I heard her comforting a friend who was f-feeling down. I was... feeling a little d-down and lonely myself back t-then, so I visited her, hoping to have a bit of c-company who wasn't going to s-stare at me. I was too n-nervous to speak the first few t-times, but even though I c-couldn't answer anything she asked about or react t-to anything she said, she was f-friendly and hospitable to me and made me f-feel welcome. When I went back to my r-room that first evening, she told m-me that she was hoping that I'd visit her again s-soon even though she didn't even know k-know my name."

"I later l-learned that her c-comforting a friend wasn't unusual for her. She has always b-been a bit of a mother figure for her class who would offer emotional s-support whenever someone n-needed it. Most of her class r-really looks up to her."

"In a m-manner of speaking, as Lilly herself would s-say."

"That's probably why she's been c-class representative for nearly 3 years. But I think that's also b-because Lilly is very independent even c-compared to her classmates that have p-partial eyesight."

I fidget a bit before continuing.

"L-Last w-week you t-thanked me for looking after L-Lilly, b-but... that's not how things are at all. I h-hope that I can someday look out f-for her too, but the t-truth is that ever since I've m-met her, it's been Lilly who's b-been looking after me."

"I can c-cook a bit myself, but ever since w-we met, Lilly often c-cooks for both of us. I hope to b-be as good at it as she is s-some day. She also t-taught me m-many other things, like how to d-dance or f-fold c-crances out of p-paper."

Hisao takes this moment to interrupt.

"You shouldn't sell yourself short, Hanako. I don't believe Lilly knew how to play chess before she met you."

"I... s-suppose not. It's fun to p-play against her, so I'm happy she p-picked it up so quickly."

She's not an extremely challenging opponent, but I wouldn't even be able to finish a game if I kept my eyes closed, so it's still impressive.

I take out my phone and show it to him.

"This is a g-gift from my best friends. The pretty phone s-strap is a present from Hisao, but the phone itself is f-from Lilly. She wanted it to be a s-surprise, so she went into the city on her own to p-pick it out for me."

I could still bring up Lilly's activities in the student council, but I'd rather avoid the subject of her relationship with Shizune. Not really knowing how to proceed, I fall silent and blush. Hisao, sensing that I've hit a dead end, speaks up again.

"I can confirm, sir, that everything Hanako just said is true. I think she's trying to ask you to..."

Mister Satou, who until now has been listening with his eyes closed as if trying to concentrate and weigh every word I just stammered, opens his eyes and makes a gesture to indicate there's no need for Hisao to continue.

08

"I think... I... understand... what... she... wishes to... tell me..."

He turns his gaze back to me.

"Miss... Ikezawa... thank you... for... telling... me... all this..."

"Ummm..."

"I... presume... you... would... like me... to... think... about... what... you... said?"

I manage a barely visible nod.

"Then... I will... if you... also... think... about... what I... said."

"O-Okay."

He nods.

"Then... I will... not... take more... of your... time and... I... wish you... two a... safe... journey... home."

"Thank you sir. May you have a swift recovery."

"Y-Yes... ah... g-get better soon."

We both make a polite bow and prepare to leave the room, but just as we're about to walk through the doorway, I hear Mister Satou's voice one more time.

"Miss... Ikezawa...?"

"Uh... Y-yes?"

"Did you... not... just say... that you... were... hoping to... one day... look out... for... Lilly?"

"Y-Yes."

For a split-second there's an amused smile on his face.

"I think... you... did... exactly... that... just... now."

Chapter 33 (Hanako)

01

"Will you be the one seeing us off, or should we say our goodbyes right now?"

For a moment it appears as if Akira didn't hear Hisao's question.

"What? Oh, if possible I'll try to be at the airport when you guys leave. It was eight o' clock in the morning, right?"

"That's right. We'll hope to see you tomorrow then."

We get out of Akira's car and wait for her response. She's been awfully quiet since we left the hospital after paying a visit to her father.

"Yeah..."

"Is everything alright?"

Seems like Hisao also noticed Akira's voice trailing off.

"Yeah, I'm alright. I was thinking it's probably not worth it to return to the office. Maybe I'll just go and get some fresh air. Take a little walk along the bay shore."

"That sounds good."

"I think I wouldn't mind a bit of company."

"Do you want us to come with you?"

"If it's okay, I'd like to borrow Hanako for a bit."

She turns to me.

"You don't mind, do ya?"

"M-Me?"

Hisao makes a face.

"Just Hanako?"

"Yup. Girl talk."

"I didn't know you liked that."

"Hey!"

Akira glares at Hisao and then rolls her eyes.

"From time to time."

I wonder if that's all there is to it. Akira obviously wants to talk about something with me in private. I'm just not sure what it could be. I have to admit it piques my curiosity a bit.

"Ummm... Okay, I'll come with you."

Hisao shrugs.

"Guess I'll just go and continue packing our stuff in preparation for tomorrow."

"Thanks."

As Hisao turns around and disappears into the house, Akira and I walk down the driveway, cross the road and walk up to the shore. This area has slowly started becoming familiar terrain to me as well. The sound of the shore tends to put my mind at ease. Maybe the same is true for Akira.

"You... like this place?"

"When Lilly and I first visited here, I'd often take a little walks along the shore whenever I didn't feel like hanging around the house. Most of the time alone, but sometimes Lilly would come with me, and we'd talk about... stuff. This place makes you relax, doesn't it?"

"It does. I... used to come here daily to write in my journal."

"Right, Lilly mentioned that. But I'm picking up a past tense here. Did you stop writing?"

The last few days have been a bit... uneventful, and the one major thing that has happened is something I'd rather forget as soon as possible."

Akira gives me a playful grin.

"That major thing you're trying to forget about involves you saving an old man from what was probably either death or existence as a vegetable. And from what I learned today, he seems awfully determined to not let ya forget about that, no matter how hard you're gonna try."

"Do you... think he was serious?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. In fact, I was secretly hoping you'd ask for something like half of the family fortune or something equally outrageous. You know, just to see how far you could stretch that gratitude of his."

"I don't want that sort of thing."

"Hmmm?"

"I read a book once, about a man who won the lottery. And suddenly... everyone wanted to be his friend. He didn't even know who his real friends were anymore, because everyone just seemed to want to take advantage of his new-found wealth. I... would hate for something like that to happen to me. It w-would... drive me crazy."

"Well, it's true that as convenient as it is, money can't buy you happiness. I speak from experience. Still, maybe you can think of something. Heh, if you don't want the old man to keep stalking you for the rest of your life, that is."

"Uhhhh..."

"Relax, I was only joking. Still, I doubt this is the last you'll hear about this. Dad's got this old-fashioned 'you saved my life, so now it belongs to you forevermore'-type of samurai mindset going."

Akira's exaggerated eyerolling makes me giggle a bit.

"It's actually a rather... romantic mindset, don't you think?"

"Only if you ignore the secondary implications of that kinda mindset."

"Secondary implications?"

"Since a child owes her life to her parents, she's obliged to show lifelong respect and reverence to them no matter how badly they deserve the opposite. No doubt Dad sincerely believes that. Heck, he couldn't resist rubbing it in my face during your visit."

I think I remember what she's talking about.

"So... that's what he meant."

Akira bends down and picks up a few smooth stones. She flicks one away, and I see it bounce along the water surface several times before it sinks.

Splash - splash - splash

"I must be coming across as very petty, complaining so much about my parents to a person who no longer has her own."

I cringe a bit. Even after all this time, Akira's statement of the obvious still hurts inside.

"It's o-okay."

"Ya know... Hisao probably had a point when we were at the hospital. I wouldn't blame you if you agreed with him."

It comes across as weird for the usually up-beat and assertive Akira to suddenly sound this way.

"I'm not s-sure. M-Maybe, but you... probably have your reasons."

Akira nods absentmindedly and flings another stone along the surface before sitting down on a large rock near the shore.

Splash - splash - splash

02

"You know, this has been a very weird time for me. Over the last six years, I can't say my life's been very easy, but it was fairly stable at least. After Mom and Dad left and our grandparents moved to a place more suitable for Granddad's dwindling health, I ended up concentrating completely on both my job and looking after Lilly. Nothing else mattered. Eventually, I ended up cutting both Mom and Dad out of my thoughts for the most part. Aside from the money that was wired to our account on a monthly basis and the increasingly rare phone calls, I started feeling like they didn't really exist anymore. I considered the matter dead and buried. It was easier this way."

She absentmindedly tosses one of the stones in her hand in the air and then catches it again.

"What I've learned over the last couple of weeks was that the matter may have been buried, but it was far from dead. After six long years, Mom and Dad were suddenly part of my daily life again and acting like nothing friggin happened. As you can see, I haven't been dealing with that very well... at all."

She gives me a guilty look as I sit down next to her.

"When I told you guys in the hospital that I simply screwed up, that was the truth. I didn't really mean to start a fight with the old man when he was in such a sorry state, but... well... it simply happened anyway. I guess that... there are a lot of buried grievances suddenly clawing their way back to the surface."

"Like... them l-leaving."

"Uhuh..."

She sighs.

"To be completely honest, it's not just bad memories I have of them. There's been a few good ones too. Like the annual New Year, when our parents, our grandparents, Lilly and I would visit a shrine to pray for good luck the upcoming year and play games afterwards. Also our trips to the summer house..."

"The one we visited?"

"It was a different one back then, but in the same area. The three, and later the four, of us would go there from time to time and that was also the place where Lilly and I'd get in touch with the British part of our heritage. Our own home was kind of traditional, but the summer house was more like... Well, the residences here in the UK. We'd speak English all the time, eat with cutlery instead of chopsticks, and Mom would read us Scottish folk tales or parables as bedtime stories. It was also like... that intangible pressure I often felt didn't exist there. The atmosphere was simply different. Dad and especially Mom seemed different. Of course, things'd revert to normal the moment we got in the car, but I still have good memories of those times, even though they became more and more rare as Dad advanced up the corporate ladder."

"...pressure?"

"Before our parents allowed me to make my own barber appointments, I used to have slightly longer hair. Other than that though, I've always been the way I am now. In other words, a long shot away from the kind of person the daughter of an upstanding family is supposed to be."

"Your p-parents d-disapproved of who y-you were?"

"It's always been kind of subtle. It's not like they weren't nice to me, but there was often that subtle undertone of sadness like they were expecting me to be more... I dunno... elegant... lady-like... the whole shebang. For a long time I felt like they expected *something* of me, but I didn't know exactly *what* that something was. I found out eventually what that was as Lilly grew up. I think in the end Mom and Dad always rueled the fact that I couldn't be more like Lilly."

I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach as I attempt to determine if there's any bitterness in Akira's words. If she felt like she lived in Lilly's shadow, how does she feel about her sister?

"Uhhh... H-how d-do you feel about Lilly?"

Akira sees the distressed look on my face and lets out a reassuring chuckle.

"I guess lots of people would grow to secretly resent their sibling in that case, wouldn't they? Interestingly enough that never happened with me. Besides, it's not like Lilly was the perfect daughter to Mom and Dad or they wouldn't have left her behind six years ago."

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"I think the reason we've always been so close is due to the fact I often spent time looking after Lilly, even when our parents still lived in Japan. Mom often asked me to keep an eye on my sister. And there was the fact that while I've often felt a bit like an outsider even in my own family, Lilly was nevertheless always unconditionally accepting of me."

Splash - splash - splash

"Probably one of the very few I can say that about."

Splash - splash

"She was also a really cute kid when she was younger. If I'd show you a picture of her when she was like three, you'd probably develop a girl-crush on her in an instant."

Splash - splash - splash

"Heh."

Akira's light-hearted remark about toddler-Lilly's cuteness was probably meant to lighten the mood, but it doesn't draw my attention away from the rest of her words, especially since this is a sensitive issue for me myself. Didn't Akira make school friends or something? She's pretty sociable, if a bit rough. I always imagined her to have lots of friends, like Lilly.

"Uh... Akira... H-how about y-your school days?"

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"Elementary school was... I think mixed is the right word. Heh, get it?"

"Uh... N-no."

"Sorry, didn't have time to make up a better punchline. Anyway, in the same way I've always been a bit of an outsider in the family, I've also been a bit of an outsider at school."

"Outsider?"

"When I started attending elementary school, I quickly discovered that I was the only kid in the school with a biracial background. I found that there were few convenient things about standing out in a crowd like that, but several downsides. Some of the reactions I'd get were amusing in a stupid way. Like others asking me how on earth I was able to speak Japanese or being amazed that my blood was red like theirs instead of yellow. Other times less funny things happened.."

"You were... b-b-bullied?"

"Picked on, from time to time. I mean, I looked pretty different from the rest, so I naturally attracted attention from all sorts of kids. Now, before you start worrying about me, let me say that I've always been pretty strong for my size, and back in elementary school, I could even take on many of the boys. Bullies don't like running the risk of a black eye when they pull their crap. So all in all things hardly ever truly escalated since I wasn't an easy target."

"That's... g-good."

I'm happy for Akira she that was able to stand up for herself like that, though it also makes me feel inadequate myself. I was never able to stand up for myself. Akira takes a brief look at me and seems to guess my thoughts. A sympathetic expression appears on her face.

"No such luck for you, huh?"

I meekly shake my head. When I was finally released from the hospital, I was still learning how to use my right arm for even basic stuff like lifting and opening a lunchbox. In addition, my scars and the pressure garments I was forced to wear day and night for the first few years made my movements stiff and awkward. Any physical confrontation, even with kids younger than me, would have been over within seconds.

"Figures. I think from the moment I first met you there was something in your eyes and body language that told me you were given a hard time at school."

How do you respond to that? I merely nod my head. Suddenly, my depressing train of thought is interrupted by a hand on my shoulder.

"Ya know... uh... Even though Lilly's usually the one to do this kind of thing, I just wanted to tell you that if you ever wanna talk to someone about this sort of thing, I'm there as well. Don't be a stranger."

Akira puts on a slightly awkward but sincere smile on, and I can't resist smiling back for a moment. I'm not sure if I'd ever accept Akira's offer, but her gesture of emotional support nevertheless feels extremely good to me.

"T-Thank you."

After confirming that my mood has cleared a bit, Akira continues.

"Anyway, I can't say my elementary school time was smooth surfin', but aside from the occasional incident every now and then, I was okay. I was still able to hang out with other kids from time to time, though I didn't really make any deep friendships. Then again, a lot of friendships in that time are kinda shallow anyway. I mean, kids in that phase of their lives often become friends simply because they sit next to each other in class or wear the same color ribbon in their hair, not because their personalities are extremely compatible."

"Ummm... Akira?"

"Yeah?"

"Uh... D-did Lilly ever... get... picked on?"

"I was really worried about that myself when she started attending school, but I don't think that ever happened, and thank heavens for that. Due to her blindness, teachers were always keeping a close eye

on her, and two random students from her class were picked every day to help her out with... whatever she couldn't do herself. Sometimes I felt weird about that arrangement, almost as if Lilly was the class pet instead of a classmate, but in practice it probably meant she wasn't an easy target for bullies since she was hardly ever unsupervised. I also think... well... most students eventually forgot about it."

"Forgot?"

"You know what the funny thing is about the labels we human beings tend to stick on others? We usually pick one label and run with it, ignoring everything else about a person. In this case, I think people were so focussed on the very obvious fact that Lilly was blind, they quickly forgot that she was half-foreign. It's weird, but I think it played a role."

I wonder what label ended up sticking in people's minds for me. The one about my burn scars or my dysfunctional behavior.

"Anyway, by the time I was about to leave elementary school, I wasn't having that many conflicts anymore, and I was keeping my fingers crossed that things wouldn't get difficult once I'd get into middle school. Turns out I was right to worry."

"You... went to the same school as Lilly, d-didn't you?"

"Yeah. It was expensive, prestigious, all-girls and hella strict. The worst place to be for someone like me in other words. I spent a large part of elementary school playing mostly with boys. Lots of stuff people thought of as typical girl-stuff didn't really interest me. When I was suddenly thrown into Princess U, it wasn't just my mixed blood that made me stand out, but everything else about me as well. I was suddenly having run-ins with obnoxious fellow-students and teachers alike left and right. Less than three weeks into the first year, I was already firmly stuck into the pariah role. Those were some very lonely and miserable three years, let me tell ya."

Looks like I wasn't the only one whose middle school time was hard.

"Didn't you t-tell your parents how you f-felt?"

"Surely you don't think they tossed me into a friggin Japanese wife factory by accident? They were probably simply tired of relying on subtle correction attempts all the time, so they tried a more drastic method of molding me into a better daughter. Of course I told them that I hated it there, but all they said was to please hang in there and keep going. Dad even had the audacity to suggest that this was in my best interests and that I'd be grateful one day. It's been about ten years since I was released from that hellhole, and so far I haven't had any sudden epiphanies of gratitude."

It's a little frightening how bitter Akira sounds, but there's one thing that scares me more than her tone.

"Ummm... J-Japanese wife factory? D-Does that m-mean that Lilly...?"

Akira's expression turns genuinely remorseful.

"Sorry, I kind of went overboard with my venting. I didn't mean to imply anything about Lilly. To reassure you; middle school gave Lilly an additional layer of classy manners, but underneath she's still the same person she's always been. I still wouldn't have sent her there myself, but I'm relieved that she doesn't have the same horrid memories I have of that place."

Splash - splash - splash - splash

"Well, as you can see things between me and the folks weren't exactly peachy even before they left Japan, but things might have worked out if they hadn't upped and left just like that."

"You were... 19 when they left, right?"

"Yeah. It was after I graduated from high school, which was fortunately not the same kind of place middle school was. I didn't really know what I wanted to do afterwards. Dad pulled a string or two at the company, and I was allowed to work at the legal department of SMT as a secretary. Back then there were apparently already office rumors about a big change being in the wings."

"Your parents moving?"

"It was a little more complicated than that. Back then, Granddad was still in charge of the company, though he was ill during the last months before the big change. Eventually Granddad revealed his plans for the company's future at the dinner table. He and his brothers on the board of directors wanted to expand our clientèle, but we weren't having a lot of success getting a foot in the door in China. Business was booming in Inverness though, and the people there were doing a good job getting the European mainland to warm up to our brand. So the board made the decision to make Inverness the new headquarters and have the Japanese branch concentrate completely on the domestic market from that point on. Of course, a Satou had to be in charge of headquarters, and that's how Dad finally got his promotion to number 1 executive of the company. A promotion and a plane ticket. He immediately accepted the offer, too. He said he was honored by the responsibility placed on him. I wonder if he even considered how Lilly must have felt. I remember everybody applauding. I wondered even back then how many of those ovations were actually real."

Splash - splash - splash

"The actual shocker came during his visit to Japan a few weeks after moving to Inverness. It turned out that he was going to live there permanently, and he mentioned Mom's help being needed in Scotland and that she'd need to come along with him for some time. The board apparently already approved. Heh, 'for some time' being a euphemism for forever. The true bombshell was when we were told that Lilly had to stay behind. For her education, so to speak. She was gonna lose her parents for a friggin education. At least that was the story."

SPLOOSH

I'm startled by an unusually loud splash. That must have been quite a rock she just threw.

"You still don't believe it?"

"I'm not sure what to make of Dad's reaction, but one thing I know for sure is that there are also prestigious private schools in the UK. I don't think the quality of her education was a good argument to leave her in Japan. Heck, and judging from what the old man said the other day, he wasn't even expecting Lilly to get a job anyway, even with that education."

She shrugs and gives me a sad look.

"Ya know, I always thought there was something creepy about Yamaku, or rather the idea behind it. It's like this place in the middle of nowhere so 'proper society' doesn't have to see or hear those attending there. I still wonder if Mom and Dad didn't rue the fact that Lilly couldn't be shoved there until she finished middle school."

"I... actually like that about Yamaku. M-Middle school was h-hard for me. I'm n-not sure w-what would have happened at an ordinary high school. M-Maybe something terrible. I... didn't function all that well at Yamaku, but at least I wasn't b-bullied anymore. I'm... r-really thankful for that."

Akira thinks for a moment.

"I never really thought much about that. I guess it's a good point, though it didn't apply to Lilly."

I don't really have an answer to that, so I decide to shift the conversation to the earlier subject.

"A-Anyway, after your parents left... you... decided to look after her?"

"Either I stayed with her or she'd be left with an ailing grandmother and grandfather. Shizune's family wasn't an option. Dad and Shizune's Dad hate each other. He wouldn't have permitted it."

"W-What are y-your grandparents like?"

"To be honest, I never really knew Granddad. He was at work even more often than Dad was. Of course, he ranked higher than Dad. On Sundays he'd be out golfing with business pals or reading in his study. The rest of the days he was at work or hanging out with co-workers. The company was his life as well since he stayed at its helm for a very long time, even though he could have retired years earlier. He even considered it a few years earlier, before ultimately reconsidering. He was a pretty heavy smoker, and it came back to bite him six years ago when he developed lung cancer. He was lucky they discovered it before it spread, but they still ended up removing a part of his right lung and with it an equally large part of his stamina. Grandpa and Grandma used to live in the same neighborhood as ours in a house on a rather large incline with stone steps leading up to the front door. After his surgery, it'd take him half an hour just to reach his own porch. Even Lilly could run circles around him at that point. So he and Grandma moved to another town, and we haven't had much contact with them ever since."

Splash - splash - splash

"As for Grandma, when I was a child she'd drop by our home on a daily basis. She was nice enough. She was formal, polite, proper and friendly, but also a bit distant and stoic. She was more responsible than Mom though. She'd always be the one to take me to the park to play when I was a kid. She was also the one who went to PTA meetings during Lilly's elementary school years instead of Mom. Heh, somehow Mom always managed to come up with a reason to be busy with something else. Thinking back on it, it's possible she was already going her own way even then, just on a smaller scale although ironically she didn't really get out of the house much back then. I remember Grandma scolding her about it a few times. Heh, of course when I asked Grandma about that, I got a major scolding myself about how impolite it is to listen in. She was pretty strict, all in all."

Akira toys with one of her locks of hair for a moment.

"Save for a few bad periods once in a while, Grandma's always been in pretty good health, but after Granddad's surgery, her physical condition took a nosedive as well. High blood pressure, ulcers, shortness of breath. I guess his condition hit her harder than any of us expected. Between her declining health and the fallout of grandpa's surgery, I didn't feel it was responsible to leave Lilly in their care. Of course, it's not like I was really all that more fit as a caretaker..."

"I think Lilly would disagree. You did a r-really good job l-looking after her while..."

I pause for a moment. If Akira left for a job right after high school, when did she earn her law degree? Akira seems to read my mind as I trail off and smirks.

"You're wondering how I became a lawyer without visiting a university, right?"

I nod.

"Before 2004, becoming a lawyer in Japan didn't require a university degree. All you had to do was pass the official bar exam, which... heh... had a 3% passage rate at the time. While at work I heard a couple of guys at our department going on about taking a shot at it. It gave me the idea to give it a try myself, which was naturally met with ridicule. But I figured that if I could pass it, I'd be able to get a career without having to attend some university located somewhere far away from my home and my sister."

"You p-passed such a difficult exam without having attended a university?"

Just how much of a genius is Akira if she pulled that off?

"Without a university, but not without preparation. There are cram schools that specialize in preparing people for that particular exam. I attended one before taking the exam."

A sad and slightly guilty look appears on Akira's face.

"I didn't think Dad was going to sponsor an attempt like that, so Lilly suggested letting go of our housekeeping staff and using the money Mom and Dad wired us every month to employ them to get me into one of those cram schools. She was already a lot more independent at the time, but I still had a bad feeling about it. Eventually she managed to convince me to give it a try, and I gave in after swearing a solemn oath to her that if things became too much for her, I'd drop everything immediately and we'd go right back to the way things were. I ended up passing the bar exam on the first try, apparently being one of the few ones who pulled that off."

"W-Wow."

"In order to officially practice as a lawyer, I would have had to spent over a year training at the Supreme Court's training center in Tokyo, but since that involved leaving Lilly behind, I passed on that. Practically speaking, it wasn't a big loss since they focus almost completely on litigation training there anyway and hardly spend any time on contract drafting and other corporate practices. I could do my job as a corporate lawyer even without it. Officially, it did mean I probably wouldn't be able to do my job at any place other than the family company. Still, I promised myself to spend all the free time I had with Lilly if I passed the bar exam, and I did my best to keep it. She was the one who was rooting for me and making sacrifices for me that entire time. It was the least thing I could do back."

"I've... always been a b-bit envious of how c-close you and Lilly are."

"I suppose that with our parents out of the picture we were the only true constants in each other's lives for a long time. That creates a bond. But bonds have to be maintained too. And right now I can't shake the feeling that our bond used to be in a better condition than it is now..."

Splash - splash - splash - splash - splash - splash

I'm distracted for a moment by a particularly skillful throw on Akira's part, and it takes me several seconds to digest what she just said.

"W-Wait! What?"

Akira doesn't immediately respond and merely puts a few flat stones in my hand.

"Go ahead and have a try yourself. It's not that difficult when you get a feeling for it."

Splash

'Not that difficult' is probably still pretty subjective.

Splash

"You gotta throw sideways a bit. Make them spin like a discus. As long as they keep spinning, they keep bouncing."

Splash

"Maybe you ought to try using your left hand instead of your right."

That might work. My left wrist is a lot more supple than my right.

Splash - splash

"See?"

Splash

I sigh in frustration. This is still harder than Akira made it out to be.

Splash - splash

"Umm... W-why do you think that your bond with Lilly is... in worse condition?"

Akira merely looks at some point in the distance before turning to me with a sad look in her eyes.
03

"It's not just Dad Lilly's been keeping at arms' length over the last two days."

"H-How can you be so sure?"

"The way we parted after our last visit to the hospital gave me that idea already, and the fact that she's neither answered nor returned any of my phone calls merely reinforces my hunch. I probably screwed up one too many times. I've been screwing up ever since Lilly and I first came here."

"B-But..."

I start denying Akira's suggestion, but she stops me with a gesture that indicates she has more to say.

"Ya know, I've been thinking a little bit. Back when I learned that Lilly didn't want to migrate to Scotland after all and that she came this close to going there against her will, I was upset with her for not letting me in on how she really felt. Lilly's rather reserved by nature, but she and I have had very few secrets between us since we started living together without our parents. I was shocked that she

kept me out of something this major. When I confronted her with this, she merely apologized, so I dropped it without pressing her for the reason. I think I know the reason now."

"You do?"

"Back when it was just the two of us, I'd occasionally vent my frustration with our parents in front of Lilly. She'd never argue with me or defend them. She'd just sit there nodding her head. No nods of agreement, but simply of acknowledgement. This was the one area we never shared a wavelength on. Most of the time, it didn't matter. Until our folks entered our life again. Then it suddenly became a huge deal. I hate to admit it, but I think the truth is that Lilly simply kept me out of the loop because she didn't think my input could be trusted."

"..."

Even though Akira's words are harsh, I can't bring myself to deny them either. I've witnessed Akira's bitterness towards her parents, and based on what she just told me, she's probably justified to feel that way. Still, her bitterness has made me very uncomfortable recently. Perhaps it's because I've had quite a few bouts of cynicism myself, and Akira has felt like a reflection of myself at times. It didn't make me feel very good.

"I'm not particularly worried about my long-term relationship with my sister. This situation will end in one way or the other, and when it's over, I don't doubt that she'll let me back in. In the meantime, the best thing I can probably do is keep my mouth shut in her presence whenever the subject of our parents comes up, so I don't end up making things worse anymore."

I meekly nod.

"Still, the rut Lilly's currently in *is* about our parents, and I hate the fact that I can't do anything to offer her emotional support like I'm supposed to. She won't talk to me about this, but she might confide in someone else. Someone who isn't blood-related to her, yet with whom she feels a strong bond."

Akira gives me an expectant look to remove any doubt about what person she's talking about.

"M-Me?"

"Who else?"

"Hisao and I... already visited Lilly in her room a few times, but all s-she does is make small talk."

"Your boyfriend's a good friend to Lilly, but you're the one she probably trusts most. Maybe if you spend some time with her alone..."

"Then what...?"

Akira smiles awkwardly.

"Dunno."

"I... don't really understand what you want me to do."

"If I knew what had to be done to sort out this whole mess and make Lilly happy again, I'd tell you. But I'm not so sure myself. Maybe you could spend a little bit of time with her before you leave tomorrow."

Just you and her. Maybe cheer her up a little. Get her to stop moping in that room of hers. Would you be willing to do that for me?"

"I... uh... Okay. I was... already hoping to t-talk to her a little before we go tomorrow."

Akira smiles broadly.

"Thanks. That means a lot."

I shyly shake my head.

"It... might not m-make much of a difference."

Akira grins in response.

"You shouldn't sell yourself short like that. The last time you had a candid talk with Lilly, she reversed a life-changing decision just like that. That's no small feat. And just today, you got some impressive results with the old man too."

"W-What?"

"You told him how wrong he was about Lilly and also suggested for him to apologize to her, all of that without being so direct as to cause him to get butthurt. Hey, don't give me that look. It was pretty easy to pick up if you read between the lines a bit. I don't think Dad missed it either. He said he'd think about it. That's much more of result than anything I've been able to get done."

"I... just w-wanted to make Lilly happy."

"And I guess you think that reconnecting with Mom and Dad in some way will make Lilly happy or you wouldn't have asked our old man to apologize. Do you still feel this way, even knowing everything I just told you?"

"I'm... n-not sure. I... think... so. When I... met them, they seemed... not so bad. They still seem to care about Lilly. Maybe... it's possible for... someone to be a bad parent... but not a bad person."

"You think so?"

"Besides... n-not having p-parents at all... is still worse, I think."

Akira gives me a sympathetic look.

"I'd feel like a real bitch arguing against that with you."

She gets up to indicate she's ready to start walking back. We walk side by side along the beach until we get back to the Satou home's driveway. Ever since we started walking, Akira's had a pensive look on her face, and she hasn't said a single word the entire time. It isn't until we reach her car and I get ready to go back inside that she turns to me.

"Hey Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe... well... You should try and convince Lilly to do one more patching up attempt. Who knows? It might just work out."

Chapter 34 (Hanako)

01

"L-Lilly?"

Upon receiving no response to my knocking, I hesitantly open the door of my friend's room and look inside. Surprisingly enough, there's nobody there. That's a bit unexpected. Lilly's hardly been out of her room for days, except to eat dinner. Where could she be?

Just as I close the door, I hear the sudden sound of something clattering on a tile floor. Unless Hisao just had a moment of clumsiness in the shower area of our bedroom, the sound I just heard probably came from the bathroom. I walk up to the door of the bathroom, gently push down the door handle and discover that it's not locked. I peek inside and notice that Lilly's sandals are on one of the shelves and I hear some movements from behind the changing area's inner wall. Lilly's definitely in here.

I take off my shoes and socks and put them next to Lilly's sandals on the shelf. I walk into the bathing area, and sure enough, Lilly's kneeling near the small shelves underneath the mirrors. There are several bottles and flasks around her, and Lilly's sweeping the ground with her hands in an attempt to locate them all. She suddenly stops and tilts her head as I approach, probably having picked up the pattering sound from my bare feet on the tiles.

"Lilly?"

A tiny smile appears on her face as she recognizes my voice.

"Oh, welcome back, Hanako."

"Uh... Did you drop a few things, Lilly?"

Lilly sheepishly nods.

"I wanted to put some bathing supplies on the little shelf in front of me, and I discovered too late that someone still left his or her own supplies in that exact spot. The result is this little mess."

"Oh...uh..."

I think I have a good idea of who created this little inconvenience for Lilly.

"S-Sorry, Lilly. That m-may have been me."

Hisao and I took a bath together the day before Lilly's father had his incident. I meant to clean up after ourselves afterwards, but we got... distracted by other things while we were here.

"It's not a problem, Hanako."

"Let me help you."

I walk up to Lilly and quickly pick up the bottles and flasks around her. I take one of each and neatly arrange them on the shelf near her.

"Lilly? I arranged the bottles on the shelf in front of you in the... uh... usual order."

Lilly gives me a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Hanako. Your thoughtfulness is greatly appreciated."

"So, Lilly, were you planning to take a bath just now?"

"That was the idea, Hanako. I've only taken a bath once during this trip, and the circumstances were less than ideal back then. Maybe a pleasant soak will help to ease my mind. There should still be plenty of time before dinner."

"I suppose I... came at a bad time then. But... do you have some time to spare... after dinner?"

"I do. Do you have any plans, Hanako?"

"Not really. I just thought... after tomorrow... we won't see each other again for some time. Maybe we could... spend some time together until Hisao and I leave?"

"That sounds like a good idea, Hanako. I apologize for having neglected you and Hisao over the last few days."

"That's okay, Lilly. There's no need to explain anything. We understand completely."

"I'll be sure to keep you and Hisao company after dinner this evening. Let's make the most out of your remaining time here."

"Um... Lilly?"

"Yes?"

"M-Maybe... the t-two could spend some time... together? We could... talk for a bit, if you like. I'm sure that Hisao... wouldn't mind."

"Are you sure about that Hanako?"

"I... haven't really done a very good j-job s-supporting you, but... maybe I can still do that for the little bit of time I'm here."

Lilly looks in deep thought for a moment. Then she gives a small nod.

"I... would probably welcome that, Hanako."

"G-Great."

Lilly gets up, and I allow her to take hold of my sleeve before helping her return to the changing area. She then feels her way over to one of the baskets on the shelves and starts taking off her sweater. I figure that this would probably be a good time to take my leave.

"Lilly, if you don't need my help for anything else, I'll b-be going, okay?"

"Hmmm, Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"You... said that you wanted to spend some time alone with me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we should take the opportunity to do that now. It's not like we have that much time left."

"Huh?"

"If you were to stay here right now, you could keep me company."

I give Lilly a baffled look as she takes off her top and starts removing her skirt. Keep her company?

"Uhhhhh.... Is t-that okay?"

Lilly, who is now wearing nothing but her bra and panties, gives me a playful look.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You'd b-be... n-naked... in f-front of me."

Lilly giggles.

"We're both girls, aren't we? I don't think it'd be that big a problem."

"If it's... not a big p-problem with you then... I'll stay here."

"I appreciate that, Hanako."

I quickly walk to the door and lock it. When I turn around, Lilly has already taken off the last of her clothes and is brushing the shelf with her hand in search of a towel.

"I just l-locked the door, Lilly."

"Could you help me to my stool, Hanako?"

"Sure."

Averting my eyes, I place Lilly's outstretched hand on my arm and lead her out of the changing area. But before we reach the corner with the mirrors and the stools, Lilly suddenly stops.

"Hanako, what will you do?"

"I'll just sit on the edge of the bath."

Lilly nods but doesn't move or say anything. I wonder what she's thinking right now.

"Hanako... I apologize if this seems a bit forward, but... I wouldn't mind if you joined me. Would you like to?"

"W-W-What?"

Lilly seems to have expected my shocked reaction and shows me an amused smile.

"If you wouldn't mind, that is. You and Hisao took a bath several days ago, didn't you? Didn't you like it?"

"I... uh... d-did."

"To be honest, I had been hoping for a chance to take a soak together with you since we came here. I don't see us visiting a hot spring resort or anything like it anytime soon in Japan. Maybe this would be a good opportunity."

"Ah... r-really?"

Lilly nods.

"It's also easier to talk to each other when you're sitting next to me instead of half-way across the room. And as you may have noticed yourself, the bath is a bit on the large side for just one person. It seems to have been built with group activity in mind. Or family activity."

"F-Family activity?"

"Yes, bathing was very much a family activity back in the days. I used to take baths with Mother and Akira all the time when I was young. Occupying such a large bath on one's own feels... off somehow."

"If it's a f-family activity to you, then..."

Lilly quickly shakes her head before I can finish my sentence.

"Then sharing a soak with you would definitely not feel inappropriate to me. You... feel very much like family to me right now, Hanako."

"L-Lilly."

I can't help but smile at Lilly's kind words. Lilly's expression quickly saddens though.

02

"In fact... You may feel more like family to me right now than... anyone else I know."

The impact of that statement isn't lost on me, and I reel back in shock for a moment. This isn't something I ever expected Lilly to say.

Are things really this bad?

This would probably be a good moment to try and put my shyness aside and focus on more important things.

If Lilly really feels this way, then is it okay for me to be flying back tomorrow? Shouldn't I stay and be there for Lilly instead?

I'd best take this one step at a time though.

03

"Ummm... I'll... j-join you then. O-Okay? I'll b-be r-right with you."

Lilly gives me a relieved smile.

"Thank you, Hanako."

Still a bit uneasy, I walk back into the changing area and nervously start undressing. While I'm busy doing so, Lilly doesn't say a single word and the only sound audible in the room is the rustling of my clothes. I eventually take off my underwear, pick up a towel and, my legs shaking a bit, walk out of the changing area to face Lilly.

I blush a bit at the sight of her as we come face to face. Lilly isn't even bothering to try and cover herself up. She just casually stands there as if she was fully clothed. As my eyes briefly wander over Lilly's body, I feel the painful sting of envy for a moment. Lilly is gorgeous. Her vibrantly blonde hair is hanging loosely over her shoulders, her figure is slim, and yet her curves are ample. And her skin is both smooth and spotless. It makes the condition of my own blighted skin all the more jarring.

I'd better move on with things before I get depressed.

"Lilly... could you h-hold out your right h-hand?"

She calmly extends her hand towards me, which I place on my left arm. I guide her to the stools while at the same time keeping a bit of additional distance between us so she can't accidentally touch any of my scarred areas, and when we sit down I also make sure that my stool isn't too close to hers.

I get a bit of a weird feeling when I pick up one of the shower heads, but then shake the sensation out of my mind and dutifully fill both Lilly's bucket and my own. We quietly proceed to drench ourselves, soap ourselves up and then wash ourselves. I feel a bit bad about not offering to wash Lilly's back, but I'm a bit afraid of doing so since I know she'd offer to return the favor, and me declining it would just lead to another awkward moment.

It takes me quite a while to get my hair over and done with, and when I finally rinse the remaining shampoo out of my hair and look at Lilly, I notice she's been absentmindedly toying with her bangs. I wonder how long she's been waiting without saying a word.

"Lilly?"

"Hanako, are you finished as well?"

"Y-Yes. Sorry to keep you waiting. My hair usually takes a little while."

"Almost everyone I know says you have very beautiful hair, Hanako, so it goes without saying that it's important to take good care of it."

"Ah... oh.... R-really?"

Lilly merely grins.

"Really. Are you ready? I must admit I'm getting a bit chilly."

"Okay. C-Could you give me your right hand again?"

I take Lilly's hand again and guide her to the large bath. I help her step in, then get in myself and start considering where to sit. Lilly doesn't seem to have much trouble picking a spot as she walks up to one of the corners, turns around and beckons me to sit next to her.

I hesitate. If Lilly sits down in that corner, I'll have to sit on her left side and my scarred side will be facing her. Maybe it'll be okay if I simply don't sit too close to her. I can't offer support to Lilly and then appear to be distant. I'll simply sit just far enough away to avoid accidental physical contact. I make my way over to Lilly, and we allow ourselves to sink slowly into the water.

"Aaaaaahhhh..."

"Hmmmm..."

We both let out a long sigh as we make ourselves comfortable, and the water fills our bodies with a pleasant warmth. Then we both giggle.

"The water feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it's just the right temperature."

It feels like the water is still set at the temperature Hisao and I picked when we took a bath here. I'm happy that Lilly likes this temperature too because a bath is quickly too hot or too cold for me.

For a long time neither of us says anything, and we are content to just hang back and relax. Eventually though, Lilly breaks the silence.

"So, Hanako... How was the visit to the hospital?"

"When we arrived, we briefly saw your mother and a person who just arrived here from Japan. Akira said he was the manager of the Japanese branch. Then we went to see your father and umm..."

I hesitate for a moment. I don't think Lilly needs to hear about Akira's verbal scuffle with her father.

"...he... uh... still seemed to have a lot of difficulty speaking, but he talked to us even though it hurt. He... thanked us for helping him and said to let him know if there was ever something he could do back. Then he wished us a safe journey."

"I see. Did... Akira say anything in particular? When Hisao came back upstairs he said that she invited you for a stroll along the shore."

"She... wanted to spend some time with me before I leave tomorrow. She wasn't sure when we'll meet each other again, after all."

She's also worried about you, but I don't think I should let that one slip. I don't like being so secretive, but if Lilly mistakenly believes that I'm only here because Akira sent me, she might clam up.

"That makes sense."

"Lilly?"

"Yes, Hanako?"

Maybe I should ask her straight out.

"W-What d-did you mean when you said that... I f-felt more like f-family than anyone else? D-Did you... mean that?"

Lilly doesn't immediately answer. I briefly wonder if she's just going to smile and dismiss the whole thing. But then she sighs softly.

04

"After Mother and Father left Japan, I've been telling myself for a long time that this was only temporary and that when they'd return, everything would be as it was before. But when Akira and I visited here in July, I think everyone could feel the distance. When I offered Mother to visit here, I thought all that we needed to do was spend a bit more time in each other's company. But... I've recently started feeling that things are nowhere that simple. If anything, I feel that this trip has merely widened the distance between myself and the rest of my family. It's like all my efforts have the opposite effect. It's... very disheartening to say the least."

"Widened the distance?"

Lilly nods.

"You've known Akira for some time now. Surely you must have noticed as well."

I think I have, even before Akira herself pointed it out to me.

"Akira... really doesn't get along with your p-parents, does she?"

"Akira and I have always been very close and only grew closer after our parents left Japan. We used to be able to share everything with the other. Only the subject of our parents has always been a troublesome issue. Akira would usually get angry or bitter whenever this subject came up, so I'd usually let her blow off steam and then change the subject. It didn't really become a problem until recently."

"Until... the summoning?"

"Even slightly before that. When we visited Scotland in July, I didn't really know how to act around our parents, but I tried to just make the best of an awkward situation. Akira, however, would often be either distant or hostile whenever we interacted with them. It made the situation with the summoning a lot more difficult for me than it already was."

"How so?"

"In the past, whenever I ran into a situation I had trouble dealing with by myself, such as... hmmmm... turning down a confession or dealing with conflicts in the student council, I would take comfort in the fact that I could always approach Akira as a last resort and she'd listen to me and give me sisterly advice. But when we visited Scotland, I started feeling alienated by Akira's attitude towards our family. I used to trust her opinions unconditionally because I knew she always had my best interests at heart, but in this case, I can't deny that I felt a sense of distrust towards her. So I ended up trying to deal with our parents' summoning on my own. I felt... very alone... in that."

"Oh, Lilly..."

Lilly gives me a guilty smile.

"Of course, that's a little bit my own fault as well. I should have realized sooner that I also had you to confide in. I just hope you understand that usually what happens in the family is meant to stay in the family."

"I understand."

"I had been hoping that Father's hospitalization would have resulted in a truce or even a new start, but it seems that even an event as major as this wasn't enough. I'm not really sure how to deal with Akira now."

For a moment Lilly looks mildly frustrated.

"I... really want to be understanding of Akira. She's endured a lot of hardships of her own. But...*sigh* what kind of person starts a fight with someone who only just got off life support?"

And today was pretty much a rematch of the confrontation Lilly referred to.

"It... is indeed a bit harsh."

"Of course, Father is hardly blameless himself. He took an unacceptable risk. And... When he mentioned that he did it for Akira and me, it almost made me feel partially responsible for what happened. As if having him in my life is somehow less important than a large sum of money in the bank."

She sighs again.

"I keep thinking back on what he said. About wanting to make sure I'd always be 'well-provided for'. I wonder if I'm a bad person for believing that that's a really condescending thing to say."

"I don't think you are."

"Now I just keep wondering if that's how he's always seen me. I keep wondering if the biggest achievement he expects out of me is to be noticed by some potential husband so I don't end up living off his money by myself. I wonder if he'd laugh off my dreams of becoming a teacher. If he's not willing to pay any university tuition, there's probably not much hope of me getting into a university after I graduate."

Wow, she's really in a downer mood.

"It's p-probably a little early to w-worry about that already."

"Hanako... Do you think I'm an ungrateful daughter for feeling this way?"

"N-No. I'd probably f-feel a little bit offended too."

"That's somewhat of a relief to know."

Lilly thinks for a moment.

"I'm also not sure what to think of what Akira said about the way Mother and Father live their lives. Especially Mother. To be honest... I'm not really sure what to think of her to begin with."

"I... noticed that things sometimes seemed a little awkward between your m-mother and you, but I didn't really understand why because your mother has been very friendly from the start."

Lilly nods and smiles sadly.

"It's probably just me. But even so..."

"I... don't really understand the problem."

Lilly turns to me.

"Hanako, if you don't mind me asking... What do you think about my mother?"

"Huh?"

"Please just give me your honest impression. Surely you must have come here with certain expectations."

"Hmmm. She was... different from what I was expecting, but she was nevertheless very nice. I think I like her."

"May I ask what exactly you were expecting?"

"I think I was expecting to meet an older version of you. Like... a formal and graceful upper-class woman with impeccable m-manners. Maybe, unlike you, even a bit haughty or s-snobbish. I know it's a bit silly. But your mother actually reminds me quite a bit of Akira. I think I simply made the wrong guess."

"You were expecting a so-called proper lady?"

I think I've heard Lilly's father utter that phrase a few times.

"Yes. But it doesn't really matter that much to me. Why do you want to k-know all this?"

Lilly pauses for a second and then sighs.

"Because the way you imagined her is also the way I remember her."

"The way you remember her?"

"I know it must be difficult for you to believe this, but Mother was a completely different person when she was still living with us in Japan. She was... graceful, gentle, friendly though also just a little bit distant and always very proper and appropriate. And she was completely devoted to Father and the family. While growing up, Mother was the person I always tried to emulate and resemble."

"R-Really?"

"Being around her has been a very strange experience. I... have no idea how to act around her. Living abroad can change a person, I suppose, but..."

It's still very odd. And something doesn't make sense.

"But Lilly, what about y-your first trip?"

"During our first trip to Scotland, Mother took up her days off from work to spend time with her bedridden sister and us. Back then, she was still acting like her old self whenever she was with us. Well, for the largest part anyway. She didn't start acting this casual until I returned here."

Lilly lets out an unhappy sigh.

"I could put up with the more casual way of interacting with me, but what really bothers me is the fact she seems to have been neglecting Father. That's... just so not her. I... really don't know what to think or what to do. This isn't the family I expected to find here."

"I... I'm sorry, Lilly."

"It's okay, Hanako. Thank you for listening to me complaining like this."

"Oh, d-don't worry about that."

"What would you do in my situation?"

I'm not sure. Knowing myself, I'd probably run away, take the first plane back to Japan and hide away in my dorm room for the rest of the year. But that's not what Lilly needs to hear.

Okay Hanako. Think...

"I'm... n-not really sure, but..."

I try to recall the things Akira told me earlier today.

She said something along the lines of not wanting to trouble Lilly with her issues any further.

"Akira... umm... talked to me earlier and... she's not happy with the situation either. She said... she was going to try and b-back off a little. I don't think there's a lot you can do for her. This is probably something she'll have to... sort out herself."

"Did Akira appear angry with me over our lack of interaction the last few days?"

"Not to me. Maybe you can call her. Or spend some time with her after work without bringing up your f-family. I think she'll like that, and you might enjoy it too. You've always enjoyed each other's company so much."

"It may feel odd to ignore the elephant in the room just like that, but if she meant what she told you then there may be no harm in trying."

Akira isn't the tricky issue though. Lilly's bond with her sister is strong enough for it to withstand a few hurdles. The issues with her parents are more difficult. I can imagine how Lilly must have felt. I think I've been there myself.

"L-Lilly?"

"Yes?"

"I... I think I know how you must have felt."

"You do?"

"When I was... still getting to know Hisao, I used to worry a lot about what he thought of me. I was often afraid that he looked down on me. That I was just someone for him to worry over."

Lilly suddenly looks very uncomfortable. This used to be a sensitive point between the two of us as well.

"I don't think that was all he saw you as, Hanako."

"I don't know. I still remember that night when Akira took us to that jazz club. Hisao and I played a game of pool in the back and it was really fun... until he said something to me that really hurt."

"He did?"

"While I was trying to ease my nerves, he said: 'Don't worry. Even with Lilly away, I'll be there to protect you.' It was then that I realized that... to him... I was just a pitiful and helpless person who couldn't do anything on her own. Someone who would always have to be looked after."

"I don't think he really meant it like that, Hanako. He may have acted in a bit of a misguided manner, but in the end I believe he meant well. He simply didn't know you well enough yet."

"I... think he meant well too, but it still hurt back then. I wanted him to respect me, but he didn't."

"I think he respects you now. And I think he also loves you very much. So he obviously came around, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, it... took a lot, but... he came around eventually. And he apologized and confessed to me. I'm really happy that he did."

"Was there anything specific that triggered this?"

I blush briefly upon hearing Lilly's question. I think if I told Lilly that I let Hisao sleep with me in order to make him come around, she'd probably faint in shock. Actually, in the end it wasn't really Hisao and me taking each other's virginity that broke down the walls between us, but the painfully awkward talk we were forced to have the day after.

"A... um... painfully awkward talk at some point. It's not really important."

"I think you're right, Hanako. The important thing is the result."

"Umm... L-Lilly?"

"Yes?"

"I was thinking... maybe... maybe the same is true with you and your father. Maybe your father... didn't really mean to d-disrespect you, but... he s-simply didn't know you well enough yet either. Maybe he's simply... ignorant."

There's a long silence as Lilly ponders my words.

"Do you really think the two cases are similar, Hanako?"

"I... think so. I think your father cares about you in his own way or he w-would not have offered to take us to Edinburgh while things were still so busy at work. M-Maybe if you show him how strong and reliable you can be, he'll see past his current view of you."

In fact, you'll probably pull it off without jumping into the kind of irrational actions I took part in.

"Show him?"

"I think this is a good opportunity. Maybe... the best chance you're going to g-get. Your f-father is probably going through a very d-difficult time right now. He could... really use someone like you by his side."

"Someone like me?"

"You're... very good at... comforting people and making them f-feel better. Giving emotional support to people who need it, whether they're classmates or newly arrived transfer students or even p-panicky neighbors with whom you never even spoke before, is simply what you do. It's like a s-second nature to you. It was... the first thing I learned about you."

"That's a very nice thing of you to say."

"If you... look after your f-father like you've looked after Hisao and me, he'll have no choice but to respect you."

"You make it sound more simple than it probably is."

I probably do. Lilly's pride was hurt in this whole mess, and I know that that's not something she can easily let go or overlook.

"If anyone can bring your f-family together, it's probably you. Also... I think if you give things your all while you're here, you can say that you've t-tried your best no matter what happens during the rest of your stay. If you... don't do that then you might feel regrets when you're back at Yamaku."

I wonder if I myself would be able to practice what I'm preaching right now. I feel a bit hypocritical talking to Lilly about swallowing her pride and reaching out to her parents in good faith while I myself am frequently prone to bouts of cynicism. But there's no doubt in my mind that if Lilly just allowed things to stay the way they are, she'd feel awful about her inactivity later.

"Maybe..."

"You... d-don't really have much to lose. If you... m-manage to still get closer to your f-family, you'll have achieved what you c-came here for. And if... despite your best efforts, you s-still feel distant f-from them b-by the time you get back, then... uh... ummm..."

"Yes?"

05

"Then... uh... I'll b-be your f-family... instead. Either way, you w-won't be alone."

Lilly lets out a happy laugh at my remark.

"Hmmm, hmmm... Promising someone such a reward for failing is not a good way to motivate them, Hanako. But nevertheless I really appreciate your kindness."

"Also... uh... This is just m-me, but I t-think that...!"

06

While I'm still in the middle of my sentence I suddenly become aware that Lilly has softly put her hand on my shoulder. My right shoulder! I gasp and in a sudden fit of panic, I lunge forward in an attempt to get away. However due to the resistance of the water reaching to just above my knees, I promptly fall over, producing a loud splash in the process. In other circumstances it'd probably be comical. The splash gets some water in my nose, and I snort and cough a few times before I can regain my composure. I finally calm down enough to realize that I just made an utter fool of myself in front of Lilly and anxiously look over my shoulder at my friend.

Lilly's smile has vanished and in its place is a worried, almost frightened, expression.

"H-Hanako! Are you alright?"

"I... I'm... okay... S-sorry... I'm... alright..."

My panting and stammering attempts at reassurance don't do much to put Lilly's mind at ease.

"Hanako, did I hurt you just now?"

"D-Don't worry. You didn't."

"Honestly?"

"I... I d-didn't even f-feel it at f-first. S-Several of m-my... m-my s-scared places are n-numb."

"..."

"It's o-okay, really. You j-just startled me a little."

Lilly seems to consider it and then slowly nods.

"I apologize. What was it that you wanted to say before I interrupted you?"

"What I w-wanted to say was... that s-supporting your father is also simply the r-right thing to do. B-Being stuck in the hospital after s-surgery is hard on everyone. Your f-father probably f-feels he can't show it, b-but I think that d-deep down he's feeling a little bit l-like Hisao m-must have felt. Or..."

An uneasy feeling starts welling up in my stomach before I can finish my sentence, but Lilly seems to have guessed what I was about to say.

"Or how you must have felt... Does this situation remind you of your own hospitalization, Hanako?"

07

"B-Being stuck in the hospital after s-something like this is a very miserable experience. In addition to the p-pain, there's the loneliness. And there's all the t-time you have. S-So much time - too much time - and nothing to s-spend it on except w-wondering. W-Wondering why t-this happened to y-you and what you d-did to deserve t-this. Wondering what y-your life will b-be like afterwards and r-realizing it will probably never b-be the same again."

"Was that what it was like for you, Hanako?"

"I... d-don't really remember m-my own first week very well. I... w-was on very heavy medication at first. The strongest they had. M-My room was one of those s-sealed pods that w-was completely s-sterile. I b-barely survived the f-fire. They s-said a s-simple infection could kill me until I m-my injuries healed up a bit more. They usually c-couldn't b-bring in toys or b-books because there could be g-germs on them. D-Doctors or nurses wouldn't c-come in unless really necessary and I w-wasn't allowed out of the r-room. But then again, I c-could barely move b-back then, so I wouldn't h-have been able to leave anyway."

"That must have been terribly lonely..."

"I preferred to b-be alone eventually. Whenever the n-nurses came into my room, it was usually to change the b-bandages or to move and s-stretch my injured arm and b-back. Burned skin becomes really t-tight and it has to be s-stretched several times a day or I wouldn't be able to use those p-parts of my body at all anymore eventually. That's what they s-said. But... I didn't s-see it that way at first. All I knew was that several t-times a day p-people would come into my room to cause me terrible pain."

For a moment my thoughts fly back to my time in the hospital. The constant pain that became unbearable when my limbs were moved or the wound dressing was changed. The fear and panic I felt when I saw the nursing staff enter my room again. Their continuing reassurances how important it was to start these exercises as soon as possible. I suddenly find myself shivering.

"Hanako..."

"S-Sometimes, after the nurses w-were finally done f-for the day, I w-wondered why my m-mother did what she d-did. Why she didn't j-just let me..."

"Your mother?"

"The fire happened when I was eight years old. It was night, and I was s-sleeping when it started. I... curled up into a ball... when the f-fire swept over me. My mother... tried to shield me. Th-that's the reason... I lived... and she... d-didn't."

"..."

"I was... still on intensive care... f-fighting for my own l-life when the... c-c-cremation took place. M-Maybe it w-was for the best. If... If I h-had been there when they... when they... I d-don't think I w-would have..."

I sniffle and it takes all the willpower I have to swallow the sudden lump in my throat, and when Lilly speaks up, her voice is rather tiny as well.

"H-Hanako... your parents' ashes... are they... kept at a grave somewhere? Because if so... perhaps I could go there with you some time and pay my respects."

That comment makes me smile despite the mood of the moment. It's just so much like Lilly to say something kind like that.

"T-They're not. The funeral w-was already very costly, and it w-was decided not to s-spend additional money on a grave with just m-me to maintain it. After I... recovered enough to be able to walk and d-dress myself again, the m-matron came to visit m-me in the hospital. She told me she worked at an orphanage in t-town and that I'd be living with them from then on. They... kept my p-parents' ashes while I w-was recovering in the hospital, and after I was allowed to l-leave, we took a long ride to a place n-near the ocean with a really b-beautiful coastline. The matron s-said I could pick the prettiest spot I could f-find and that's where we would... s-s-see them off."

"She sounds kind."

"She w-was. All the staff members at the orphanage w-were nice, and it felt a bit like Yamaku does. But the staff was also always b-busy. Since they w-were already h-helping me with my... exercises and other m-medical needs, I t-tried not to burden them further. The place had a small library, so I started reading to p-pass the time. S-Sometimes I'd play a game with one of the other c-children if the staff suggested it."

"Did you ever consider getting in touch again with some of the children you got to know there?"

"I didn't r-really get to know anyone. The other c-children didn't really t-talk much to me, and I didn't r-really talk much to them. I... d-didn't really mind."

"But you were all in the same boat, weren't you?"

"I'm n-not sure. As th-the years went on, I realized... I was different. M-Most of the children there were up for adoption, just like I was. But unlike me... they gradually left, o-one by one. By the time I went to Yamaku, I was... among the oldest ch-children there. For a while, I h-helped with some of the y-younger children, but... I n-never really got to know them either."

"That must have been very lonely."

"I d-don't like interacting w-with p-people very much, so I didn't m-mind."

"But everybody needs friends, don't you think so?"

"Friendship... was something I thought I'd g-given up on. I s-stopped believing in others... after what happened after the accident... B-Before my accident happened, I got on well with p-people and other children. I d-didn't have many friends, but... I didn't m-mind. I t-treasured the ones that I had. Afterwards, though..."

I swallow with some difficulty. For some reason just the mere mentioning of this brings back fragments of the desperation I felt back then.

"...I was c-called names by the others and t-teased a lot. It hurt... really deeply. The teachers t-tried to help s-sometimes, but they c-couldn't do much, and even many of them r-recoiled just at the sight of me. Among t-those c-calling me names and t-teasing me... were the ones that I t-thought were m-my closest friends. *sniff* Up to that point, I had been hoping I c-could still maintain... just a little bit of m-my former life, but... it was then that I r-realized that my former life was truly gone for good."

I feel a few tears flow down my cheek, and I see them create small ripples as they hit the surface of the water.

"Middle school... was even worse. I g-got bullied... a lot. I was c-called names and got excluded f-from work groups. There were... worse things, too. Especially when tests came up and p-people started f-feeling pressure. I s-started skipping class. I knew I wasn't s-supposed to... M-my grades were already r-rather low, but... I became more and more f-frightened to go there each day. After m-middle school, Yamaku was one of the options the s-staff brought up. It was... isolated and m-most students there were d-disabled. I d-didn't expect to m-make any friends there, but... at least p-people would leave me be. That was... g-good enough for me. That was... even m-more than I c-could hope for."

I rub my eyes a few times, trying to wipe away the tears. When I take a brief look at Lilly, I see that she's softly crying as well. For a long time, neither of us says a word. When Lilly finally opens her mouth, there's a sad but tender tone in her voice.

"Hanako, you said you gave up on friendship, and yet I think that deep down you never stopped desiring other people in your life. The fact that our friendship came to be is proof of that because it was you who approached me. You chose me as a friend - your first real friend judging by what I just learned - and I feel very honored by that, even if I haven't always been able to live up to your expectations."

"I'm... n-not sure. I think... I really d-didn't believe in real friendship... back then. But... I think I still wanted to believe, even though I couldn't. I thought... since you couldn't s-see what I looked like... t-things would be... different... somehow."

"And were they?"

"I'm... not really sure. Even though... you couldn't see my appearance, there... were still plenty of things wrong w-with me that you c-could notice. And sometimes... I wondered if it w-was just a m-matter of time before... you found out m-more about me and then d-decided you could... do better."

Lilly considers this for a moment.

"Hanako, would you do something for me?"

"Yes?"

"Can you... take my hands? Both of them?"

"Uh...?"

Lilly sits up a little and holds out both her hands in front of her. A little hesitant, I move over her corner, sit down in front of her and carefully take her hands in mine, trying to avoid contact with the scar tissue on my wrist. Lilly gives a pleased nod.

"Thank you. Don't be afraid."

"Huh?"

Lilly gently pulls her hands away and then puts them on top of my own. She gives me a reassuring smile. Then, without waiting for my reaction, she moves her hands upwards along my arms until they're resting on my shoulders. A moment later she leans forward, wraps her arms around me, and before I realize what's happening, Lilly has locked me in an embrace.

"Aaah!"

I let out a cry of surprise, and my body completely freezes up in panic, and time seems to stop for a long time as I wait for Lilly's horrified gasp.

But as more and more seconds pass, a realization starts slowly sinking in.

08

Lilly hasn't flinched.

Not even once.

I finally manage to hold back my anxiety long enough to stammer out a reaction.

"L-L-Lilly?"

"Hanako. Try to relax..."

"Uh..."

She lowers her voice to a whisper.

"Just relax."

"I..."

As my anxiety slowly - very slowly - starts ebbing away, I become aware of Lilly's hands gently feeling my back and running through my hair. As I slowly start to relax, Lilly pulls me even closer, letting her chin rest on my right shoulder and gently pressing the side of her face against my scarred cheek. Her hug is firm yet oddly tender.

"A blind girl and a burn victim being best friends... Several of my sighted friends at Yamaku have pointed out to me how strangely fitting it seems. And yet, it also feels a bit off-putting, to hear our friendship being defined by this single thing. Don't you agree?"

"I... d-don't know..."

"Would you abandon our friendship if some miracle caused your scars to disappear, Hanako? Would you feel you could do better if that were to happen?"

"No, I... I would never do that."

"Likewise, if some miracle gave me eyesight, it still wouldn't change anything between us, Hanako. You are a wonderful person. The scars on your body don't change that. In fact..."

"She gently runs her fingers across the side of my face."

"You will probably disagree with my assessment, but I think you look fine."

"I... I... don't..."

I stammer a half-hearted denial, but leave it at that. There was such sincerity in Lilly's words that it feels disrespectful to loudly decry her words. As a strangely comfortable silence falls, I try to sort out what I'm currently feeling.

It feels strangely pleasant, but it's not passion or desire, like I felt when Hisao and I were in here and he hugged me. The gentle sensation of the warm water and Lilly's close presence feel vaguely familiar, a little bit like whenever Hisao is holding me after we make love. It's the same comfortable sense of safety and security, yet also different somehow.

I slowly feel the tense feeling leaving me as my past demons who were awakened briefly by my story are lulled back to sleep, and I eventually gain enough courage to wrap my arms around Lilly and return her hug. Again, she doesn't cringe like part of me expected her to.

Inexplicably, something Lilly said to her mother on that fateful day she decided to stay in Japan comes back to mind.

I have a very good friend here who is like a sister to me in all but blood. If I need help with something, I can always count on her to be there.

I wonder if my presence is also soothing Lilly's anxieties right now.

Eventually, Lilly lets go of me, and we break off our embrace. I sit down next to her, although this time I no longer bother to stay an arm's length away from Lilly. After another long silence, Lilly finally speaks up.

"Hanako, how are you feeling right now?"

"B-Better. How about you?"

"Better as well. Thank you for entrusting me with all of this, Hanako."

"It's... okay. I felt it was... only fair... to do so."

"Fair?"

"This week I've seen you... during some v-very vulnerable moments. I've also... learned a lot about your f-family. A lot that... you probably didn't want me to learn. It was only fair that... I also allowed you to l-learn a bit more about me even though it isn't pleasant."

"To be honest, I feel a little embarrassed. You've been through so much, and yet here I am, feeling sorry for myself and complaining about parents to someone who no longer has her own. I must really look spoiled to you."

"I think you were right to feel upset."

"Still, my problems must look so trivial in your eyes."

"I... don't think they are and even if they were, it's still okay to feel bad about them. I... uh... g-get upset about what are p-probably trivial things to you... all the time."

Lilly giggles.

"Thank you for cheering me up, Hanako. You're a true friend."

"Lilly... What will you do now?"

Lilly doesn't immediately answer. She merely closes her eyes and seems deep in thought for what feels like several minutes. Eventually a mysterious smile appears on her face for a second as if she's enjoying some private joke. Then she opens her eyes and turns her head in my direction.

"The right thing, Hanako. I'll do my best to support my parents to the best of my ability and hopefully get them to see me in a new light as well. I will do what I can to change this family for the better and do my part to turn it into what I feel it should be."

There's a determination on Lilly's face and in her voice that's unlike anything I've ever seen. It's a stronger determination than she's ever shown before. I can't help being a little awed.

"I hope... No, I know... t-that you'll succeed."

Lilly smiles and nods.

"Shall we go?"

"Okay."

We stand up, and Lilly once again holds out her hand. This time I don't feel frightened to let Lilly take hold of my arm as I guide her out of the bath and back to the changing area. As we dry ourselves off and start putting our clothes back on, Lilly flashes me a playful grin.

"Hanako, what happened here will stay between us, won't it? For the sake of Hisao's heart, it might be better if he doesn't know all the details."

We let out a mutual giggle to confirm our mutual oath of confidentiality, and, once dressed, we make our way out of the bathroom and down the stairs. As we enter the living room, I see Lilly's mother and Hisao sitting there. Karla gives her daughter an unsure look.

"Hello Lilly. How are you doing?"

Lilly answers her mother's question with a polite bow.

"Much better now, Mother. How about you?"

"Okay... I guess. I hope you're not too hungry yet. I didn't know when you would be finished, and I've yet to tell Allison to start preparing dinner."

"Actually, Mother, would it be okay to give Allison the rest of the day off?"

"Huh?"

"This is Hanako's and Hisao's last day here in Scotland. If it's okay with you, I would like to cook for them myself, just this once."

"Uh... Well, I don't mind. But..."

"Perhaps you could help me get the ingredients ready. I'm still not too familiar with the location of everything."

"Well, alright then."

And with that Lilly and her mother disappear into the kitchen. An hour later the four of us share a simple, but delicious meal, and afterwards Lilly accompanies Hisao and me on one last long walk through the neighborhood before the two of us retire for the evening.

09

The next morning, after a filling breakfast, Lilly and her mother take us to Inverness Airport where we're pleasantly surprised by a chipper Akira who's been waiting for us there. After checking in our luggage, the five of us have a cup of tea at one of the coffee shops near the security gate. The atmosphere is surprisingly relaxed with Lilly interacting in her usual way with Akira and Akira not displaying any outward signs of hostility towards her mother. Eventually Lilly's mother checks her watch and gives us a sad smile.

"Well, I think it's time for you two to head to your gate. You probably want to be among the first to board."

Hisao sighs.

"Well, I guess we'll be off then. Best of luck to all three of you. And maybe until some other time, Akira."

Akira grins.

"Hey, I'll still be in Japan from time to time. I'll try to accompany whatever business delegation is heading east. And whenever I'm in the country, I'll be sure to stop by at Yamaku. So we'll definitely meet again."

Karla smiles.

"So will we. I'll probably be the one accompanying Lilly to Japan on her way back, so we'll probably meet again soon. Take care of yourself in the meantime, okay? And uh... Since you're in her class, be sure to tell Shizune that I said hello."

"We will."

Hisao gets up from his seat and looks at me.

"Shall we then?"

I nod uneasily. Saying goodbye to Lilly and Akira suddenly feels very hard.

"O-Okay."

We all get up, and Lilly's mother gives us a respectful bow.

"We've put you through quite a bit of trouble. Sorry for that. I hope you enjoyed your time here regardless."

"Oh, we definitely have. Right, Hanako?"

"Yes. It was great fun."

Karla smiles and then reaches into her wallet. She takes some banknotes and puts two of them in each of our hands. I look at them and there's a large 50 on each of them. That's 200 pounds in total. I'm not completely sure how much that is in yen, but I bet it's quite a bit.

"When you get back to Japan, please change this and use it to go on a couple of fun dates together. It's on us."

"We couldn't..."

Akira cuts off Hisao by giving him a playful shove.

"Just take it, you two."

Lilly smiles.

"You can tell me all about it when I get back."

Hisao and I exchange a resigned look. I don't think there's time for us to argue over this. We both put the banknotes away.

"Thank you."

Akira steps forward and gives Hisao a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Have fun, you two. See ya later."

Then she walks up to me and gives me a warm hug while giving me a knowing look.

"See ya, Hanako. Don't be afraid to call sometime."

She leans in and whispers.

"And thanks for yesterday."

"Uh... O-okay."

Lilly briefly puts her hand on Hisao's shoulder.

"Hisao, please take good care of Hanako today, okay?"

"Will do, Lilly. Be sure to hang in there yourself."

"Hanako, will you be alright?"

"D-Don't worry about me, Lilly. I'll... make it."

Lilly steps forward and gives me a loving hug, followed by a light kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks for everything, Hanako. We'll keep in touch, okay?"

"Y-Yes."

We walk out of the coffee shop, and Hisao and I join the queue near the security gate. We turn around and wave goodbye one last time to the Satous. The crowds and security checks will no doubt ruin my day today, but until it's our turn to pass through I want to hold on to that image of Lilly and her family.

The sight of Lilly, Akira and their mother all wearing a smile.

Maybe things will turn out alright after all.

10

Chapter 35 (Hanako)

01

The sound of footsteps walking into the room shakes me from my semi-slumber. I yawn and curiously peer past my bangs in an attempt to place the room I'm currently in, but quickly close my eyes again when the footsteps get closer and someone walks up to the couch I'm lying on. The footsteps stop close to me, and I can tell that whoever came into the room is now looking at me for a bit. I don't think it's Hisao who's now standing in front of me, so I pretend to be asleep. It may not be social, but I think the impression I leave here will be more positive if I limit the number of awkward conversations I get involved in. When I hear the person in front of me move away, I carefully open my eyes again, thankful that I'm lying on my left side so that my hair covers most of my face, and survey the room again.

Now that I'm fully awake, I recognize the room I'm in. This is the living room of Hisao's home, and the sound of bowls and dishes being placed on a table coming from behind me, mixed in with the occasional sound of soft humming, tells me that it was Hisao's mother who came in here earlier.

It's been two days since Hisao and I returned from Scotland. We were pretty exhausted when we finally made it back to Yamaku, especially since there was no Akira to give us a ride this time, and when we reached our dorm rooms we pretty much hit the sack immediately. Hisao spent most of yesterday getting his biological clock back on schedule while I spent most of the day behind the computer in the newspaper club's archive room downloading photos off my camera, burning them to CD and getting my favorite ones printed out. Late in the afternoon we boarded the train to the Nakai home, and we managed to get there before Hisao's parents. When they came home later that evening they were both happy to see him again, and they were pretty friendly to me as well. Hisao spent the remainder of the evening showing his parents a selection of the pictures we took and telling them about our vacation in Inverness.

The last time I met Hisao's parents, shortly after Hisao and I successfully salvaged our relationship, I only stayed long enough to introduce myself and sit by Hisao's side for a few minutes while his parents were busy digesting the news that their son had been dating. I was a bit apprehensive about spending an extended amount of time around his parents, but my curiosity about his life before Yamaku overrode my social anxiety, and if his parents were put off by my shy and awkward behavior last night, they didn't really show it. Of course, neither of us had any interest in telling his parents about the more intimate aspect of our relationship and Hisao made sure not to disclose the fact that he and I shared a bed during our stay in Scotland, so we both kept our mouth shut when Hisao's parents said I could sleep on the couch in the living room when it was time to go to bed. I guess I shouldn't complain; the couch was a soft and very comfortable sleeping spot, but I still would have preferred to spend the night together with my boyfriend.

"Good morning."

Another person enters the room and I recognize the voice as the one belonging to Hisao's father.

"Good morning, dear. Did you sleep well?"

"Quite well. Is... ah... Hanako still asleep?"

"I think she is, so let's keep our voices down a bit so we don't wake her up."

I hear Hisao's father let out a sleepy yawn.

"Well, it was a short night."

I hear the sound of liquid being poured. I can't see Hisao's parents from where I'm lying, but I suspect they've started their breakfast.

"But you have to admit it's a special occasion when our son not only returns home for the first time since his transfer, but also brings his girlfriend along and souvenirs and photos from a vacation on the other side of the world."

"Yes, it's nice he'll be staying for a whole week. I was beginning to wonder if he had forgotten about us."

Hisao's mother lets out a chuckle.

"That's not very nice, dear. He has called us twice during the weeks after his hospitalisation, and he also sent us a text message to let us know that he and his friends arrived safely in Scotland."

"Well, I can't deny he has been improving lately."

"He's been through a lot this year, and I think he simply needed some time to learn that good things still can and do happen to him despite his condition. I think he's starting to realize that. While he was in the hospital he grew so distant from everyone, but last night while he was talking about their vacation it was almost like his heart attack never took place."

"Maybe that's also because there's a girl in his life now. When he called me yesterday he said that she was curious about his life before transferring to Yamaku. I'm willing to bet that was a strong factor behind his decision."

"It's reassuring to know that she has a good influence on him."

I silently smile a bit. It sounds like they approve of me dating their son. That makes me very happy and a bit relieved as well. Dating someone is tough when his parents don't like you, and I don't think I'd be able to deal with disapproval of that kind. I still feel a bit ashamed that I wasn't even there for Hisao during his last hospitalisation.

I hear a snicker.

"I got the impression last time that he has become quite the ladies' man. When we reached the dorm building last time there were no less than three young ladies waiting there to welcome him back. No wonder he didn't want to come home with us that day. While he was introducing them to us I was actually wondering if he was perhaps seeing one of them."

"That's what I also wondered about back then, but I couldn't really decide at the time which one of them was the more likely possibility."

"You mean you weren't sure what type of girl he was most likely to go for?"

"If Hanako had been there with those other three at the beginning I think it would have been easy. When he came into that teahouse with her in tow, I immediately had a hunch he wasn't going to introduce us to simply another friend. That was before I even noticed he was holding her hand."

"A hunch?"

"Do you remember back when Hisao was still in the hospital and there was this dark-haired girl who dropped by several times during the first few weeks? Hanako reminds me a little bit of her."

"Yes, I remember. What was her name again?"

"I'm not completely sure anymore, but I believe her name sounded a little bit like Hanako's."

"They weren't that similar, were they? If that other girl had been even only half as shy as Hanako, I'd probably remember that."

My smile immediately drops upon hearing that. I know I'm really shy. I'm trying not to be, but I'm still having a hard time relaxing around Hisao's parents, probably for no other reason than the fact that they're my boyfriend's parents. I let Hisao do most of the talking last night and had been hoping that they wouldn't have paid attention to the fact that I barely said a word. Looks like they noticed after all. Finding out that Hisao's parents might have been put off by my timidity has left a bad feeling in my stomach. I pray that this conversation isn't going to end with them agreeing that it would have been better if Hisao had picked up Lilly or Shizune as a girlfriend instead of me.

"I'm not saying they were extremely similar, but I do feel they shared a few superficial traits. Dark and fairly long hair, kind of girlish and coming across as just a little bit delicate. I wouldn't be surprised if those traits are what Hisao finds attractive in a girl."

"You're acting like that girl from the hospital was a girlfriend, but Hisao insisted she was merely a classmate."

Hisao's mother chuckles playfully.

"Did you believe him when he said that? The few classmates that visited only did so once or twice the first week. And Hisao never mentioned her before as someone he hung out with."

"Well, if there was a relationship before his condition was first triggered I don't think it lasted throughout his hospital stay."

"I don't think so either. I doubt it was just us he grew distant from over those months."

Although I realize that eavesdropping isn't very lady-like, this conversation is very interesting, and I strain to hear more without alerting them to the fact that I'm already awake. However, my attempt at listening in is suddenly cut short.

02

Rrriinnggggg

"Eek!"

I let out a surprised yelp before I can stop myself when my cell phone, which is lying on a side table next to the couch I'm resting on, suddenly rings. I grab it as quickly as I can, but the knowledge that there are probably two gazes aimed at me right now causes me to fumble a bit, and I nearly end up dropping it out of my shaking hands in my attempts to fold it open as quickly as I can. I manage to fight off my anxiety long enough to press the accept-button, and I try not to look in the direction of Hisao's parents.

"H-Hello?"

"Hello Hanako."

"Lilly!"

I'm surprised for a moment that Lilly would call this early before remembering that we're in different time zones. I didn't recognize the number on the display, so Lilly's probably using her parents' phone right now.

"Is it okay for me to call this early in the morning? I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"N-No, I was already awa.... eh... ummm."

Damnit! I blush as I realize what I just blurted out. Hisao's parents must think badly of me now for pretending to be asleep in order to eavesdrop on their conversation instead of properly acknowledging their presence. While I struggle to react, Lilly replies in a worried tone.

"Hanako, is something wrong? Where are you right now?"

"At H-Hisao's h-home in Chiba. Hisao's p-parents are h-having breakfast right now."

"Ah. Perhaps it would be more convenient if I called back in half an hour?"

"Okay."

"Very well. Please give Mister and Mrs. Nakai my regards."

"Y-Yes."

"Thank you. I will talk to you later then."

"B-Bye."

I snap my phone shut and meekly turn to face Hisao's parents who are looking back at me from their seating spots at the table. They give me a friendly nod which I manage to mimic with some effort.

03

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

"G-Good m-morning. Ummm... L-Lilly s-said hello."

I put my phone away and slowly get off the couch. Hisao's mother looks at my awkward movement with a slightly worried expression.

"Are you alright? Was the couch comfortable enough?"

I quickly nod to reassure her.

"I'm... often a l-little s-stiff in the m-morning."

My scar tissue is often stiff after a night of sleep and requires a few stretching sessions to loosen up. It's a little worse than usual today because the couch left me with little room to move during the night. My scars are also itching a bit, but I can probably handle that for a little while.

"Sorry for not waiting for you and Hisao, but we both have work today, and we thought you were both going to take it easy. Aren't you suffering from jet lag?"

I quietly shake my head.

"I'm o-okay, but Hisao m-might s-sleep in this m-morning."

Hisao's mother makes a gesture towards the fridge.

"I'm terribly sorry that we lack the time to be good hosts right now, but please feel free to help yourself to whatever is in the cupboard and the fridge. There should be more than enough in there for several meals."

"T-Thank you."

They get up and put their bowls, cups and dishes next to the sink. Hisao's mother gives me a friendly nod.

"Please make yourself at home here."

"Thank y-you."

I take a brief glance at the dishes on the sink unit.

"Ummmm..."

"Don't worry about those. It's Hisao's task to do them."

"Oh."

Hisao's parents make their way to the entryway area in order to put on their shoes. Before leaving the room, Hisao's father turns to me.

"We expect to be back around nine o' clock. Maybe 8:45 if we're lucky and get an earlier train. There's no need to wait for us with dinner."

"I'll t-tell Hisao."

"We'll see you this evening then. Bye."

"B-Bye."

A few moments later I hear the door close, and I'm on my own again. As I start wondering what to do now, my attention returns to my itching right side. First things first, I guess. I return to the area where I spent the night and do a few careful stretch exercises to get the stiffness out of my body. I then make my way to the bathroom. Most of my stuff is still in my suitcase, which we stored in Hisao's room, but my lotion is one of the things I had the foresight to take out in advance. I lock the door, take off my nightgown and apply some of the moisturizer to the itching areas. I then put my nightgown back on and make my way back to the kitchen, putting my hair clip on in the process.

They said that there was no need to bother, but I don't think it hurts doing something back for the hospitality they've given me.

My mind made up, I get some dishwashing liquid, turn on the tap and quickly start scrubbing the first bowl on the counter with the brush lying near the sink. I realize that Lilly might call back at any moment, so I do my best to finish washing and drying everything as quickly as I can. It turns out that my timing was impeccable, because the moment I finish drying off the last dish I had left, my phone springs to life to alert me of the incoming call.

Rriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg - rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg

"Coming!"

I cheerfully pick up my phone and press the accept-button once more.

"Hi Lilly."

"Hello Hanako. You sound a lot more at ease this time."

"I'm on my own right now. Hisao is still asleep and his parents just left for work."

"How are Hisao's parents doing?"

"I'm... n-not really sure. I haven't really s-spoken with them since we g-got here. They seem to be doing well. They were happy to see Hisao, that much I could tell."

There's a short pause on the other end of the line as Lilly deduces the implication of my words.

"Hanako, I don't think there's any need to be afraid that Hisao's parents will not accept you. When Shizune, Misha and I spent time with them a few weeks ago they came across as fine and kind people. That was an impression all three of us shared. I am certain they will give you the time you need to open up to them."

"I... h-hope so."

"It sounds exciting, getting to spend some time at the place where Hisao grew up and getting to know what his life before Yamaku was like."

"Yes, that's why I wanted to go here. I was a bit curious about that."

"So this was your idea?"

"Yes. We were having brunch at the Shanghai, and we were talking about how empty the school was because most students returned home for the summer break, and Hisao said that reminded him he needed to let his parents know he and I were back already. I asked him if he was going to return home to see his parents too. He asked if I wouldn't be lonely here and I... ummm..."

"You asked if you could come along?"

I started asking, but I ended up tripping over my words before I could get half-way through the question. Fortunately, Hisao quickly got the hint and when he asked if I wanted to come along I only had to nod.

"S-Something like that. So Hisao called his father, and he said it w-was okay if I came along too. We'll be staying here for a week."

"I'm sure you'll have a lot of fun, Hanako. I'm happy for you."

"I'll be s-sure to tell you about it when you return."

I suddenly remember that there's a large time difference between Scotland and Japan. I believe it's nearly half a day earlier there than here. Given that it's early morning here, it must be pretty late over there.

"Lilly... Isn't it late in Inverness right now?"

"It's around midnight here, but I wasn't very tired yet, and I found myself wondering how you and Hisao were doing."

"We're doing well, but... How are you d-doing, Lilly?"

A long silence. Looks like Lilly doesn't want to wave the whole thing off by saying she's doing well, but she probably doesn't want me to get worried over her either.

"I've mostly spent the last two days keeping Father company at the hospital. We didn't really talk that much, but one thing he told me yesterday was that you and Hisao spoke very highly of me to him and that he would like to get to know me the way you two know me. I suppose... That's his way of apologizing to me."

"Yes, it sounds that way."

"I would have liked to start telling him about all the things he has missed over the years, but something told me that now wasn't the right time. He seemed too distracted to really listen to what I'd tell him."

"Distracted? About... work?"

"Yes, apparently the meetings in the US will not be postponed despite his hospitalization, meaning that the final few negotiations will proceed without his involvement. It appears that the thought of not being able to finish what he started occupies his mind day and night. The doctors here told him that worrying and stress at this point will merely extend his stay in the hospital, but he still can't let it go. I can't say I blame him entirely."

"How about your mother?"

"She offered to take some time off from work to be at his side during his stay in the hospital despite the fact that I think she's still a bit angry at him for not letting her in on the risk he was running, but he refused that. He felt the company needed her more than ever now that he's out of commission. She respects his request, but I can tell she does so with a great deal of reluctance. It's a shame. I've spoken to Allison, and she also confirmed that Mother and Father mostly led separate lives here outside the workplace. This incident could give them the opportunity to get closer to each other again if only Father could put the company matters out of his mind."

I can't say I have any business experience, but I can imagine how it must feel to work on something for years and then have someone else take it off your hands a few meters before the finish line. I'd probably feel like a failure. But it still seems disturbing how focussed Lilly's father is on this.

"If it's... that important to him, can't they hold the meetings over the phone? Do a teleconference?"

"I don't think the board would allow that. Meetings are always conducted in person, especially important ones. Besides... I don't think Father would be willing to speak to his business partners on the phone the way things are now. His rib fractures make it painful for him to speak at length."

"I'm... s-s-sorry."

"Don't apologize for doing the right thing, Hanako. I'm glad you were there when we needed you."

A short pause takes place as neither one of us really knows how to continue. Then Lilly speaks up again, deciding that it's probably for the best to change the subject.

"So Hanako... What are your plans for today?"

"Hmmm. I don't really know yet. I'm... not sure what Hisao wants to do. We'll have to make breakfast... or lunch if he decides to sleep in. I'd... like to see some of the places he remembers from his childhood. His old school maybe. Maybe we can go on a date today too."

"That sounds like a lot of fun. I hope Hisao will not sleep in too long then."

"How about you, Lilly?"

"Probably the same thing as I have been doing the last two days. I can't do anything to speed up Father's recovery or help him out with anything related to his work, so the best thing I can do is keep him company while he's in the hospital."

"I think... that's very important too, Lilly. Being hospitalized makes you lonely very quickly, and even though he might not admit it, I'm sure he's looking forward to your visits."

"...I understand, Hanako. Thank you."

I try not to think back too much on my own hospitalization ten years ago, but I have no doubt Lilly sensed that I was speaking from personal experience.

"Hanako, may I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Is first aid difficult to learn? You seemed to have picked it up fairly quickly. I was wondering... Maybe I could learn it too. At least the basics."

"Are you thinking of following a training?"

"If that's possible for me. I learned yesterday that Mother has had first responder training herself years ago, but she wasn't there when Father collapsed. I... I would rather not ever go through a situation like that again..."

I can empathize completely with that. I know from experience how extremely frightening it is to have someone you care about nearly die in front of you. I wouldn't wish that sort of thing on anyone.

"I t-think you could easily learn to check someone's vital signs or do CPR and artificial respiration. You don't really need sight for that. I r-really think you should go for it, Lilly. Maybe someone at your father's company gives training. They d-do make emergency devices there."

"Thank you Hanako. If you think it's a realistic goal for me to pursue then I will ask Mother about it tomorrow. Who knows. Maybe I will return to Japan with a certificate of my own."

I giggle.

"Then w-we would need to hold a celebration p-party for you too."

We both laugh out loud at that. The memory of that wacky night has lifted the mood, though I still cringe for a moment when thinking back on my actions that night. We spend some time simply making small talk until I pick up on Lilly stifling a yawn.

"You must be tired."

"A little bit. It has been a rather long day. Perhaps I should try and get some sleep."

"That would probably be a good idea."

"Thank you for the company, Hanako. It was good talking to you."

It dawns on me that for all her efforts in easing her father's loneliness, Lilly's probably feeling a bit lonely herself over there with her being far away from Yamaku in a relatively unfamiliar environment and with her mother and sister both dealing with the fallout from the situation at work. She's doing her best to support her father, but I wonder if anyone is supporting her. Maybe I could be that support? I doubt phone bills will be a problem for her and her family.

"L-Lilly... ummm... Why d-don't you call back again tomorrow? If you... want to talk, I mean."

"Would that be okay, Hanako?"

"Of course. You can call me anytime, Lilly. Anytime you want."

Lilly chuckles at my enthusiasm.

"I might just take you up on that offer then, Hanako. And thank you again. Please give Hisao my regards too. And enjoy your day."

"Okay. Bye."

"Goodbye."

As I close my phone I think back on the conversation I just had. Now that the phone call is over I realize that this talk was slightly different from the conversations we used to have. In the past, the focus was almost always on me - how I was doing. Yet today we talked mostly about Lilly's situation, and Lilly seemed fine and comfortable with that, and she didn't make any attempts to sweep her own troubles under the rug. I think back on what Akira said - about how in this situation, where Akira herself can't be an objective listener, I should be the pillar of support for Lilly. This is certainly not a role I would have expected myself to fulfill a few months ago, but even I can no longer deny that my friendship with Lilly has changed a lot over the last few months. And I think it has changed for the better.

I put my phone away, get off the couch and smile a bit to myself as I ponder these thoughts. I really hope she'll call again tomorrow.

In the meantime, I'm left trying to figure out what to do now. My books are still in my suitcase, and I don't want to risk waking up Hisao by walking into his room and retrieving them. I could watch television, but I don't really feel like doing that right now. Suddenly, an idea pops into my head, and I smile.

I could surprise Hisao by making breakfast for the two of us. His parents did say we could use whatever ingredients were in the fridge and cupboard. I quickly check both and see that there's enough in there for a decent meal.

I put on the apron hanging on a hook near the fridge, open the cupboard and start collecting the ingredients for the meal I have in mind.

04

As my breakfast preparation approaches its end, I find myself cheerfully humming a song I've had in my head for the last 15 minutes. This part is rather hectic. I'm still in the process of grilling the fillets of salmon, but I've also kept my soup on the stove to keep it hot, and I've once read that miso soup shouldn't be allowed to boil once the miso paste has been added. Still, despite having to carefully watch what I'm doing, my mood couldn't be better.

As I turn to put a bottle of soy sauce back in the cupboard, I see someone's reflection in the window from the corner of my eye, and when I turn around, I suddenly become aware of my boyfriend, still in his boxers and shirt, standing near the door. The surprise startles me enough to make me drop the bottle I was holding. Fortunately it's a plastic bottle so it doesn't break. While I'm struggling to think of how to react, Hisao quickly walks up to me, takes the bottle off the floor and puts it in its designated place.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's o-okay. Ah... f-for how long have you been standing here already?"

Instead of answering, Hisao simply looks past me, and when I turn around I notice that steam is already rising from my soup. I hurriedly turn down the heat. I'm annoyed by how easily I can get distracted by things that would be so minor to others. Hisao appears to read my thoughts and briefly places a hand on my shoulder.

"I could help if you like, but if you want to do this yourself I'll just go back to my room and take my batch of medication."

"I'll... be done in less than ten minutes."

"Okay."

I breathe a sigh of relief as he walks out of the room. I'm a bit bummed that the surprise is now gone, but I appreciate the fact that he offered to let me be for a little while. Him looking over my shoulder would probably make me nervous to the point where I'd start messing things up in my attempts to avoid messing things up. It's really nice that Hisao seems to start intuitively sensing these kinds of things about me.

With my nerves calmed a bit I manage to focus my attention back on my nearly-finished breakfast. Fortunately there are no further interruptions and five minutes later a full-fledged Japanese breakfast graces the nearby kitchen table. As I finish shuffling things around a bit in an attempt to make the whole thing look as good as possible, the sound of the door opening alerts me to the fact that my boyfriend has made his extremely well-timed return, making me wonder for a second if he hasn't been secretly standing behind the door the entire time.

He briefly looks over the nicely laid table and then looks back at me with a smile.

"Good morning."

The loving way he says it makes it impossible for me to resist smiling back at him.

"G-Good morning, d-dear. D-Did you s-sleep well?"

He frowns for a moment at my reply before his smile returns, him probably having decided to play along.

"Quite well. Thank you dear."

He looks over the table a second time.

"Ummm... I made miso soup with tofu and seaweed, steamed rice, grilled s-salmon and fermented soy beans with soy sauce."

"It looks delicious. I can't wait to taste it."

"Shall we?"

I take off my apron, hang it back in its previous place, share a quick good morning kiss with my boyfriend and then sit at the table across from him. I hold my breath and give him an expectant look as he takes his first sip of my miso soup. When he sends an approving nod my way, I let out a relieved sigh and start eating my own portion.

"Tastes good."

"Thanks."

We finish the soup and move on to the fish, rice and beans.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"So ummm... for how long were you... in here before I n-noticed you?"

"Oh that? For a few minutes, I think."

"A few minutes?"

Now I wonder what exactly he was staring at. He smiles a bit awkwardly.

"It was quite the pleasant sight, and I was afraid you'd get jumpy if you knew I was there."

"What w-was a pleasant sight? M-Me in... an apron?"

He chuckles.

"That too."

He stops to think for a moment, and I wonder if he's thinking something dirty, but before I can come up with a remark, he continues.

"But I was just speaking in general. The sight of you being in a good mood, humming and doing something you obviously seemed to enjoy was... kind of cute."

My heart skips a beat when I feel his foot brush lightly against mine. It takes me a second before I can react.

"Uh... T-thanks."

"Given your mood, I take it you've slept pretty well?"

"That too. But Lilly called me this morning, and we talked for a bit."

"Lilly called? How is she?"

"She's... holding up. I think her f-father apologized... in a way. Now she's just keeping him company. But his mind is still occupied with work. I don't think Lilly's days are as carefree as ours."

"It'd be weird if they already were. Still, this is Lilly we're talking about. There are very few situations she can't handle."

"I agree..."

My voice trails off as I feel his foot brush against mine once more. I'm starting to get the impression that this didn't happen on accident.

"Still, I think her dad's lucky to have her by his side all day long. I would have welcomed something like that."

"Yes, me t..."

I feel something touch my foot once again. Now I know he's doing this on purpose despite the innocent face he's putting on.

Should I return the favor?

"Is something wrong?"

Yes, I definitely should.

"N-No."

"Could I have a little bit more miso soup?"

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it tastes very.."

His words are cut off when I move my foot forward and stroke his ankle with my big toe. It takes a lot of effort to suppress a wide grin, but I manage.

"Is s-something wrong?"

"Uh... No. Sorry, it tastes very good."

"I'm happy to hear that. Go ahead and have some more."

"Thanks."

I look on when my boyfriend refills his bowl, and just as he puts the first spoonful into his mouth, I tickle the calf of his right leg with the top of my left foot. I see him react a little, and I squeeze my jaws together in order to avoid laughing.

"Is it... too hot?"

"It's... fine. Perfect temperature."

This is actually pretty fun. I move in again to caress the top of his foot with my own, but this time he's expecting me and he quickly places his other foot on top of mine, causing me to pull back again.

"I... uh... used most of the ingredients in the cupboard and the fridge. We might need to do some shopping."

While I'm still waiting for an opportunity, I feel his foot caress the place just above my ankle. I try to catch his foot with my own, but he pulls back in time.

"Sure. We can do that later today."

Hisao finishes his second bowl of soup, and we get started on the main course.

"Hisao? Do you have any plans for today?"

I feel his foot stroking mine again. This time I manage to catch it with my other foot, but instead of withdrawing, he just continues stroking the top of my foot.

"Not really. We can take it as easy as we like."

And then he starts stroking my other foot with his other foot. I let out a giggle before I can stop myself.

"Did I say something funny?"

I quickly shake my head, but we both have a pretty large grin on our face.

"Let's start with some salmon and rice."

"I'll take some beans and rice."

We both get started on the rest of the food, and I find myself thinking that this could end with one or both of us choking on our breakfast if we make each other laugh while we have our mouths full.

"Hey Hanako, this is kind of nice, isn't it?"

Is he talking about having breakfast together or playing footsie? Or maybe the combination?

"...this?"

"You know... uh..."

I manage to distract him momentarily by using two of my toes to grab one of his.

"...just having breakfast with nobody else around. It kind of feels like us having our own little place."

He starts wiggling his toe in order to break free from my grasp without having to move his foot. I tighten my grasp a bit in order to prevent him from getting loose.

"It... does feel a little bit like that. I think it's kind of nice too."

I giggle as I suddenly feel one of the toes on my other foot being squeezed. Looks like Hisao duplicated my little maneuver, and now we're engaged in this some kind of double tug-of-war.

"I wonder what our lives will be like in a few years."

It isn't even certain we'll still be together by that time. Though I really hope we will.

"It's... probably a little... early for long-term plans."

"Yeah, there are still lots of things to do in the meantime. We both need to figure out a career path for ourselves. We'll have our grades to keep up. There'll be the National Center Test for University Admissions to worry about in January and probably some additional entrance exams afterwards too."

Then we'd have to finish university and apply for a job. We'll still have years ahead of us and lots of tough choices to make."

"Yes."

In the silence that follows, we both manage to wiggle free from the other's toe grip. I wait for Hisao to resume our little play-fight under the table, but that doesn't happen.

"Hey, Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Disregarding the specifics, how do you see yourself in a decade or so? Do you see yourself... you know... married and with kids someday?"

I know it's physically impossible, but I nevertheless feel like every drop of blood in my body is instantly rushing to my head.

"Y-Yours?"

"Heh, that's why I said to disregard the specifics. I was just curious, because... uh..."

Because I don't have a family of my own, and the only way to change that would be to start one myself.

It hurts a little to hear Hisao bring it up.

Still, it's not an unfair question.

"For a long t-time... I didn't think it was p-possible to begin with. Recently, I've regained a bit of hope. If... If possible, I'd l-like to b-be married someday and... if I c-can take it... b-be a m-mother too."

"What do you mean with 'can take it'?"

I give Hisao a sad smile and pat my belly.

"I have scars on part of my belly too. Scar tissue... doesn't stretch well. M-Maybe the doctors would advise against it. Or maybe it's possible, but very, very painful without surgery. I'm... n-not really sure."

"I suggest not worrying about that too much for now. At least not without consulting an expert first. It might not be a problem, and medical science still advances every year. Personally, I think you'd make a great mommy."

"W-What?"

He snickers at my baffled expression.

"Hey, no need with the look. I'm totally serious."

"R-Really?"

He nods, smiles sweetly, and I feel how his foot reaches out and starts stroking the back of my leg.

"I mean, you did help the orphanage staff out with taking care of the younger children, didn't you? And you're very sweet and loving whenever you're at ease. You'll be a great mother someday."

That's one of the sweetest things he's ever said to me, and I'm completely at a loss on what to say back. So in the end, I don't say anything back at all. Instead, I merely seek out his leg with the sole of my foot and start stroking it.

We stay like this for a long time with both of us content to just continue our little footsie game without the need to say anything, and I'm wearing a pretty large smile throughout the entire thing.

I eventually decide that I want more than just a cuddling session in which only our feet are involved, so I get up just a little, lean forward across the table, close my eyes and pucker my lips. A second later, he's also leaning across the table, and his lips lock with mine.

This is a rather awkward position since we're both trying to maintain our balance, and our lips are either pressing too tightly or too loosely against each other throughout the kiss. As a lead-in to something more, it's more than enough though, and when we separate and I see the longing in Hisao's eyes, I know that this is just the beginning. We get up completely, and Hisao walks around the table, takes me in his arms and kisses me a second time. I wrap my arms around his neck and playfully tickle the spot near his ankle with my toe while our tongues engage in a passionate embrace.

When we pause in order to catch our breath, Hisao grins a little awkwardly and looks deep into my eyes.

"Hanako?"

05

I give an affirmative nod. The question is obvious. The answer should no different.

"Okay."

"Here?"

I take a quick look around, but I can't see any places where we could comfortably do it, and I don't like the idea of doing it while I'm bending over the kitchen sink unit.

"Y-Your room..."

We can probably wait a few seconds longer.

Hisao takes my hand, and we hurriedly make our way to his bedroom. Just when Hisao closes the door behind us, I decide I've waited long enough and press my lips against his again. I close my eyes and allow myself to get lost in the sensation of our kiss. With some amusement, I notice that his kiss has the slight flavor of soy sauce, and I wonder if I taste the same to him.

Without breaking our kiss, we edge closer and closer to the bed. I tingle with anticipation. How many more steps? Ten? Five?

"Whoa!"

"Eeek!"

Our shuffle towards the bed is unexpectedly interrupted when we accidentally bump into the office chair standing near Hisao's desk and it's only through sheer luck that we're able to remain standing though we have to quickly let go of each other in order to avoid landing on the floor.

"Sorry."

"S-Sorry."

We look at each other with a sheepish grin. We didn't land on our face, but the mood we were in just seconds ago was nevertheless shattered.

"I'll try to avoid the chair the next time. Either that or we'll have to keep our eyes open in the future."

"Y-Yes."

We give each other a 'now what'-look.

"So... Shall we continue?"

"Uh... Yes."

Undressing suddenly feels a lot more awkward with the mood having gone up in smoke.

Stupid chair!

"Maybe we should take our time to get back into the mood?"

"Okay."

Hisao takes a look at the bed, then at the chair and then at the bed again before pulling the office chair towards him, sitting down on it and giving me an inviting nod.

"Here?"

"This chair kind of owes us something, don't you think?"

I giggle. At least the mood already seems a little less awkward. I walk up to Hisao and pull up my nightgown to just above my waist, trying to ignore the stare aimed at my panties. I put my feet on both sides of the chair, which is fortunately lacking armrests, and then straddle his lap.

I can hear his breath pick up briefly when I shift a bit in an attempt to get comfortable, but he doesn't say anything. He merely looks up at me with an expectant look in his eyes.

"Hisao... What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever you want, Hanako. You'll need to take the active role this time."

"The... active... role?"

"I'm all yours."

Me, the active role?

That's not exactly common unless we're engaged in something that involves taking turns.

I guess I could give it a try.

I gently use a finger to tuck his chin up, lower my head and press my lips against his, softly nibbling on his upper lip at first, then letting my tongue slip into his mouth. I tickle his chin with one hand while lovingly rubbing his hair with the other.

He brings his hands up to my face, caressing both sides of it before moving on to my hair and then edging down my sides until they're resting on my upper legs.

The awkwardness of a few minutes ago is all but forgotten now, and I've reached the point where mere kissing and light petting just isn't sufficient anymore. Wiggling my bottom a bit in order to get the best angle possible, I start moving my hips.

Hisao lets out a pleased sigh at the sensation and then spreads his legs, causing me to slide down a bit. I blush as I feel something hard press against me. Looks like *someone* is eager to continue.

I place my hands on his shoulders in order to get a bit more leverage and continue grinding against him. In less than a minute, the place where his boxers are rubbing against my panties goes from feeling good to feeling great, and when one of his wandering hands softly fondles my right breast, I let out a moan before I can stop myself.

Hisao snickers and gives me a playful look.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"What we're doing right now. It... kind of feels familiar, doesn't it?"

What is he talking... Oh!

I cringe a bit and feel my cheeks start to burn. Why did he have to bring up *that* incident at a time like this? Deciding to change the subject as quickly as I can, I brightly smile at him and firmly shake my head. Then, when he opens his mouth to say something, I passionately kiss him to get the hint across.

Apparently it's very effective, because when our lips finally part, he shows no desire to bring up that particular subject again. Instead, he merely raises his arms, aching to continue, and I eagerly take the opportunity to take his shirt off.

Having to take the 'active role', as Hisao called it, is really nice as it's allowing me to rub myself against him at the best possible angle and speed and just moving around on his lap feels really good to me, but it's also pretty tiring, and I feel a drop of sweat running down my forehead.

Not wanting to continue until my nightgown's drenched, I also raise my arms and allow Hisao to take it off for me. I avert my eyes for a moment as his gaze sweeps over my body, stopping on my breasts for several seconds. Then I move again.

And again.

And again, making sure to press a little firmer this time.

In an attempt to assist me, Hisao places one hand on my lower back and presses me tighter against him. Meanwhile, his other hand goes back and forth between caressing my side, breasts and neckline.

"Hhhhhhhh.... Hhhmmm."

"Hhh... ah... Hhh."

Between our ragged breathing, we start letting out little sighs of pleasure, arousing each other further. I can see a tension building on his face. He's probably close to his limit. I should probably get off his lap so we can take off our underwear and finish this properly. But at the same time, this rubbing feels so wonderful that I can't bring myself to stop. Even halting for a moment to pull my panties aside feels like a waste. Maybe I should just keep going until we finish. We're already in need of a change of underwear anyhow.

"H-Hanako... I..."

He's almost there. Only a little while longer.

"H-Hanko... S-stop... Stop."

With some reluctance, I let go of him and get off his lap. Hisao immediately pulls his boxers down, takes the tip of his member between his thumb and index finger and squeezes firmly. After a second or two he lets out a relieved sigh.

"Whew. That was close. Nearly... soiled... my boxers there. Could you give me a minute or two to cool down?"

"..."

Two minutes sounds like an eternity. I give a reluctant nod, but at the same time start anxiously rubbing my thighs together. I don't really want to cool down myself.

Hisao seems to notice my fidgetting and smiles.

"I can still make you feel good in the meantime. I could... you know..."

He shoots a knowing look at the dark spot on my panties and then gently kisses my belly button.

"T-That...?"

"Why not? You liked it before."

"I... uh... h-haven't bathed or showered this morning and... it's really b-bright in this room."

He chuckles at my worried expression.

"That first part really isn't a problem for me, and if you like, I'll just close my eyes."

"...o-okay..."

That last word was nearly a whisper, but Hisao nevertheless heard it as he takes off his boxers, kneels on the floor in front of me, gives one more kiss on my belly button and then closes his eyes.

Feeling a little awkward still, I take off my panties, take a careful step forward and gently press myself against Hisao.

I feel his hands on my thighs and what follows is a sensation so intense I let out a high-pitched squeal.

"G-G-Gently!"

That grinding session must have left me more sensitive than I thought."

"Sorry. Is this better?"

I let out a content sigh.

"Y-Yes..."

The intense stimulation changes to a more gentle lapping, and I let out a content sigh, trying my best to push the usual sense of embarrassment out of my mind. As he promised, Hisao's keeping his eyes shut, and I close my own as well in an attempt to block out everything around me and just let myself get carried away by his sensation.

It's really quiet around me, the only sounds I hear being the soft suckling noises from Hisao, my heavy breathing and the occasional moan. Letting him pleasure me like this is different from before. I can still run my fingers through his hair like usual, but I can also move my hips a little more this time, pulling away or pressing myself against him depending on what feels best.

It's starting to get tough to remain standing though. Maybe it's because of my extended physical involvement this time, but my legs are getting wobblier the longer he continues.

"Hhhhhh..."

Suddenly, he starts speeding up and the pleasure nearly causes my legs to give out. I manage to remain standing only by putting my hand on his desk to support myself. Almost immediately, the intense sensation stops, and I feel his arms around me, holding me up.

"Hanako, you okay?"

I'm still panting heavily, but nevertheless nod my head.

"Y-Yes..."

"You don't want to rest for a bit?"

I shake my head and then unexpectedly kiss him. He reels in surprise, but then returns it. He tastes a little different this time, but nothing too bad.

"Hisao... Do you want me t-to... return the favor?"

"Uh... Next time, okay?"

"Okay."

He takes a towel from a nearby shelf, puts it on the chair's seat and then sits down, inviting me to sit on his lap again. My legs still a little unsteady from before, I walk up to him, position myself above him and place one hand firmly on his shoulder to stabilize myself. I take hold of his member with my other hand and slowly start lowering myself. It's tougher than I thought. As I start squatting down, my legs immediately start shaking, and I'm forced to brace myself against his shoulder in order to keep steady.

"Uh... Hanako..."

My gaze shifts from our loins to Hisao's face and I can see a slightly scared expression on his face.

"Be very careful, okay? If you aim wrong, you might just... snap... something important, and I don't think I can handle a few weeks of having to hobble around the school with a problem in my pants."

06

"Poooooooooooo! Hahahahahahaha!"

Before I can help it, an image appears in my head of an extremely sad-looking Hisao with his willie in an orthopedic cast similar to the one Jun from the newspaper club has been wearing, and this image is so utterly bizarre that I burst out laughing, and I have to stand up straight in order to avoid dropping down on his lap for real.

Hisao for his part is merely looking at me with a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. He obviously finds the sight of my laughing fit funnier than the thought that caused it.

Eventually though, he rolls his eyes and softly clears his throat. Looks like he's eager to continue.

"Hanako? Shall we...? I can give you a hand if you like."

I giggle, but nevertheless nod in agreement.

"T-Thanks."

I take hold of him again, and this time he puts his hands on the back of my upper legs, gently lowering me onto him. I manage to guide his tip inside me and then allow myself to slide down until he's all the way inside. We both exhale sharply as we become one, and I fidget a bit in an attempt to get comfortable. When I'm reasonably sure I have the right angle, I start gyrating my hips, still giggling a little bit.

"Hmmmm..."

The friction is really pretty good even though moving is a bit tiring. His hands have found my breasts again and are stroking and kneading them. No longer needing to hold onto his shoulders so much, I take his face in my hand and kiss him again, muffling the moans we can't suppress.

"Hanako... Can you... move up and down a little?"

"Y-Yes..."

I try to alternate the gyrating movement of my hips with moving up a little, taking care not to let him slip out. It still feels really good, though my legs start shaking again.

"H-Hisao... C-can you help me...move?"

"Yeah..."

He puts his hands under my butt, playfully squeezing it a bit and helps me gently bounce up and down. I hear an embarrassing noise coming from the place where we're joined each time he sinks back into me, but I'm too far into the whole experience to care anymore.

"... Mmh!... C-closer."

"... Hah... G-got it."

He pulls me closer, increasing the friction between our bodies and intensifying my pleasure even more. We soon figure out a rhythm and start increasing the speed of our movements. This is probably tiring for both of us, but since we're sharing the workload we'll probably be able to keep this up until the end. I let out a cry followed by a giggle as he leans forward and licks my nipples before putting his head between my breasts and kissing the spot between them. I press his head further against my chest, eager for more pleasure.

"Hmmmm. H-Hanako. Hhhh..."

"Ah! Hmmm. H-Hisao. Nnnnng. Hmmm..."

Our panting and gasps barely leave us breath to moan each other's name. I can feel my limit approaching and speed up my movements as much as my body allows. Judging from his closed eyes and ragged breath, Hisao's even farther along than I am. I lift his chin up and kiss him once more. He seems almost too immersed in our love making to notice, and just as our lips part I can see a grimace appearing on his face. He squeezes my buttocks even harder than before and starts bouncing me up and down even faster.

"Hanako!"

And then he tenses up, grips me tightly and his body jolts several times in sheer pleasure. I stop my up-and-down movement and focus on my gyrations. My hips seem to have gotten a life of their own and are grinding against him as hard as they can. I close my eyes and block out everything to focus on that feeling, that intense feeling of pleasure that's slowly completely overwhelming me. I picture Hisao's face in my mind. The one I saw just seconds ago. The bliss written on it. The pleasure that I gave him. His gasps and moans. The way he called my name. That image is enough to push me past my limit.

"Hisao!"

I feel a discharge of pleasure between my legs, and my upper body surges forward in the grip of my climax. I throw my head back and let out a cry of ecstasy as my body shudders and quakes. After the last few aftershocks have disappeared I weakly open my eyes and look at my boyfriend.

His eyes are half-closed. His breathing still fast, but steady. He exchanges his usual 'I'm alright'-smile with me, wraps his arms around my waist and then leans his head against my chest. As I shift a bit in order to get more comfortable, I feel him slipping out of me. We could probably both use a shower right now. My back, sides and forehead are drenched in sweat, and I feel something that probably isn't perspiration running down the inside of my thighs. Good thing Hisao put a towel on the seat.

As wonderful as this experience was, it was also really exhausting, and while we probably ought to get up and clean ourselves, I don't really feel motivated to hurry and get off his lap, not just because my legs and thighs still feel tired and I feel a bit drowsy, but also because it feels really good being so close to him. I let my chin rest on his head and tenderly ruffle his hair. He responds by gently stroking my back and shoulders. For several minutes, neither of us says anything. Both of us are content basking in the afterglow of our experience and exchanging these little acts of affection. I love the warmth of his body and the sweetness of his touch. Eventually, I lean back a little so Hisao can lift his head and we look each other in the eyes. I let my forehead rest against his, and we tenderly caress each other's cheek. After one more kiss, Hisao finally speaks.

"Did you... enjoy it?"

I smile and nod my head.

"Yeah, me too. It was pretty enjoyable to switch places for once. Maybe you can take the lead more often?"

"It was pretty tiring in the end."

"Maybe we can do it on the bed next time and see if it's less taxing on you."

"O-Okay."

"So... Wanna take a shower together?"

A nice warm shower to wash the sweat off does sound very tempting. Now that my body's cooling down from our lovemaking session, I'm starting to feel a bit chilly.

"Y-Yes."

I get off his lap, Hisao takes some tissues from his desk drawer that we use to clean ourselves and then he takes my hand and leads me to the shower in the bathroom where we wash ourselves and engage in some additional post-coital cuddling. It's such a nice experience that part of me wouldn't mind doing this all day long. That's not realistic though, and eventually Hisao turns off the water though he doesn't let go of me yet. He has a cheeky smile on his face.

"You know, there's no running track in our backyard and this might be good morning exercise. I wouldn't at all mind if every morning of our stay turns out just like this."

I wouldn't either, though I don't tell him that.

"Emi likes to say that a good workout still beats sex, but I think she simply doesn't know what she's talking about. Either that or she's had nothing but lousy experiences."

We both laugh at that.

"Hey Hanako, now that I think about it again... What was that song you were humming while you were preparing breakfast?"

"I... don't really remember the title. It was just in my head at the moment."

"Heh, you know, it was a little disappointing that you weren't singing while we were taking a shower. Quite a few people sing under the shower."

"I don't... usually."

"You sounded really nice this morning though."

"N-Not r-really..."

He snickers at my embarrassed reaction. I can see him thinking to himself. After a while, his eyes suddenly light up. He lets go of me, takes a towel and starts drying me off. All the while, there's a grin on his face.

"W-What is it?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get dressed first."

"W-Why are you smiling like that?"

"I think I just thought of a suitable destination for our first date here."

Chapter 36 (Hanako)

01

"♪ Fill my heart with song ♪"

"♪ And let me sing forever more ♪"

"♪ You are all I long for ♪"

"♪ All I worship and adore ♪"

"♪ In other words, please be true ♪"

"♪ In other words, I love you ♪"

"♪ In other words, I love you ♪"

As I finish singing the latest song we picked for our karaoke session and make a humble bow, my one-man audience breaks into spontaneous applause. I blush a bit, but am nevertheless very pleased by how appreciative Hisao seems to be about my singing, although his opinion is probably far from unbiased.

"That sounded really good, Hanako."

"T-Thanks."

I walk over to the table and take a few sips from the soft drinks we bought in order to prevent my throat from getting sore. In the meantime, Hisao is already eagerly browsing through the karaoke machine's music catalog.

"Would you be up for another one, Hanako?"

"Don't you want to try another song?"

"If you take this one too, I'll give you a kiss."

I playfully roll my eyes. While the initial idea was to take turns in singing songs, I ended up doing most of the singing while Hisao took the role of a doting audience that keeps asking for an encore. Still, I'm having a good time. The karaoke booth we got was among the smaller ones, but the atmosphere in here is relaxed and cozy.

"Hmmm... Okay. But I need a little break first."

"Sure."

I take a seat at the table, and Hisao sits down next to me and wraps an arm around me.

"I think we can safely declare this date a success."

"Hisao... Do you... like my singing voice that much?"

I admit I'm not exactly bad at singing, but I'm surprised how taken Hisao is by it.

"Yeah, I do. I guess it's because I've never seen this side of you before. Or rather 'heard this side of you' is a better way to word it. Your singing voice is kind of different from your speaking voice."

"It's not... that different, is it?"

"It's still recognizable as yours, but it's... less restrained. Since you usually speak rather softly, it's a pretty noticeable contrast when you raise your voice like you do when you sing."

I suppose he has a point. In everyday life, I make an attempt to attract as little attention as possible, and never raising my voice is very much part of that.

"Out of curiosity; how are Akira's and Lilly's singing voices? I understood that Lilly's not overly fond of karaoke."

I smile.

"Akira's singing is okay - as long as she doesn't drink too much beer. But she's always really enjoying herself while singing karaoke, whether she sounds good or not. She's not too self-conscious about how she sounds when she's with us."

"And Lilly?"

"I think she sounds fine. Maybe she's a bit perfectionistic about how she wants herself to sound. Part of the reason she doesn't enjoy karaoke more is because she can't read the lyrics off the screen and there aren't many songs that she has completely memorized."

"That kind of makes sense."

"She does enjoy hanging out with Akira and me and listening to us though."

"Maybe the four of us could go give it a shot the next time Akira is in Japan, assuming she doesn't visit in the middle of examination hell."

"That would be nice."

Hisao takes a chug of his own drink and then checks his watch.

"Man, time sure flies. Our hour is nearly up already. What do you say about extending our stay for another hour?"

"Sure."

Hisao takes out his wallet and gets some bills out. It's part of the sum we got from Lilly's mother before we boarded our plane back to Japan. He prepares to get up, but I stop him.

"Umm... I could go and do that. I have to take a restroom break anyway."

"If you insist."

"Thanks."

"Take your time."

02

I put the money in my pocket and leave the booth, making my way over to the reception. From what I can tell, most of the booths are occupied right now. Summer break is obviously an excuse for many local students to take some time off from school work and relax for a spell. Fortunately, it's not particularly crowded at the reception desk. The only people aside from the employee behind the desk are two people about my age who seem to be a couple and who still appear to be involved in a discussion on how long to rent a booth. I carefully approach them, wondering if I should wait for them to make a decision or if I should ask them if I can quickly let the clerk extend my stay. Then I wonder if I'd even have the nerve to follow through on the second option.

As the two other customers notice me, the male looks at me and opens his mouth to say something, but then notices my scarring and stares for a moment without saying anything. The female, who until now was cheerfully chattering to her partner, gives me an awkward look. I shudder a bit and instinctively turn away from his gaze, my formerly good mood quickly dropping. After three excruciating seconds he remembers he was on the verge of saying something.

"Ah... If you want to go first, go ahead."

I nervously nod and then approach the desk. I notice that the clerk behind the desk isn't the same person as when Hisao and I arrived here and as a result I'm treated to three stares rather than two in less than half a minute. I'm beginning to feel that not letting Hisao handle this was a really big mistake.

"Ah... ummm..."

"Can I help you, miss?"

"I... uh... W-we w-would like to s-stay for one m-more hour."

"Ah... Of course. What's your booth number?"

"Uh?"

03

Damnit! There was probably a number next to the door when we entered the booth, but I didn't pay attention to it when I entered or left. I desperately dig through my memories of the last hour, but my nervousness makes it impossible to recall what number Hisao and I were in. If I get the number wrong and then have to return here to sort things out later that'll be even worse.

"Ummm... D-down the hall on the r-right..."

"Number 15? 16? 17? 18?"

I'm straining to resist the urge to just run off. Just when I'm about to blurt out a random number, I have a moment of clarity that manages to calm me down just a bit.

"Ummm... W-we called ahead earlier to ask if t-there was still r-room. Y-You'd keep a b-booth r-reserved f-for us."

It's a longshot since this employee may not have even been on duty when Hisao called this morning, but maybe whoever took the call wrote it down. Sure enough, the clerk nods, checks a notepad next to his computer and then looks at me.

"Nakai. Booth number 16."

"Y-Yes. T-That's us. Ummm... One m-more hour, please."

I hand him the yen I brought along, and he makes a semi-bow to me in return.

"Please enjoy your stay, and I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

I realize he's expected to apologize for any and all issues that arise, whether they're his fault or not, but it feels odd to say sorry for something that's entirely caused by my anxieties. When I take the change he hands me and turn around, I suddenly realize that the couple behind me hasn't said a single word since I first started interacting with the desk clerk and has been following my tortured conversation word-for-word. This time it's the girl staring at me. My anxiety flaring up, I make my way past them and towards the restroom as fast as I can without actually running. As I get away from there, I can feel their gaze on my back like a pair of knives.

04

My restroom break takes longer than I planned, simply because I remain in the stall until my nerves have eased a bit. I don't want to return to Hisao looking all stressed out, or he'll just get worried about me. After taking a few minutes to calm down, I exit the stall, wash my hands and then prepare to return to our booth.

"Oh!"

That's when the door suddenly opens and a familiar face walks in. It's the same person who witnessed my bungled conversation with the receptionist a few minutes earlier. Upon seeing me, she lets out a subdued cry of surprise. I can feel my anxiety rearing its head again as she looks at me, but before I can decide on whether to flee back into the stall or make a quick exit from the restroom, she makes a quick bow and opens her mouth to speak.

"Umm... Excuse me."

She seems a bit uneasy herself, probably due to my appearance. Is she going to try and have some random conversation about nothing with me? I really should get going.

"I'm... ah... sorry for earlier. I really didn't mean to stare."

That's a bit of a surprise. I don't receive apologies very often. Most of the time I have the impression that others feel the fault for making them uncomfortable lies with me, and the best thing I can do to get rid of the awkwardness is to quickly get away from their presence.

"It's... o-okay."

"Can I ask you a question, please?"

A question? What would she want to ask? I hope she's not going to ask how I got these scars. 'What happened to you?' is a question that was posed to me on several occasions when I first came to Yamaku, and I've never been able to deal with it very well. It's not like the answer's all that difficult to guess, so why even both with the question?

"This may seem a bit forward and I... ah... apologize in advance, but erm..."

If she asks about my burn scars, I'm out of here. I'll just cross my fingers and hope there's nobody in the hallway to see me sprint back to our booth.

"...I was just wondering if you..."

What could she possibly want to know about me if not for my scarring?

"...you wouldn't happen to be a student at Yamaku Academy, would you?"

"W-What?"

That question comes so completely out of nowhere that I visibly reel in shock. For the first time since she started speaking to me, I move my gaze away from the floor and towards the person standing in front of me. She's a girl with a slim figure and a slightly delicate posture. Her hair, which is even darker than my own, reaches just past her shoulders, and her long bangs are not completely unlike mine. I can't say she looks familiar to me. Does this person know me or something?

I struggle to determine how to react, but the girl in front of me patiently waits for me to get my bearings back. I finally manage to stammer out a response, my curiosity slowly reining in my anxiety.

"I... ah... I am. B-But how...?"

She gives me a rather weak smile that seems more than a little forced.

"There was... a boy at my school who was hospitalized last school year. He... ended up transferring there."

"H-Hospitalized last school year and t-transferred?"

I certainly know one person at Yamaku who fits that particular description.

"I... ah... overheard your conversation at the reception desk earlier. His... ah... last name matched the one that the receptionist mentioned. I apologize if I got this wrong, but I wondered..."

There's no doubt in my mind that this girl is talking about Hisao. What are the odds of us running into someone from his old school? Well, according to Hisao this place *is* rather close to his old high school, so I suppose the odds of us running into students from there aren't impossibly low, especially since it's summer break.

"Ah... "

This girl is pretty quick to latch onto a surname that is probably shared by several more families in a city as large as this one.

"I... t-think we're t-talking about the same p-person, but..."

I can't help but grimace as the girl's logic suddenly hits me. I already know that she's aware of Yamaku being a school. Chances are that she also knows what kind of school it is. In that case, she probably decided to take her chances because it was a girl with severe facial scarring who was bringing up Hisao's name. The idea that I can be this easily identified as a Yamaku student in this way, even when I'm out of my school uniform, feels like a painful blow to the gut. The girl, who is eyeing me pretty closely, looks slightly worried.

"Is something wrong?"

I quickly brush off her concerns. I don't think there's a need for me to bring up my insecurity about my scars.

"It's n-nothing. Ummm... so... y-you were f-friends with Hisao?"

Her forced smile seems to relax for a moment when I mention Hisao's first name, but then resurfaces just as quickly.

"We were... in the same class."

Hisao, during one of our get-togethers in the city, confided in me that there were only three people he used to hang out with on a regular basis before he moved to Yamaku, and it doesn't seem like this girl was one of them. Simply a former classmate then?

"Oh."

But there's something that doesn't make sense to me. Why is she having this tortured discussion with *me*? If she overheard his name, she must have heard our booth number as well. Why didn't she just take a peek inside and simply apologize if the person inside wasn't who she was expecting?

"Ummm... Are y-you g-going to say hello to him?"

The girl in front of me doesn't immediately answer. For a moment she seems lost in thought. Then she smiles awkwardly.

"I am... uh... not sure if I should impose on him."

She sighs. For some reason she's fidgeting a bit as if trying to make a decision yet not quite succeeding.

"It's a bit complicated."

Complicated? That's rather vague. Were they more than classmates? Did she have a crush on him? Or...?

I suddenly remember something Hisao once told me. It was on the day that I first told Hisao about why I look the way I do. In return he told me that his first heart attack took place when a girl confessed to him. Could the person in front of me be that girl? That would explain her seeming awkwardness.

Hisao has told me before that he lost contact with all the people from his old school, including his old friends, during his hospitalisation. While telling me about that, he did his best to put on a 'life goes on, so what can you do'-attitude, although since I went through a similar thing myself when I was younger, I never truly bought his act. If what Hisao's parents said this morning was true and if this girl is the person who confessed to him, then she's also the girl who visited him in the hospital for a while. The girl I was being compared to.

"S-Sorry if it's too f-forward to ask, but d-did you... ummm... l-like him?"

She doesn't immediately respond, obviously not completely sure if it's appropriate to answer that question.

"I was there when... it happened. I visited him in the hospital for a while, but I haven't really heard from him since his hospitalisation. We... didn't really part on the best of terms."

Looks like my hunch was correct. This girl confessed to him last year, his heart acted up and he spent nearly half a year in the hospital. She visited him at first, but they drifted apart while Hisao was busy digesting how much his life had changed. I can't really judge her for not sticking with him all that time since I did an even worse job supporting him during his last stay in the hospital. I don't think anything like a relationship ever came out of it. Hisao already mentioned before that they lost contact after she stopped dropping by. Yet at some point he did get a letter which I suspect came from her, and he was visibly upset when he saw who sent it. He mentioned wanting to write a letter back at some point, but it sounds like he never actually got around to doing it.

I guess even when you think you've moved on, people from your old life resurfacing unexpectedly can quickly cause the past to come back and haunt you. That seems to be the case for this girl too. I sincerely wonder how Hisao would react if he suddenly came face to face with this girl. He's been doing pretty well lately, so maybe he would be in the mood for briefly catching up. But judging from the way they went their separate ways and the fact that he never ended up sending a reply to that letter, it's equally likely that a confrontation would be excruciatingly awkward. I'm fairly certain that this girl is currently contemplating the same thing.

"On the one hand it feels a bit rude to know he's here and not say hello and ask him how he's doing. But it could get a bit awkward, too, and I... don't really want to ruin the afternoon for him or for myself."

"T-The person you came in with... Is he y-your b-boyfriend?"

The girl gives me a tiny smile.

"Maybe. This is only our first date."

She rolls her eyes a bit.

"It almost makes you wonder if this is an omen of some sort, does it not?"

I personally think that instead of an omen this karaoke club is simply popular with the students from Hisao's old high school, and Hisao simply took me here because he was familiar with the place without really thinking of the possibility of running into someone he knows.

"Ummm..."

I'm not really sure what to tell this girl. I think Hisao has moved on from that old 'relationship' or he wouldn't be dating me. This girl has moved on too or she wouldn't be going out with that person I saw at the reception desk. But I can imagine that when she thinks about Hisao, she's still thinking about that boy lying in his hospital bed and trying to fight off a depression. That's probably her most recent impression of him after all. Maybe I can help with that.

05

"...if you're curious about h-how he's d-doing, I could tell you a f-few things. He's b-been in my class since early June. He... ummm... has been eating lunch with m-my best friend and me since h-his first week there. It t-took him a bit of t-time to get used to the n-new school, but n-now he gets along well w-with most of the class."

She doesn't immediately react, and I wonder if I'm even doing the right thing here, but I still continue on.

"He still l-likes to read a lot, l-like he did in the hospital. He also set up a science club together with our homeroom t-teacher who also teaches science. The club is still s-small, but Hisao is looking to recruit more m-members. Our homeroom teacher has t-taken a liking to him because he's doing so well in the subject. He also plans to study science after he g-graduates."

I hesitate for a moment before continuing on a more serious subject.

"He... w-was hospitalized again a little while back because a small accident triggered his c-condition, but fortunately that w-was only for a week. After he got out he told me that he w-wasn't going to let a hospital s-stay get him down again and that he wanted to continue where he left off. He goes jogging almost daily to stay in shape, and he does his best to mind his medication, so his condition doesn't h-hinder him in everyday life these days. My best f-friend let us come with her to Scotland for a while, and I think Hisao also really enjoyed that. I t-think he's... happy with his l-life right now."

I kept my eyes pointed at the floor during most of my story to limit my stammering, but when I finish my story and cautiously look back at the girl, I immediately notice that her awkward posture has diminished, and a genuine smile has appeared on her face. She lets out a soft giggle.

"You brightened up a little while talking about him. Are you... dating him?"

I nod meekly, a bit embarrassed by her observation but also feeling a bit proud.

"S-Since early July. We're c-currently on a date too."

She smiles gratefully at me.

"Thank you for telling me all this. It's a real relief to know he bounced back so well."

"It's o-okay."

"If it's just you and him here then he's probably starting to wonder what's keeping you. I was thinking; it'll probably feel odd if I seek out his company instead of my date's."

"M-Maybe we s-should both j-just go and have a good time without c-complicating things."

She gives a determined nod.

"Perhaps that would be best."

"O-Okay then. Ummm... G-goodbye then?"

"There's one more thing if you don't mind."

"Yes?"

She gives me a curious smile.

"May I know your name?"

I blush. We've been talking for some time now without even knowing the other's name. I make a polite bow to her.

06

"H-Hanako."

She returns my bow and lets out a girlish giggle.

"That sounds a little bit like mine. I am Iwanako."

"So... ah... I'll be g-going then."

She nods

"Thank you again."

I make my way over to the exit, but before I open it I look behind me one more time. Iwanako smiles at me and gives me a small wave.

"Hanako... enjoy your date today."

I smile bashfully.

"Y-You too, Iwanako."

"I was beginning to worry whether the door of your stall got jammed."

I give my boyfriend, who I find waiting outside the ladies' room, a guilty smile.

"S-Sorry for making you wait."

"Well, at least I have the feeling that I'm not the only one who's waiting for his lady friend."

He shoots a brief look at another person who's standing in the hallway and who appears to be keeping an eye on the door I just exited.

"Let's get back to our booth."

I take hold of his sleeve and give it a gentle tug to indicate I'm eager to get back.

"Okay, okay, no need to rush. If we exceed the time we have we can always extend our stay a second time."

We move back into our booth, but before I take the microphone I turn to Hisao.

"Hisao? If it's okay with you, I'd like to go somewhere else after our time here is up."

"Sure, Hanako. Any suggestions?"

"I would... like to see your old high school, or maybe the game center you used to visit."

"Hmmm."

He seems deep in thought for a moment.

"Can we move that to tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we might actually end up running into someone I know there and I'm not completely sure how to act around them yet. I'd like to sleep a night on it if that's okay with you."

"Sure."

"I know a cozy movie theater I've been to a few times in the past that's about a 15 minute bus ride away from here. We could go there and see if there are any nice movies playing."

"That sounds like fun."

"It's a deal then. But let's go through a few more songs first."

"Okay."

He takes one of the soft drinks standing on the table and raises it.

"To a wonderful date."

I take my own soft drink and touch the bottle against his.

"T-To a wonderful date."

07

My anxiety from the incident at the reception desk vanished, I pick a song from the karaoke machine, grab the microphone and then walk up to Hisao and gently sit on his lap. As I start singing and he lovingly wraps his arms around my waist, I think back on the last words of the conversation in the restroom and smile.

I think I *will* enjoy my date today.

08

Chapter 37 (Lilly)

01

The sounds of footsteps approaching the kitchen draws my attention away from the cupboard containing what I believe to be various cooking implements. I've been trying to memorize the layout of the kitchen and the contents of the cupboards and drawers since the start of this week. Due to the size of the kitchen this is not exactly a small task.

As the footsteps get closer, I softly tilt my head to try and determine the identity of the person approaching me. From the sound of the heels it must be a woman, so that rules out Father. The footsteps' pace is also too quick and steady to be his. It could be Allison. Or perhaps Fiona, the cleaning lady. From what I've noticed, Fiona's pace is more energetic than this, so that must mean Allison has returned from her shopping trip. I turn around and try to face the doorway so I can greet the person walking into the room.

"Good afternoon, Allison. You're back sooner than I expected."

"Good afternoon, Miss Lilly. I was lucky it wasn't very busy at Raigmore's apothecary, so it only took a few minutes to get your father's latest batch of medication."

"I greatly appreciate it. May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"When we have visitors here, do we usually serve green or black tea?"

"It depends on the visitors. We offer both out of courtesy, but people from around here usually stick with black and the few times your father has Japanese visitors over they usually prefer green."

"Do you often have visitors here?"

"Your mother has visitors almost weekly. There are friends with whom she goes on bike rides around the countryside, and they usually have tea before and after the ride. She's also chairwoman of the neighborhood association, and meetings often take place in this house."

"Mother certainly lives an active life. Doesn't she ever take it easy?"

Allison chuckles as if I just told her a very funny joke.

"I do not think your mother is the type for that."

I smile wistfully. Mother has changed so much from the way I remember her. Back in Japan she hardly ever left the house and wouldn't even go to my school's PTA meetings or take us to the park. Would I change this much if I had decided to move here? It's a bit of a creepy thought. I like the way I am.

"How about visitors for Father?"

"People from the Japanese branch occasionally stop by in Inverness, and your father lets them spend the night here instead of at a hotel. He always looks forwards to their visits, and when they stay here we are asked to treat them like royalty. But such a thing only happens once every four months or so."

"We will be getting a visitor from Father's office later this day. He called earlier today, and he asked if it was okay if he stopped by after work to drop off some equipment for us."

"I see. That means he will probably be here within 40 minutes or so. But I don't think your father would appreciate it if we let that colleague come up into the master bedroom."

"No, he would not. I think it would be best if we receive him in Father's study. Isn't that where he usually has his guests?"

"It is. So what would you like me to do, Miss Lilly?"

"Ahem..."

This is a bit awkward. Two days ago, Mother took a flight to the United States together with a business delegation consisting of Akira, Kojima and a few more colleagues, leaving Father and me as the sole residents in this house. Allison was supposed to be responsible for running the day-to-day things here, but only minutes after we left Inverness airport, she started getting slightly more formal than usual with me and explained that as far as she was concerned I was the lady of the house right now and officially in charge of the household. I was taken back by that at first, but over the last two days I've slowly started growing into the role that had been handed to me, and although I'm not about to admit it out loud, I am somewhat enjoying it.

"Perhaps it would be good if Fiona could make certain that the room is cleaned and vacuumed. Because of its distinct appearance, our visitor is certain to pay close attention to the state of its interior."

"As you wish. If I give Miss Wilson a hand, I am certain we'll be able to have it looking prim and proper in 10 minutes."

"Wonderful. After Father's colleague called, I made a phone call to the nurse we hired to do Father's daily checkup, and she thinks he should be able to handle a short meeting as long as he rests up afterwards. When our visitor arrives, I could perhaps do the serving while you wake up Father, make certain he looks presentable and help him down the stairs. I might have trouble with some of those tasks myself."

"Not a problem. Do you wish me to help you make the tea, Miss Lilly?"

"I think I can manage. Assuming everything is still in the same place as it was yesterday."

"It should be. I brought some tasty biscuits along to go with the tea. I put the box containing them on the second shelf of the cupboard next to the fridge."

"Shall we get started then?"

"Good afternoon. May I help you?"

After the doorbell rang, I made my way over to the front door, while Allison went to help Father get out of bed. I do hope he will be okay. It's only been about two weeks since his heart attack and he's only been home for a few days.

"Good afternoon. Geoffry McLaughlin. We spoke on the phone two hours ago."

I make a gracious bow towards him.

"Welcome, Mister McLaughlin. I am Lilly Satou. This way please. My father will be with you shortly."

"Thanks."

I make my way back to the study with McLaughlin following close behind.

"Wow, nice place you've got here."

"You're flattering us."

He chuckles briefly at my response, but doesn't say anything back. When we reach the study and I open the door for him, he lets out a soft 'Holy Shit' under his breath.

"Please take a seat while I get you some tea. Would you prefer black or green tea?"

He pauses for a bit, probably wondering whether it's okay to let a blind person serve him hot tea, but then responds.

"Black with just a dash of milk, please."

"Certainly. I will be right back."

"One question if you don't mind."

"Of course."

"Do you have Wifi in this place?"

"Ah... Wifi?"

"Wireless network. I'd like to start setting things up, and it'd be good to know if I have to use the ethernet cable I brought along or if I can set up a wireless connection. Either way's fine."

My smile becomes a little more forced. I have no idea what he's talking about. He's probably assuming that every teenager, even a blind one, knows what a Wifi is.

"Ah... I'm afraid I... can't help you."

"That's fine. I'll just power up the laptop and see if it can detect any wireless routers around here. If I can find any and authorization is needed, I can ask your father for the password. Okay?"

Translation!

I force the brightest smile I can muster.

"That would be... good. I will be right back."

I quickly make my way out of the room and head over to the kitchen. I take the kettle from the stove, fill the tea pot and think back on what just happened. That was painfully embarrassing. I thank God that Father's not here right now, because he would certainly feel that I brought shame on him by my blatant display of computer illiteracy.

I can't let this throw me off though. After preparing the tea (and some fruit juice for Father) I carefully head back to the study, making sure not to accidentally drop the tray while reaching for the door handle.

"I apologize for taking so long."

"That's fine. I doubt I'd be able to prepare tea if I wasn't able to see what I was doing."

I pour a bit of milk into his cup and carefully fill it. Then I fill my own. I hold his cup out to him until he takes it from my hands.

"Please enjoy."

"Thanks."

"It might take Father a few minutes to get ready. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"No need to apologize. Suffering from a heart attack isn't something anyone would do on purpose, now is it?"

"That is certainly true. May I inquire what exactly do you do at the company, Mister McLaughlin?"

"You know, you can call me Geoffry if you wish. No need to be formal."

I merely smile at him. If Father heard me address one of his colleagues with his first name, I'd probably get in trouble.

"Anyway, I'm a system administrator. My colleague Alec and I are in charge of the department that maintains the computers, company network and servers at the office. We also take care of whatever issues people have with their computer systems. Hehe, in a way we're the most powerful people in the company."

I politely chuckle at his remark, but remind myself I'd better try and steer the conversation away from his area of expertise if I don't want to embarrass myself again.

"Your mother came to us last week with the request to set up a digital conference system."

Indeed. During the days I spent at Father's side after he was hospitalized, it quickly became clear to me that the matter of him now missing out on the final steps of the company's expansion wasn't a passing problem. And while I was thinking on how to help him, Hanako's suggestion of a teleconference came back to mind.

I first spoke to Akira about the feasibility and then later to Mother and Father as well. Mother wasn't extremely enthusiastic about going to the US without Father at first, and I don't think her reluctance was out of insecurity. Rather, she seems to partially blame Father's condition on the company and wasn't eager to stick her neck out for it instead of remaining by her husband's side. Eventually, I managed to convince her that helping Father tie up this loose end would be the best way to get the four of us together again. As for Father, he was reluctant as well because he considered not showing up in person to an important meeting to be an insult to his business partners although when Mother assured him that these were special circumstances and that the people we'd be meeting wouldn't think less of him for it, he eventually relented.

"I am glad you managed to obtain the necessary equipment so quickly."

"Well, we've worked with stuff like this before, so it wasn't that big of a deal."

I hear him take a careful sip from his cup.

"By the way, how is your dad?"

"He's getting better. Though it is unlikely he will be seen in the workplace any time soon."

I pause for a moment and then continue.

"Mister McLaughlin... It is probably best to tell you in advance that my father will not be able to talk at length and can only be present for a very short while. It would be good if you could take that into account."

"...fair enough. I'll try not to waste any time. I kind of need to get home quickly too. Lord knows it's going to be a long night for me as well. Alec's gonna owe me quite a few pints when he gets back."

"Your colleague accompanied our business delegation to the United States, didn't he?"

"Yeah, we drew straws to determine who was going to stay here and who was going to take a trip to the US and stay in a luxury hotel. Three guesses who took the short one."

I giggle a bit at his remark.

"That's unfortunate for you, but I assume that someone had to stay behind."

"Yeah and to be honest, this was for the best. Alec's a bit of an eternal bachelor, and he can afford to go there for a week or two. I have a wife and a seven-year old waiting for me at home, and my boy has football training at six each Wednesday. It'd be kinda hard to drive him there when I'm on the other side of the world. His mom could do it if necessary, I get called on emergencies from time to time, but there's usually nothing but fathers on the sidelines. Football is really a guy thing, you know?"

"Of course."

He's talking about it like it's normal for him to be home around that time each day. Maybe it is over here, but if that's the case then that's a pretty big contrast from the way things were in my childhood. Even before he left the country, Father's job often kept him away from the home for six days a week, and he wouldn't return from work until way after my bedtime. It was this way with all fathers in the neighborhood. During these weeks where I've been by his bedside, we've probably had more extended interaction than any other time in my life I remember.

I consider asking him about his son, but my ears suddenly pick up the sound of approaching footsteps. I instinctively rise to my feet when they stop on the other side of the door, and when it opens, I greet my father with a graceful bow.

"Hello Father. I'm glad you could join us."

"Lilly. Mister... McLaughlin. Good afternoon."

I can tell that he's doing his best to speak at normal volume. Since speaking too loudly or even breathing too deeply is still painful and very exhausting, I doubt he will last very long. There is, however, no doubt in my mind that he'll do whatever it takes to make certain his colleague won't notice.

"Good afternoon, sir. How are you feeling?"

"I am well... thank you. I apologize for the delay."

"Not a problem. Your daughter's an excellent host."

I wait until he's seated, pour him a glass of fruit juice and hand it to him.

"Would you like some more tea, sir?"

"I haven't finished my first cup yet, but thanks."

He scrapes his throat.

"I'll try not to take up too much of your time. Shall I start explaining how we've set up things?"

A short pause before responding. I know that Father prefers to start meetings off slowly with some polite small talk and that getting down to business immediately feels rude to him, but at the same time he seems to remember the importance of saving his strength.

"Please proceed."

02

"First of all, I notice there's a wireless network set up here. I can log the laptop onto it, but I will need the network password."

"Please... check under... the table."

I hear a the sound of fingers probing the underside of the table surface.

"Ah! A network cable. I didn't realize that table leg was hollow. That'll do fine too."

I hear a soft click as the cable he spoke of is inserted into a device on the table.

"Looks like we have a connection to the web. This laptop here runs the conference software we've installed. This little unit next to it is the transmitter for the wireless headset. The headset should be able to pick up the signal from just about anywhere inside the house. I also have a normal headset ready on the off chance of the transmitter failing."

"I... beg your... pardon, but do... you have... a spare head... set?"

"Would you like someone else listening in too?"

"If... she is... interested."

I realize that Father's talking about me. I was planning to remain by his side this night, but I didn't expect being given a chance to actually listen in. I doubt I'll understand much of what's discussed, but this is quite the chance to hear my parents 'working'.

"I'd be honored, Father."

"I have several more headsets back at the office. I'll stop by there and fetch one later this evening."

"Thank you."

"This laptop is part of a pair. Alec took the other one along to the US. He has a transmitter just like the one here, except it's connected to a collection of microphones. Since some of those meetings the upcoming week will be held over dinner, we felt that putting a teleconference unit on the table might be cumbersome. The microphones we'll be handing out to the participants are the small, unintrusive kind. You clip them onto your lapel and then forget they are there. They have a noise filter too, so you shouldn't have any problems making out what is said even if there are other discussions going on nearby, and if the volume is too soft, the conferencing software has the ability to amplify the incoming voices."

"That is good. After... all, I will not... be able... to ask them to... repeat themselves."

"That's true. Everyone in the room will be getting a microphone, but only your oldest daughter will have an earphone, so she'll be the only one who can actually hear you."

Akira's job will be to act as Father's proxy. If, at any point, Father wants to bring up his own points, he will mention them to Akira and it'll be her task to relay them to the rest of the room.

"We also took the possibility into account that people might want to share documents. Alec has a small scanner with him, and I have a wireless printer in the trunk of my car. Any documents or graphs they want you to look at can be transferred from there to here in a matter of moments."

"Quite convenient. I... suppose all that is... left is to ex... plain to me how to set... up the connection."

"I think I actually have a better idea, sir."

"..."

I silently cringe. I'd be very surprised if Father didn't take that as an insult and the fact that I'm present here as well probably only made things worse. But to my surprise, there isn't even a subtle change in tone when my father answers.

"What exactly... did you... have in mind?"

"Well, I was thinking about changing the plan and being present here myself to operate the equipment. I could get things running over here while you and your daughter can relax in the room of your choosing and leave the technical stuff to me. You can focus on the meetings while I keep the connection running, handle the receiving and printing of incoming scans and immediately jump in in case of a malfunction."

"You would... work from this room... then?"

"Yeah. I can take over and control the laptop from my desk at the office, but in case of technical issues I'd still need to drive over here, and that could take up to 10 to 15 minutes. If I'm allowed to handle things here, that will also mean there won't be any need for me to spend time teaching you the ropes about setting up the connection and working with the software."

"...Very well then."

"Great. I believe the first meeting is set to take place at ten o' clock our time, so I could be here at nine to set things up. We'll have plenty of time to run some tests and talk to our guys on the other side."

"It has... decided then."

Sensing that there's not much more business to discuss, I take advantage of the moment of silence to address Father's colleague.

"Can I pour you another cup of tea, sir?"

"Just one then. I don't want to impose on you longer than necessary."

"Should I take the printer out of my car now or is it just going to get in the way?"

The meeting ended with a minimum of small talk, and I have taken it upon myself to see our visitor out while Allison guides Father back to the master bedroom."

"Is there a need to do... something... with it before it can be used?"

"No. Your father can turn it on and press the connect button and my laptop will find it as long as it's within range. I assume you'll want to remain in a bedroom upstairs this evening?"

"Yes, it would indeed be most convenient if he remains in bed. If you leave the printer in the hallway, our housekeeper will take it upstairs."

I hear the sound of the trunk opening and then being slammed shut. After putting his cargo in the hallway, he walks up to me again.

"I could tell he was straining himself earlier on. I'll set your dad's microphone's output volume a little higher than usual so he won't need to raise his voice as much. I have a buddy who broke a few ribs in a rugby match once, and he spoke in little more than single syllables while he was recovering. It's a real pain when you can't breathe well."

"Thank you for going through the trouble of accommodating him."

"Don't sweat it. I'll be back in a few hours."

I remain near the front door until the sound of his car's engine is no longer audible and then make my way back inside. Father is probably resting right now, which gives me time to get started on today's dinner. This is probably going to be a long night, so it'll be best to be well prepared.

03

"I did not even hear the doorbell. Your sharp... sense of hearing never ceases to amaze me."

I smile humbly upon re-entering the master bedroom after briefly going downstairs to let the system administrator in and making certain he was provided with a cup of tea. The housekeeping staff all went home two hours ago, but Allison made sure that everything she thought I'd need for tonight would be in a place where I could easily find it.

"It wasn't really the doorbell itself. I heard the sound of a car outside."

"Nevertheless."

As inconvenient as my blindness is at times, I'm thankful for the fact that it has honed my sense of hearing to a greater degree. Speaking at length still tires and discomforts Father, but as long as he keeps his voice down to a whisper, he can communicate without it hurting too much. That does mean people other than me are forced to ask him to repeat himself every two sentences or so.

"Has Mister McLaughlin gotten settled in there?"

"Yes. I've made sure to serve him some tea and left the water boiler and a supply of tea bags in the study so he can make some additional tea for himself if he feels like it. I also asked him to knock and wait for me to come out rather than walk into this room if he needs to talk to us. He's currently on the phone with his fellow administrator, but he said everything will be ready in half an hour."

"So we still have about half an hour... of time to kill."

"Would you like to rest for a little bit more?"

"I do not think I would... be able to sleep in the current situation. But perhaps you could give... me another bowl of your hot soup. It is truly on... par with the rest of your cooking."

"I will."

I walk over to the corner of the room where a small electric stove is keeping the large pan of miso soup that I made this afternoon to get us through the night warm with its single heated plate. I went through a lot of effort to make the soup myself, but the result is apparently quite pleasing to Father. I

fill a bowl with the contents of the pan, slowly walk back to the bed and carefully place it in Father's hands.

"Let's hope everything goes well, and we'll have no difficulties."

"Mister McLaughlin seems capable enough. We... should be fine."

My thoughts return to the talk we had with him earlier today.

"Father, may I ask something?"

"What is it?"

"What did you think of his proposal?"

"To handle his duties in here instead of from the office? I am not... overly fond of others using my private study... without me being present, but his suggestion was the most practical and riskfree one."

"I understand, but there was something that caught my attention."

"You are referring to the way he brought it up, are you... not?"

"If his words offended you, you did a good job of hiding it."

Father lets out a self-deprecating sigh.

"Welcome to western civilization, Lilly. It is quite... a different world over here."

"I imagine."

"A subordinate telling his superior that he 'has a better idea', especially in... the presence of others, would be a massive transgression in our home country. But westerners... are a lot more tolerant and sometimes even encouraging when it comes to questioning or challenging... people in positions of authority. As long as the challenge has merit... and is voiced in a civil way, it is deemed acceptable and the person being challenged... is expected to acknowledge it without feeling slighted or shamed. I was told in advance to expect this, but... it takes some getting used to. It helps to realize the people here weren't... brought up with our value system. I think... I would probably still expect Japanese employees to stick to our own etiquette."

That probably explains why he puts up with an employee making him lose face in front of his family without even a change in heartbeat while I get put on prohibition for falling asleep in the wrong place.

"Are there any other Japanese working here besides Akira?"

"None that I know of at the... moment. We have good relations with several universities... in the region, so there has been little need to borrow talent... from the Japanese office. People from here sometimes travel to Japan and we get visitors from their branch, but we are not involved in each... other's day-to-day activities. This branch was... initially only intended as a production plant.

Assembling and later also manufacturing the equipment that was sold to our clients in the region here... was cheaper than producing it in Japan and then shipping it to Europe. Eventually... it started picking up more and more... customers and became a full-fledged sister company. The board... has been playing with the idea of sending managers from the Japanese branch here to make them

familiar... with this part of the company, but did not want to immediately replace the Scottish managers who have been doing a good job serving this company for years. I became... manager of this branch six years ago because that was when the former local manager here retired, and I could take his place without pushing away someone else. One of my tasks was to... test which aspects of Japanese management style could be successfully implemented here and which ones would merely... cause frustration. You cannot just lead... a western company like... a Japanese one or a Japanese company like a western one... and expect it to work out."

"That sounds like a tough job. Japanese management style and company culture are very different from the western one, aren't they?"

"They are. Japanese... management emphasizes loyalty and insight gained through... seniority, long-time goals, risk avoidance, maintaining harmony and decision-making through well-crafted consensus. Western management emphasizes quick... returns on investment, individual decisiveness, efficiency and calculated risks. Many times the... two seem incompatible. I have found that many people... here often do not have the patience for sitting in meetings for hours on end until a consensus is made on how... to deal with a problem. Westerners... also have a very different definition of company loyalty than Japanese, and that is not something you can ignore when leading a company."

"I'm sure both cultures have their merits."

"Hmmm... It was not really my intention to complain. There is something interesting about the carefree way... they can go about their lives without the burden of what others... might or might not think of them. They also admittedly handle diversity a lot better than we do."

I wonder if that's truly a touch of envy I hear for a moment. I feel a bit taken off guard by his words.

"That's a rather frank assessment..."

"On the other hand, many could... be more loyal. You would be surprised how... many western managers seem unwilling to impose a... pay cut on themselves while their company is going through hard... times. Too many people, workers and managers alike, only seem to be in... it for themselves. It is hard for me to understand that attitude. I... try not to condemn them though. Nor am I saying that their culture... is better... or worse. I believe it is best to keep an open mind about the differences... between our society and theirs. It would be very difficult for... me to lead a branch consisting of almost nothing but Scotsmen and... deal with American businessmen on an almost daily basis if I let everything about western culture get to me."

I suppose what he says makes sense. When moving to another country, it's logical to try and adapt a little to fit in with the local people better. It just feels a little off to hear my father, who I've always seen as very traditionally-minded, say these things. It clashes with the image I had of him. I initially thought it was just Mother who changed during her time here, but perhaps Father has changed in his own subtle way as well.

Still, managing a company with a completely different business culture must have been a very harrowing job for Father, and I'm starting to suspect that the stress he's been under may have been caused by more than just social pressure to live up to his own father's accomplishments. His job here has probably been sapping a lot of his energy from the very beginning. That would explain why the doctors said that he's had high blood pressure for years.

"It still sounds like it must have been very stressful for you. How do you think Akira will handle the culture shock?"

"I think she will... do fine. Your sister can be very straight-forward when... she feels she needs to be and westerners value that trait as long as... it is combined with a modicum of respect. Young people tend to be more adaptable to... begin with. I suspect she will do a better job at integrating... into western culture than I could ever hope to do. I have... heard that her transferring here required some sacrifice, but I feel... fairly confident that in the long run she will not regret her decision to move here."

"Ah... Father? About that..."

"Yes?"

"Were you... very disappointed in me when you learned I decided to stay in Japan?"

"Hmmm..."

There's a long pause after I pose my question, and for a moment I'm starting to suspect he's not going to answer in order to avoid hurting my feelings. But just before I can apologize for asking him, he answers.

"When we invited you and Akira to join... us here, I used to believe that if anyone would reject our offer, it... would be Akira rather than you. I was... rather shocked when your mother told me the news. But, on the other hand..."

"Y-Yes?"

"...From what I have heard from... you about your life in Japan over the last two weeks, I know that you had your life set up well there. You had a school... you enjoyed attending, a position of responsibility among... your classmates and friends you enjoyed spending time with. All of those are valuable things. To... give all of that up, just to make a brand new start on the other end of the... world in a country with a culture completely different from your own... is quite a gamble."

"Father...? Are you saying...?"

"All I am saying is that while it is most regrettable that you decided to stay there, I do understand why you chose to do so."

"I..."

I don't know what to say for several seconds. What I feel right now is a strange mixture of relief and befuddlement. I've always assumed that Father would be dismayed by the fact that I turned down the summons. He was always the one who would talk to us about the benefits of respecting and deferring to your elders. Did he start getting second thoughts about having me move here?

"Thank you for your understanding, Father."

Or is this about something else? Is it possible his words earlier weren't merely a reflection on my situation, but also on his own? I've learned from Father's and Akira's stories that the work culture between Japan and Scotland is radically different. In Japan, working overtime is pretty much a daily occurrence and leaving before the boss goes home is considered rude and bad for the team spirit, so people like Father would usually remain at the office until late in the evening. Afterwards, the various teams would go out drinking together or visit karaoke establishments. Since so little time is spent at home, people's entire circle of friends tends to consist of the same colleagues they spent a large part of their week with.

But judging from what Akira has told me, people here often immediately go home at the end of their official work day, and they only do overtime when there's an approaching deadline to meet. While it's not uncommon for friendships to form on the workfloor here, most people here develop their friendships outside the workplace through social activities like sport clubs, hobbies or pub visits. Mother quickly developed a big social network here and has been partaking in a large number of activities outside her working hours, but how well did Father adapt here? After over 25 years of having all his social interaction through the workplace, how quickly could someone like him switch gears? Was him doing all that overwork here on his own purely out of loyalty to the company and to his own father or was it also because any time outside his office was simply spent at home in that study of his, reading one of the countless books he keeps there? Is the quantity of books in there an indication of how much of his free time he spent on his own without the company of others? Did he want Akira and me here because he desired more company? Was loneliness part of the stress factors that nearly ended up killing him? Did he say what he just said because of the possibility that I might have ended up feeling lonely here as well?

"Father?"

"Yes?"

I skim the surface of the bed with my fingers until I locate his hand and gently place my own on top of it.

"How about the life you had in Japan? And the friends you had there? Aren't you... lonely here?"

An uncomfortable pause. I can sense his hand stiffening for a moment. Was that question out of line?

"Is that... pity I hear in your voice, Lilly?"

"Just a bit of concern for your well-being, Father."

"I have been fine, Lilly."

The tone in his voice pretty much confirms what I've been thinking. But he probably feels that over the last few weeks he's already shown enough vulnerability to his children, so I doubt that prying further into his personal feelings will achieve anything other than making him uncomfortable. So I drop the subject, but not before giving his hand a gentle comforting squeeze.

Not really knowing how to continue the discussion, we simply stay like this for a little while, neither of us bothered by the prolonged silence, until my attention is drawn to a static noise coming from the nearby nightstand.

"The headsets. It sounds like it's starting. Would you like one more bowl of miso soup, Father?"

"That would be appreciated."

I refill Father's bowl and take the two headsets off the nightstand. We both put one on and I carefully speak into the microphone.

"Ah... is this thing on already?"

"It is and I can pick you up loud and clear, Miss Satou."

"Mister McLaughlin. How are things proceeding so far?"

"We've successfully got a session running. The clip-on microphones have all been distributed to the meeting's participants, but we're keeping their microphones muted until the meeting has officially started. It'd be kind of a cacophony otherwise."

"Could we... speak to... my daughter... or Mrs. Satou?"

"Sure. I'm adding you two to the session right now. Then I'm going to take a short bathroom break. I'll be back in five minutes."

"Hello?"

04

"Hey Sis! Will you be listening in too?"

"Akira! It's so nice to hear you again. How was the flight?"

"Kinda long, but our airline had some very luxury business class seats, so I can't complain. Heh, they have some pretty good liquor too."

"Akira. Is everything... ready? I do not... hear anyone else... nearby."

"That's because I just retreated to one of the empty meeting rooms here. I figured that in case you wanted to discuss some last minute stuff, it'd look weird if others see me talking to thin air."

"Wouldn't they notice the headset? It seems like something that would be hard to miss."

"I'm not wearing a headset. I have the same microphone on my lapel as everyone else and I'm listening to you through one of those earpieces that secret agents often wear in movies. Hehe, I was just thinking... between the earpiece and the business suit, all I'd be needing right now would be a sidearm and maybe some sunglasses, and I'd be ready to join the secret service."

I laugh at Akira's wacky remark, but hear a soft groan coming from Father. It seems Akira's playful attitude isn't inspiring confidence in him.

"Akira... can I... count on you to take... this a hundred... percent seriously?"

"Dad, it's not like I've never been part of business meetings before. Everything will be fine, I promise."

"Just act... like the person... standing in... for me is... expected to act. *mumble* And I will have your... mother buy you a vodka martini afterwards."

"Hmmm? I didn't catch that last part."

"Never mind. Am I sufficiently... audible to you?"

"You are. You can probably speak a bit softer if that feels more comfortable."

"That might... cause problems if... someone else is... speaking at the same time."

"Father? Perhaps you should lower your voice a bit more so that speaking is less painful for you. If at any point Akira didn't hear you clearly, maybe she could softly clear her throat as a cue and I will repeat your words to her."

"That's a pretty good idea, Sis. Something like this?"

We hear her let out a soft 'hrmm' under her breath.

"That will probably suffice. Father?"

Father lets out a resigned sigh.

"Very well. Let us... give that a try."

"I'll be heading back to the rest. Mom's finished giving everyone a mic, and she's explained your situation. Without getting too specific, of course. I'll leave it to her to give you the details, but so far everyone's reacted very positively, and Mom got word from just about everyone that they're willing to go out of their way to accommodate you."

"I really hope... that will not be necessary."

"By the way, Kojima will be seated at the head of the table in your place despite you being 'present'. We figured the board wanted a senior in that seat instead of me, despite him only being an observer in a practical sense and me representing you directly."

"I agree with... that decision."

While Akira's speaking, I become aware of a slight background noise appearing on the line, indicating the vicinity of other people. I faintly hear Mother's voice asking Akira if she's ready.

"Yeah, I'm ready and so is Dad. Let's go in."

The next moment, we're startled by a wave of voices as the microphones of the meeting room's occupants are turned on. I cringe a bit as the room suddenly appears to be filled with people. Just as I prepare to take off the earphones, the fragments of conversation suddenly fade out and then increase in volume again. I fiddle a bit with the dial on my headset until the sound volume's comfortable. I notice that some voices sound further away than others and certain people are specifically audible through either the left or the right speaker. I suppose the administrators set this up in some way or another and smile in appreciation of their effort to make the experience feel more natural to us.

And then finally, the meeting begins. Kojima opens the meeting with a short introduction, followed by a word from Father, consisting mostly of an apology for not being able to be there in person and a statement of appreciation for his business partners. I personally think he might have stressed the apologetic part too much, yet Akira delivers his words without a single trace of insincerity nor do I hear even a hint of the usual defiance in her voice that's almost always there when she's dealing with our parents. I suppose in her mind right now Akira isn't representing her father, but rather representing her boss. It's impressive how much of a difference that makes with her.

What stands out most for me, however, is hearing Mother. Unlike Father, who merely listens most of the time and only rarely takes the opportunity to provide a quick summary or offer his own opinion, Mother turns out to be the member of the delegation who seems to be handling most of the questions and counterproposals. Her tone right now isn't the energetic and casual one I've been struggling to get used to over the last few weeks. Instead, it's polite and relaxed, yet confident and in charge at the

same time. I've never heard Mother speak this way before. I realize I have to remain focussed in order to assist Father, so I try not to think about it too hard.

The meeting ends up taking two hours with only a short coffee break near the middle. For the most part, I've simply sat by and listened, repeating Father's words to Akira when necessary, handing Father scanned graphs and proposal summaries as they roll out of the nearby printer and refilling our bowls of soup once or twice. Still, after two hours of taking in a continuous stream of information, I feel drained. When the microphones are turned off, I let out an exhausted sigh.

"Tired?"

"Only a little bit. This will be good practice for the months prior to the exams though, which will involve cramming as much information as possible into my head."

"That is one way of looking at it."

"I suppose I should show Mister McLaughlin out. It's probably late for him as well."

"That would be appreciated. Since there... are a meeting and a business dinner planned for tomorrow, it... will be okay for him to sleep in tomorrow morning. He... will probably have to be up for most of the night."

"I will tell him so."

05

"He will be back here at eight o' clock tomorrow evening."

After showing the system administrator out, I returned to Father's room. Judging by the sound of his voice, he's either feeling less tired than I am right now or he's simply doing a better job at hiding it.

"That is good to hear."

"He was quite relieved when I told him he could sleep in. He said that this had to have been one of the longest working days of his career."

"Hmmm. I suppose it would be ungrateful to... point out to him that at our Japanese branch we used... to consider any working day shorter than 11 hours to be an unproductive one on general principle. "

"Looking on the bright side, he at least didn't leave before his boss went home today."

"Touché."

He chuckles a bit at my remark, then groans in discomfort. Laughing too much will probably be out of the question for the time being.

"Father, can I get you anything before we retire for the night?"

"Hmmm..."

There's a long pause as if he's considering something to himself.

"If I still had been at our Japanese... office, my co-workers and I would have headed over to a drinking establishment... to drink and celebrate today's events right about now..."

"Do you want me to fetch you some wine, Father?"

"I suppose a little nightcap cannot hurt. You have been to the cellar before, have you not? Is it not too difficult to navigate?"

"Not overly so."

"One of the bottles of wine on the second shelf from the top will probably do. I am certain you already know where to find some glasses."

"I'm sorry, but...did you say glasses?"

"You know what they say about people who... drink alone. You may not be a co-worker, but you did do your... best to help out this evening. It is okay... with me for you to have a drink or two...as long as it is under the supervision of an adult."

My smile widens a bit. This is certainly one pleasant and unexpected surprise.

"Thank you, Father."

With a bit of effort, I manage to get a bottle from the wine rack in the cellar and two glasses and a corkscrew from the kitchen and get them all to the master bedroom in one piece. Father takes the bottle and corkscrew from my hands, and moments later, I hear the distinct sound of a bottle being uncorked, and the smell of white wine teases my nostrils. I sit on the side of the bed, hold out my glass and hear a sloshing sound as it's being filled.

"Just remember... that a proper lady does... not pass out on the couch."

I playfully raise my hand.

"It will not happen again. The Lord is my witness."

"Very well. To the success of your mother and... your sister then."

"And to your speedy recovery as well, Father."

"That too."

I carefully balance the glass in my hand, bring it up to my face and slowly breathe in in order to sample the wine's aroma. I continue taking in the smell until it leaves a subtly sweet taste in my mouth and then take a few soft sips. The wine's taste turns out to be as pleasing as its fragrance.

"Father, I suppose this nightcap indicates that the meeting went well overall?"

"Things matched my expectations. Aside from Akira, who performed better than I expected."

"How about Mother?"

"She did as expected. She has... been part of everything since this all began, so she... knows how to handle herself."

"Really?"

"Your mother has been an true asset to the company from the... moment we came here. She did an excellent job helping the staff and... me get used to one another's mindset and bridge the cultural... divides. She has also always been ready with advice on how... to best deal with our Scottish staff and how to best interact... with American business contacts. I also quickly discovered that her knack... for networking and connecting with business people has remained as sharp as it... undoubtedly was in her days as a business reporter."

There's an unmistakable hint of admiration in his voice, and I'd probably feel a sense of pride if all of this wasn't so new to me. Shortly after Father was hospitalized, Akira suggested his and Mother's marriage was in ruins, but from the way they speak about one another, I think she was sorely mistaken. Still, Father's words once again make me wonder who Mother really is. The quiet and graceful homemaker I remember from my childhood? The energetic woman I've been spending time with here? Or the confident businesswoman I heard through my headset this evening? Perhaps a combination of all three? Is that even possible?

"Father, how... do you see Mother?"

"Akira was incorrect about us... Lilly. Please just take my word for that."

He doesn't really seem to be eager to discuss that particular subject, so I decide to drop it and move to a different topic.

"Mother certainly handled herself well from what I could tell. I don't think I'd be capable of such a thing. But then again corporate business isn't really where my own interests lie."

I hear Father let out a soft 'hmmm' as he hears this.

"You have... plans for the future then?"

"I would like to study English after I graduate and become a teacher after finishing my higher education."

"I had a very good English teacher back in... university. It is a valuable job. You would... be surprised about how many businessmen in our country, even senior... ones, are insecure about their own English skills. And yet it... is important in staying relevant in this age of globalisation. But... ah..."

I give him a reassuring smile.

"You can ask, Father. I won't be offended."

"Is that not hard? How would you prevent... students from cheating on a test for example? Or handle discipline?"

"I would seek the help of another English teacher. At times when my class has to take a test, I'll ask him to switch classes. He keeps an eye on my class for an hour while I teach his. As for discipline, I would make a seating chart so that I know where each pupil is sitting and I would walk around the classroom while teaching, so I can keep students in check through force of proximity."

"How about tests? How would you grade them?"

"I would again engage in a deal with a fellow English teacher. I would prepare and write up both my own tests and his, as well as the corresponding answer keys and he would do the grading.
I'm...ah...still trying to think up how to deal with essays. If I wanted to check a specific pupil's homework, I'd have them read it to me out loud."

I take another sip of the delicious wine before continuing.

"I would also attempt to create a sense of team spirit in each class I'd teach, so pupils could eventually be relied on to grade each other's homework. I acknowledge that school teachers have duties that require sight, but there are just as many which do not. By volunteering to take some tasks of the latter category off my colleagues' hands, I can get away with asking them to help me with things I cannot do myself."

My explanation is followed up by a long silence on his end. I can almost hear the gears in his head turning as he weighs and evaluates every word I just said. Then, just before I am about to break the silence...

"You seem to have put... a lot of thought into this."

I wonder what he thinks about my plans for the future. I weigh the tone in his voice for traces of skepticism, but the only thing I can pick up is a sense of honest curiosity.

"It's been a dream of mine since middle school, so I've had some time to think about it."

"You learn something new every day."

As I empty my glass, he takes it from my hand and pours a bit more wine into it. When I take it back, I notice it's lighter than the first time. It's probably only half-full this time around. We gently touch our glasses together and then slowly sip the contents. After noticing a failed effort to suppress a yawn on my part, Father decides that enough is enough for today and bids me good night. I carefully make my way to the door, but as I open it I hear a soft chuckle behind me.

"Father?"

"It is nothing. Just an... amusing thought that came to me just now."

"Hmmm?"

"I just thought about how... different it felt, holding... a meeting this way. Interacting with people without being... able to see their faces. Having to determine who is... talking purely by the sound of their voice, their accent and... the direction their speech is coming from. I suppose... you can relate... to this?"

I cover my mouth to mask a cheerful giggle. For some reason it feels really good to hear him say something like this.

"Trust me when I say that it's not so bad once you get used to it."

Chapter 38 (Hanako)

01

The sun is already setting by the time Hisao and I make our way to the parking lot. I received a text message from Lilly's mother telling me that they landed safely and that she'll drop Lilly off near the school gates.

"Are you sure they'll be here soon?"

"Yes. It should take them less than an hour to get here."

My boyfriend chuckles a bit.

"I have this strange feeling of *déjà vu*. Don't you?"

I smile and nod back.

"Yes. This is exactly the same situation as when we were waiting here for Lilly before."

"Well, it's not *exactly* the same."

That's true. The last time we were here waiting for Lilly to arrive, Hisao was wondering out loud whether we should be holding hands or not. This time, we've been holding hands since we got here. He probably would have wrapped his arm around me too if it wasn't for the other thing that's different from before: The presence of the other two Yamaku students who invited themselves onto our welcoming committee.

"No, not exactly the same."

Hisao throws a suspicious side-glance at our classmates.

"It's kind of heartwarming to see that you've missed Lilly so much that you're joining us here to welcome her back."

02

"Hicchan, ever since we came here with you, you've done nothing but gripe. If I didn't know better I'd say our presence here is bothering you. If we're imposing on you, you should just come out and say so."

"You're not really imposing, but..."

"Perhaps you were hoping to take the opportunity to be lovey-dovey with your girlfriend for a little while, and us being here is preventing you from doing that."

"WAHAHAHAHA~!"

"That's not really the issue here."

It looks like Hisao has been thinking the same thing as I have. When Lilly's mother and Akira left for the US, Lilly decided to stay in Scotland to look after her father, and as a result she wasn't able to return to Yamaku until the company's business delegation was back from their trip. Because of that, Lilly has missed close to 2 weeks of school, and during those weeks, Shizune has missed no opportunity to express her disapproval of her cousin's absence. When Hisao and I went for the gate in order to wait for Lilly and met the student council duo on our way there, Shizune insisted on accompanying us. Neither I

nor Hisao can shake the feeling that Shizune's simply here because she can't bear to postpone the scolding for one more day.

Hisao and I went to town the other day to do a bit of shopping for this evening. We wanted to make the occasion a bit special and bought tea and snacks just like before to celebrate Lilly's return. Lilly's probably not going to have a lot of energy, but I'd be very surprised if that's also the case for her mother. Given her energetic nature, Karla is probably as jetlag-proof as they come.

While I'm absentmindedly toying with my hair, Hisao suddenly points at a car heading up the parking lot and approaching us. As it gets closer, I see the striking blonde hair of Lilly and her mother behind the windshield. As the car stops in front of us and the car door opens, Karla steps out and gives a cheerful wave while Lilly slowly gets out on the other side.

"Lilly!"

Even though we've spoken with one another on a very frequent basis, I still feel overjoyed to see my best friend again and rush to greet her. Knowing that Shizune and Misha are watching, I go for a modest embrace, but the moment I make contact with Lilly, she wraps her arms around me and gives me a hug that is as drawn-out and tight as it is sincere and loving.

"Hanako..."

I blush a bit. I'm not really accustomed to the usually reserved Lilly making such an affectionate and unrestrained gesture. The smile on her face is one of the happiest ones I've ever seen though. It dawns on me that Lilly's probably not aware that her cousin is nearby and looking at us, but I decide that that revelation can wait for a few more seconds. With some effort I manage to tune out the rest of the world around me and return Lilly's embrace. As fun as the last few weeks have been for me, things still weren't completely the same without Lilly around, and I'm really happy that she's back.

"It's... really good to s-see you again, Lilly."

"I've really missed having you around, Hanako."

"Apparently not enough to come back sooner and avoid missing the first weeks of the new trimester."

"WAHAHAHA~! Awww... that's not nice, Shicchan. You ruined a really sweet moment just there."

Upon hearing Misha's voice, Lilly instantly freezes, and a look of horror appears on her face. She lets go of me and hastily turns towards the source of the loud voice that ruined the magic of our greeting. Her face is a little flushed, and I can almost see her brain going into overdrive in an attempt to figure out how to deal with this unexpected embarrassment.

"Ah... S-Shizune. When did you get here?"

Feeling a bit guilty about not notifying Lilly before, I whisper to her.

"S-Sorry, Lilly. Ummm... We ran into them on our way here, and they f-followed us here."

Rather than responding to Lilly's question, Shizune turns to Karla, smiles and makes a deep and respectful bow.

"Welcome back to Japan, aunt Karla. It's good to see you again."

Lilly's mother smiles back broadly at Shizune and replies with a polite bow of her own.

"Thank you, Shizune. It is good to see you too. You certainly seem to have grown. I didn't even recognize you at first. How is your family doing these days?"

"About the same as always."

"I see. And who is your friend here?"

"I'm Misha. Nice to meet you."

Maybe I misjudged Shizune. It's probably been a long time since she has last seen her aunt and maybe she simply wanted to say hello to her. From what I've heard, Mister Satou and Shizune's father don't like each other, but as far as I can tell there appears to be no bad blood between Karla and her niece.

"The pleasure is all mine. I am very pleased to meet you as well."

She then turns to us.

"Hanako... Hisao. It is very good to see you two again. Lilly told me that you two still managed to make the most out of your remaining vacation days. That is a great relief to me."

She bows to us as well, and I notice that her bow towards me is deeper than the others. I can tell that Karla's a lot more formal than she was in Scotland right now. It feels a bit odd coming from her. Is she acting that way because she doesn't want to puzzle her niece? In the meantime, Lilly has managed to regain her composure and awkwardly nods to Shizune.

"You caught me a bit by surprise, Shizune. But thank you for the welcome nevertheless."

Lilly's mother frowns and shoots a puzzled look at her daughter.

"You were surprised that your own cousin is here to greet you? I was assuming you asked Hanako to bring her along as well."

"Uh..."

A slightly panicked expression appears on Lilly's face, and I suddenly realize that she probably never told her parents that she and Shizune used to get into fights all the time. From the looks of it, Shizune has come to the same conclusion as she gives Lilly a highly amused 'let's see you talk your way out of that one'-look.

"I... ah... apologize. I did intend to drop by and catch up on the last few weeks. But student council duty must have been keeping you busy, and I didn't want to take up time you may not have."

"Well, it's nice that my efforts are acknowledged every now and then."

Lilly's mother gives Shizune a curious glance.

"Does student council truly take up so much more time than, say, an ordinary school club?"

"It is hectic at the start and end of each trimester, and it gets even worse during special events like school festivals or other activities. We usually suffer from a lack of helping hands around those times."

Shizune toys with her glasses for a second and then starts signing again.

"Not every class representative is of the reliable sort either, and we're regularly forced into crunch time because some of them won't hand in budget reports in time or even worse, ask for extensions of the deadline. This often causes the final few days to be extremely stressful."

I can see the corners of Lilly's mouth twitching a bit as she hears her cousin's remarks. It's obvious that she does *not* like where this is going, but she doesn't dare react to Shizune in front of her mother. Shizune, on the other hand, appears to be having the time of her life. Karla gives her niece a sympathetic look, obviously still oblivious.

"Well, the best thing you can do is to keep fighting the good fight. Think of it as good practice for the workplace later."

"Yes, I suppose you end up working with all kinds of people there as well."

I exchange a worried look with my boyfriend who also seems a bit uncomfortable with Shizune's little game. Deciding to cut this awkward little charade short, Hisao steps up to Lilly's mother.

"Maybe it's a good idea to return to the dorm rather than hang around here. I'm sure that Lilly's eager to get back to her room and start unpacking."

Lilly's mother nods.

"Yes, that's a good idea. Let me get the luggage out of the trunk."

Karla opens the trunk of her car and fishes Lilly's suitcase out of it. Before she closes the trunk, however, she quizzically looks at Shizune who's still wearing a huge smile.

"By the way, Shizune... I remember my daughter is a class representative too. She isn't among those unreliable people you just complained about, is she?"

This time it's Shizune's turn to get a little uneasy. Her opinion of Lilly's handling of her class is pretty well-known, but she obviously doesn't want to appear mean-spirited in front of her aunt. So with a little forced smile she shakes her head and signs a few things to Misha, although in a less enthusiastic manner than before.

"Don't worry. Her classmates consider your daughter to be very adept at her duties."

"Yup. And over the last two weeks several people from her class picked up her duties purely out of loyalty, so that says a lot."

Judging by the lack of signing on Shizune's part preceding it, that last statement is Misha's contribution to the discussion, and my hunch is that Shizune isn't very happy with her friend letting slip that particular detail. Lilly, who was looking rather tense just a minute ago now gives her cousin a cheerful smile before twisting the knife a little bit.

"I'm honored by this kind appraisal from no one other than the student council president herself. I will make sure to remember these gracious words."

While Lilly's mother has her back turned in order to close the trunk, Shizune shoots her cousin a dirty glare, but when Karla turns around and grabs the suitcase, Shizune merely shakes her head and sighs as if forcing herself to dismiss the matter.

"Let's get going, people."

We leave the parking lot, walk through the school gate and make our way to the girls' dorm building. As we near the entrance, Shizune politely bows to Lilly's mother and starts signing to Misha.

"We still have some work left to do, but it was good to see you again."

Karla responds with a bow of her own, takes a little card out of her handbag, writes a number on it and then gives it to Shizune.

"I'll be in the area for a little while. If you wish to do some catching up, do not hesitate to send me a little text message, and I'll treat you two to lunch."

Shizune gives her aunt a friendly nod, and then she and Misha walk back towards the school building while we venture inside the dormitory. When we get to our hallway, I take Lilly's room key (which I got from Lilly before Hisao and I left Scotland) from my bag and unlock the door.

03

"Welcome back, Lilly. We cleaned your room for you yesterday. It was already starting to get a little dusty in your absence."

"Thank you, Hanako. I will be happy to return the favor this week if you let me."

"It's... okay."

We enter and Lilly's mother takes the opportunity to look around a little bit.

"Well, isn't this a cozy place?"

"We... umm... bought tea for tonight. I'll go and make some."

Lilly smiles at me, but nevertheless shakes her head.

"Hanako, I think you've already done enough for me as it is. Would you mind if I take over the hosting duties for tonight?"

"Aren't you tired, Lilly?"

"It's been a rather long day, but I haven't really done much other than sitting still and reading a bit. I think being able to put my shoulder to the wheel for a little while may actually make me feel better."

"Okay then. We put the tea in your cupboard in the kitchen area."

"I will be right back."

Lilly walks out of the room and the three of us sit down. Lilly's mother stretches herself and sighs, dropping her formal disposition now that we're alone.

"Man, at the start of this week I was still in the US. I've really been all over the place lately."

"That must be exhausting."

"I've been able to handle it so far. It'll be good to take it easy for a few days though. Take some time to relax and catch up."

Lilly's mom plays with her hair a little bit.

"You know, the last time I interacted with Shizune, she was probably short enough to fit in my suitcase with a bit of effort. She's kind of starting to look like her mother now."

"You know Shizune's mother?"

Lilly's mother looks a little wistful for a second.

"When I married my husband, Mayoi was still living at home, so we lived under the same roof for some time until she got married and became part of the Hakamichi family. We barely saw each other anymore afterwards as she barely came home anymore after her marriage. Her husband and my husband didn't get along so well either."

"What's Shizune's Dad like then?"

This question makes Karla grin for a moment.

"Pretty much the total opposite of my husband. My husband once told me that he felt his brother-in-law was a cartoon character pretending to be a human. The man's a little odd. Or was when I last saw him. That was really long ago though. He might have changed."

Before we can consider whether to leave it at that or ask for more details, the door opens and Lilly comes in carrying a teapot and several cups. She carefully places them on the table, fills the cups and then hands one to each of us.

"It's been a while since we've spent time together like this. Let's enjoy the evening together."

Hisao checks his watch after Lilly says this and frowns.

"I'm afraid I can't stay for very long. I have an appointment in 15 minutes and I still have to stop by my own room."

"An appointment?"

Lilly looks a little puzzled.

"Isn't it a little late for that? Most of the teachers have probably gone home already."

I giggle.

"Not this t-teacher."

"I beg your pardon?"

Hisao grins.

"It's a bit of a long story, but the gist of it is that Mutou was approached by several students who were interested in giving the science club a try. There are now two first years and one second year student attending the meetings. One of the juniors still has some trouble with one of the subjects, and I didn't have a lot of time to explain it to him during our last meeting, so I promised to stop by his room this evening to tutor him a bit more."

"If he has trouble with the subject then isn't he in the wrong club?"

Lilly's mother snickers.

"I recall that that article Hanako wrote specifically said that an interest in the subject was more important than good marks. Looks like some people took that literally."

"It was actually... m-meant to be taken that way."

"Hmmm?"

"I... had some trouble with a few parts myself just before the summer break, but Hisao was r-really good at explaining them. So I thought..."

Hisao looks a bit sheepish.

"That line in Hanako's article about interest in the subject being more important than high marks is more or less a nice way of saying that the club is ideal for people who have an interest in science, but have trouble following Mutou's lectures. His teaching style is a bit unique. At the science club we can let members get familiar with certain topics in a more casual manner that allows them to understand the subject better. And there are also other members who can help explain things."

Lilly's mother frowns.

"If students are having trouble comprehending a subject because a teacher's lectures are too convoluted, starting a club to compensate for that isn't really the first thing I would do as a school."

Lilly giggles.

"That may be so, but Mutou has his good qualities as well and most students like him. Also, I think this is a really good initiative. I hope word of mouth can get you a few more members in the future, Hisao."

"Thanks Lilly. Anyway, I guess I'd better get going. I still need to get my textbooks from my room."

Lilly's mother gives Hisao a friendly nod.

"I very much doubt that we won't be seeing each other again before I fly back to the UK, so I'm not going to say goodbye here and now. Best of luck with your tutoring gig."

"Thanks. Have fun and enjoy the snacks we bought."

He gives me a quick kiss, gets up and walks out of Lilly's room, leaving me with the two Satous. With not much more to say about the subject of Hisao's new responsibilities, we simply sit there for a little

while and take the occasional sip from our tea cups. Eventually the silence becomes a little awkward, and I bring up the first subject that pops up in my mind.

"So ummm... Mrs. Satou..."

Lilly's mom chuckles.

"I won't be offended if you keep using my first name, Miss Ikezawa. But I won't press the matter if you feel rude doing so."

"Ummm... Karla... How d-did it go in America?"

Karla smiles playfully at me.

"I suspect you already know most of it, seeing that Lilly's been calling you so often, but... I'd say the trip was officially a success."

"Officially?"

04

"Well, before my husband was hospitalized, I was looking forward to the trip. Not just because we'd finally be tying up a process that's been taking us years to set up, but also because I was planning to stick a well-earned vacation at the end of it. Obviously that didn't end up happening, and during most of the trip I was actively counting down the minutes. So I can't really say it was an enjoyable experience. But since we ended up striking a major deal there, I can at least call it a productive trip."

"You could... still go on v-vacation with him when he's feeling a little better."

Lilly's mother smiles at my suggestion, but I notice her smile has a sad quality to it. Did I say anything wrong?

"Yeah, I guess I could try and convince him to take a break together... When he's feeling better."

I notice Lilly has adopted the same sad smile as her mother. They obviously know something I don't. Last time I spoke to Lilly on the phone she said that his condition was slowly improving.

"Ummm... Is he... s-still okay?"

Karla looks away and for a moment there's a very bitter look in her eyes that sends a shiver down my spine. It's the same kind of look that I've seen on Akira's face a few times.

"Hmmm... Physically he's getting better, but about a day after we got back we got word that he won't be returning to his job after all this. It was a pretty severe blow to his morale even though I got the impression he wasn't very surprised himself."

"He g-got fired?"

"Well, technically he resigned on his own, but... It's a bit of a complicated situation. Let's just say corporate politics reared their ugly head and leave it at that."

"I'm s-sorry..."

Karla doesn't immediately answer and closes her eyes.

"You know... My mother used to tell me that God works in mysterious ways. When we asked Lilly and Akira to join us in Scotland, the idea was to make a fresh new start. Things worked out differently than we planned them, but..."

She opens her eyes and smirks.

"This has all the telltale marks of an opportunity to make that fresh new start. It just feels a bit mixed. I can't really feel glad about it knowing what had to happen for things to get to this point."

This gets me to smile. I've been thinking the same on several occasions ever since I became Hisao's girlfriend.

"I... think that's f-fine. I've often thought about this m-myself. If Hisao... never had his first h-heart attack, he never would have c-come here. I wouldn't w-wish what he's been through on anyone, but... I think that... maybe... it's still... okay for me... to feel really happy that he came here and... that I met him."

Both Lilly and her mother laugh cheerfully at my reply.

"You know, that's a pretty good point. I guess there's not necessarily something wrong about being happy with silver linings. Now we'll just have to figure where to go from here."

"Any ideas?"

Lilly smiles mysteriously.

"There are... some."

"Some?"

Lilly falls silent and then slowly turns towards her mother.

"Mother? Would it be okay if I tell Hanako?"

"Even though the whole thing is still up in the air?"

"I assure you that she won't talk to anyone about it."

Karla lets out a resigned sigh.

"Okay then."

05

Lilly turns back to me and straightens her pose a bit as if preparing for some major announcement.

"Hanako. One of the options that my parents are... strongly considering... is moving back to Japan."

That statement manages to take my breath away for several seconds, and I wonder for a moment whether the people down the hall were able to hear the gasp I just let out.

"Lilly!"

I can barely believe this, but the happy smile on Lilly's face tells me that I didn't imagine what I just heard. As this statement slowly starts sinking into my brain, a smile almost as large as Lilly's starts forming on my face.

"Lilly, t-that would be wonderful."

"Nothing has been decided yet, but... I'm keeping my fingers crossed and offering a little prayer every evening."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for you too."

"Thanks, Hanako."

"Lilly? What about Akira? Would she be coming back too?"

Lilly's smile drops for a moment.

"I've asked her several times to consider it, but so far my attempts to convince her haven't met with much success."

Lilly's mother takes this moment to jump in.

"You tried as hard as you could, dear, but Akira's situation is different from ours. I don't think she'd be taken very seriously at the Japanese branch anymore if she returned there so soon after leaving. And forcing her to come along would defeat the purpose of having her join you here. I know you care about her a lot, but I think we should allow her to choose the life that she feels is best for her."

"I know, Mother..."

Lilly gives a resigned nod, but the tone in her voice suggests that she's not particularly happy about it. I'm suddenly reminded of something else. If Lilly's parents were to return to Japan, will Lilly move back in with them? That would probably make sense. I'd still be happy for Lilly, but I'd be really sad to lose my neighbor. We'd still be able to have lunch together and talk to each other, but I'd really miss hanging out with Lilly in here before bedtime.

"Lilly, ummm... If your p-parents move b-back here, you would... probably go and l-live with them again, w-wouldn't you?"

Lilly shakes her head and gives me a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, Hanako. I won't be going anywhere. I've already decided to stay here, and if my parents return to this country, I'll simply visit them on Sundays. I promise you that Mother and Father coming to live in Japan again will not come at the expense of my friendship with you. Mother can be my witness."

Lilly's mother gives me a cheerful nod.

"With the exams coming up later this year, it'd probably be more convenient for Lilly to keep living here on campus rather than having to deal with the travelling again on a daily basis and you two seem so close that I'd feel really bad about doing anything that would create distance between you. Besides..."

She grins and a mischievous twinkle appears in her eye.

"...imagine how early Lilly'd have to get up each morning in order to make it to class every day. It'd be torture."

Lilly's expression immediately changes into a pout, and she shoots her mother a disapproving look.

"M-Mother! That was a bit uncalled for. Besides, I had to get up early when I was still living with Akira, and I handled that just fine..."

This feels a bit awkward. I have the impression that Lilly hasn't gotten used to her mother's habit of playfully teasing her. Karla, for her part, merely snickers at her successful attempt at getting a reaction out of her daughter. Upon hearing this, Lilly lets out a tired sigh and shakes her head.

"Mother, if you keep making fun of me, I'm afraid I won't be able to share any of our snacks with you."

Lilly's mother laughs.

"You're not shy about bringing out the big guns against me, huh? Very well, I'll stop poking fun at you."

Lilly gets up and takes the teapot.

"Thank you. I will go and get us some more tea. Hanako, where did you put the snacks for this evening?"

"On the bottom shelf of your cupboard."

"Good. I will be back soon."

After Lilly has left the room, Karla stares at the door for a moment and then looks back at me.

"You know... When we left for the USA, Akira assured me that my husband was in good hands with Lilly. I thought she was merely being polite at first. But when I came back from that trip, it turned out that Lilly had been responsible for nearly every meal my husband ate those weeks and was pretty much running the household in Allison's place. I got the impression that her presence was also soothing and comforting for my husband. The fact that all of that surprised me probably shows that some extra time spent getting to know my daughter better is probably long overdue."

I giggle. I've been experiencing Lilly's nurturing side ever since I was introduced to her, so what I'm hearing right now doesn't surprise me in the least.

"Did I say something funny?"

"Lilly likes to... mother p-people she cares about, so..."

Karla lets out an amused laugh.

"...my daughter's been mothering her own dad for the last few weeks. That is kind of funny."

Lilly's mother eyes me with a smile.

"Lilly's been a big support for my husband, but she said that you in turn were a big support for her all this time. So... Thanks for that."

I'm a bit flustered by Karla's grateful expression. Lilly's called me on an almost daily basis while she was in Inverness, and I was happy to help her unwind by listening to her, though I never really thought of it as much of a big deal.

"I d-didn't do t-that much."

"You did enough, and that's what matters."

"Ummm..."

"Yes?"

"It's... probably not my p-place to say so, but... I... think... if you r-really r-returned to Japan... Lilly w-would be... very happy."

Lilly's mother smiles sadly.

"You're the third one to mention that in a few days. Lilly herself made a pretty strong case for moving earlier this week. And Akira sided with her."

"And ah... W-what do you think?"

"Me? Hmmm. I think..."

She sighs sadly, and for a few seconds it seems like all traces of her usual up-beat personality vanish before my eyes.

06

"I think... I'm really going to miss my homeland."

"It has... already b-been decided?"

"My husband's the only one who hasn't thrown in his opinion yet. He hardly ever makes decisions on a whim. There are a few factors to consider in the whole situation, and he wants to think about them first."

"Factors?"

"Like a job. He'll probably want to start working again at some point. Objectively speaking, he's probably more likely to get one quickly if we stay in Scotland. He has a reputation there as a capable businessman leading a successful company, and I have a large network of business contacts in the Highlands area I could make use of to create opportunities for him. His successor would probably agree to buy his shares if we offered, and we could use the money to retire or buy shares of local company. Maybe even set something up ourselves. It'd be a completely new start. If he wanted to continue working as a manager, western companies are also more open to hiring outsiders as managers while their Japanese counterparts prefer managers who started work at that company as freshmen straight out of university and who grew into the role over the span of a few decades of company service."

She absentmindedly toys with her blond bangs while continuing.

"But in the end a lot of it comes down to what he wants to do with his life. Even before he entered elementary school there's been this roadmap made out of other people's expectations that told him

exactly where he was and where he was supposed to go. I can only imagine that now must be a confusing time for him now that all of that is suddenly gone. Still..."

Lilly's mother stares into the distance for a second.

"...there's little doubt in my mind that deep down he'd really like to return to his home country. He's missed it a lot over the last few years. I also think that even though he wouldn't have much say on the board of directors yet, he'd still want to remain involved in the company that's been part of his life ever since he was young."

The slight tone of resignation in her voice makes me worry a bit. I'm having the impression that if the Satous end up moving back here, it'll merely be because Karla abided by the majority decision.

"You would... rather n-not move?"

Lilly's mother smiles sadly.

"It won't be easy to leave everything behind that's become part of my daily life over the last six years, but it was bound to happen eventually. Though I would have liked to stay in Scotland, I knew our move from Japan to Inverness was never really intended to be permanent. My husband left Japan for his job, not because he was tired of living here. He would probably have wanted to return here after his retirement anyway. He probably even felt he had to in order to continue serving the company as a member of the board of directors."

"B-But... h-he... you asked Lilly..."

"To tell you the truth... asking Lilly and Akira to move to Inverness wasn't my husband's idea. It was mine."

"Y-Yours?"

"It's a bit ironic. When we lived in Scotland, I'd see my husband more often in a single day than I'd have seen him in a week while we still lived in Japan. But despite that, I felt we were slowly growing apart. When my older sister fell ill and said that she wanted to see Lilly and Akira, it kind of gave me an official excuse. I had hoped some time spent together as a family of four would get us closer again. But things were merely very awkward during their time here, and I started fearing that if something wasn't done, our daughters would be little more than strangers to us by the time my husband retired and we'd move back. So I convinced my husband to take action to reunite our family. Conveniently enough a position was available at the office at that time that Akira could probably fill. I don't think she would have considered moving otherwise."

"Oh."

"My husband always insisted on Lilly finishing her education in the places we picked for her, so I didn't think I'd be able to convince him, but he went along with it after some urging on my part."

"But now... you're m-moving instead of Lilly."

"Karma works in weird ways, huh? Still, I asked Lilly to give up her life here and move to the other end of the world just for us. It's only fair that I'm not going to be a hypocrite about it now that the shoe is on the other foot. And besides..."

She gives me that familiar grin of hers, although this one looks just a little bit more forced than usual.

"...I have experience in permanently leaving my homeland behind in favor of another, so I'll be okay. Besides, we'll get to see Lilly a lot more often if we move here, and I do want to spend more time with her. A few weeks weren't really that much to reconnect with one another."

"W-Were you... very disappointed when Lilly s-said she wanted to stay here?"

"I'm kind of split on that. On the one hand I was very sad and disappointed after that phone call. But when I thought it over some more, I realized that Lilly's decision must have been a very hard one, and I came to respect it. Children eventually have to leave their parents' nest and find their own way in life. Lilly's always been a very obedient girl, and I sincerely worried that her initial decision to move was merely because she felt it wasn't her place to reject our offer. After the initial shock from her change of plans wore off, I realized that above all I'm extremely proud of my daughter for having the courage to follow her own dreams rather than letting others dictate them for her."

She smiles proudly to reinforce her words.

"What about y-your job? Do you already k-know what to do?"

"Our staff manager is already looking for someone to replace me and when we find someone, I'll spend my remaining time in Scotland informing business contacts and teaching my successor the ropes. Afterwards I'll be focusing on helping my husband get back into his daily routine. I haven't really thought of what to do after that. I'm sure I'll get plenty of time to think about it."

Lilly's mother reaches absentmindedly for her tea cup and puts it to her lips only to realize that it's empty.

"Speaking of time, what's taking that girl so long? She doesn't get lost in here, does she?"

I giggle and shake my head.

"No."

07

As if on cue, the door opens and Lilly enters carrying the teapot and two bags of snacks.

"I'm terribly sorry for the wait."

"Couldn't find the snacks?"

"I just ran into a few friends down in the common room who started asking me how my time in Scotland has been, and I felt it was rude to just brush them off like that."

"Heh, I'm sure that'll happen several more times the upcoming days. Better to get yourself prepared for it."

"I'll do my best."

Lilly pours the tea, and we take some time to feast on the snacks she brought along.

"Lilly?"

"Yes, Hanako?"

"If your friends who aren't b-blind want to know what it was like in Scotland, I could m-maybe get you a few of the pictures I took so you can show them."

"Hmmm, that's a very good idea. But aren't those your photos?"

"I'll simply print out some extra copies at the club. It's n-not a problem."

"In that case I'd love to have a few of your photos, Hanako."

Lilly's mother has lowered her teacup and has turned her head in my direction upon hearing about the club.

"So how's the newspaper club going? Have you already released the column you were working on in Inverness?"

"N-Not yet. It'll be out next week."

"I can't wait to read it."

She's still as passionate as ever about the subject. Suddenly an idea pops in my mind. I'm not sure if Naomi's going to go along with this, but she might just be interested.

"Ummm...K-Karla?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe ummm... If y-you have t-time... Y-you don't really have to if you d-don't want to, but..."

Is this really a good idea? Isn't this too amateurish for someone with Karla's experience?

"It m-might be nice if... ah... you could s-stop by the c-club tomorrow and have a l-look around yourself."

A surprised smile appears on Karla's face, and I can see a twinkle in not one, but both of her eyes.

"Can I? Really?"

"I'd h-have to ask Naomi, but she m-might allow it."

"I'd love to drop by and see things for myself."

"I'll ask her in c-class tomorrow."

"Wonderful. It's a busy day for me tomorrow as my husband's successor wanted to see me, so I have to drop by the Japanese branch tomorrow morning. But I also have an appointment with the principal here tomorrow afternoon to fully explain our situation to her and apologize for Lilly's absence over the last weeks. If you let me know if I can stop by I will do so after I'm done with that meeting. It'll be a great way to conclude the events of the day."

"Let you know?"

She takes a business card out of her bag and writes a number and e-mail address on the back. When I take it, I notice they differ from the ones on the front. These must be her private phone number and e-mail.

"I already have your phone number, but would it be a problem for you to give me your e-mail address too? For the sake of completeness?"

"O-Okay."

We take out our cell phones and put in the other's contact information. When it's finished, I look at the small list of contacts on my screen. Karla's name is visible right above Lilly's and Naomi's entry.

"...Done. That makes five."

08

Chapter 39 (Hanako)

01

"A writing club, huh?"

Lilly, her mother and I are currently sitting in Lilly's room and having a cup of tea. We all have plans for this evening that don't involve hanging around here, but it feels nice to take a few minutes to sit back and relax.

"Not really an official c-club. Just a few of us trying s-something new."

"As a result of my advice?"

"Yes."

Karla's visit to the newspaper club a few days ago had been an unexpected success. Neither Naomi nor Mister Hoshino had objections to letting a former journalist pay a visit, and so the afternoon at the club turned out to be quite different from the usual fare. Lilly's mother was first introduced to everyone and given a little explanation on how we usually go about putting a newspaper issue together. Afterwards, all usual activities for the day were put on hold, and we spent several hours listening to Karla's stories about her own time as a journalist. It turned out that Karla and Naomi took pretty much an instant liking to one another, feeding off each other's enthusiasm rather than being put off by it.

At first I was a little worried when Lilly's mother mentioned that she had been out of the profession for quite some time, but that concern was quickly alleviated when it became clear how knowledgeable Karla still was about many aspects of the job. She started with an recount of how she went to study journalism in order to broaden her horizons and meet new people and how she got to travel around the country as a business reporter. She continued with an account of how she switched jobs and relocated to Japan and concluded with an analysis on how she experienced the news business in Europe, Japan and the United States.

"I spoke with one of the club's members in class two days ago. It seems you've made quite an impression on the club, Mother."

"Hahaha, that's good to know. It'd have been bad if it turned out that I was the only one who had fun that day."

"I heard you brought me up, by the way."

"Only to make a point, dear. You should be honored that I brought you up as a source of inspiration."

I remember that. Naomi asked Karla about the possibilities of getting a job in the news business if you couldn't drive and were encouraged by the doctor to keep your day-night rhythm as regular as possible. Karla responded that the image of the reporter who's out and about 24/7 in search of the next big scoop hardly covered all journalists and that many articles could take weeks or even months to gather interviews and information for, so planning the project properly could go a long way in avoiding having to pull all-nighters. She also mentioned that it wasn't uncommon for reporters to team up to work on articles, and joining up with the right partner was all it would take to work around your individual limits. She then mentioned how Lilly wanted to teach English as a career and listed some of the workarounds her daughter came up with to circumvent the limits of her blindness. That was a pretty motivating moment for everyone. Even I found it inspiring, even though Karla didn't really say anything about Lilly that I didn't already know.

"Speaking of inspiration, what advice did you give that inspired the formation of this club?"

Lilly's mother turns to me.

"Probably the stuff I said about writing practice, wasn't it?"

I nod. Near the end of her visit, Lilly's mother said that the best way to start a journalism-related career would be to apply to a good university and get plenty of writing practice in the meantime. Mister Hoshino promised to drop off a collection of brochures at the club for universities that offered suitable studies, and Naomi came up with a proposal to cover the writing practice a day after Karla's visit. Her proposal was to start checking out online writing competitions and take part in them.

Unfortunately for her, Mister Hoshino immediately shot that idea down, as he argued that the club was centered around the creation of the school newspaper and received a club budget specifically for that purpose. He did encourage Naomi to pursue the venture after club hours, though and said he was happy to look up a few contests held by magazines, websites and other third parties that high schoolers would be able to partake in. Encouraged by our teacher's support, Naomi promptly announced the founding of an unofficial writing club and invited everyone in the room to join.

I wasn't very sure how serious she was at first. Naomi has the tendency to be a bit impulsive from time to time, but when she approached me the day afterwards and repeated her invitation, I realized she was actually planning to go through with this. Long story short, she ended up convincing me to give it a try. I wasn't sure if this was going to go anywhere, but I had been thinking of getting some writing practice myself, and since our teacher said he was willing to provide feedback on everything we submitted, this appeared to be a pretty good opportunity.

"Y-Yes. Mister Hoshino said he'd look into a few competitions for us to submit our w-work in. Even if we d-don't win anything it'll still be good practice."

Lilly smiles.

"And even if you don't win anything you're still spending your time with friends doing something you enjoy. That's never a waste of time."

Friends? I'm slowly starting to get used to my clubmates' presence, but I'm not sure if we're truly friends. Certainly not in the way I'm friends with Lilly.

"I... suppose."

"When will you be starting?"

"We... meet up for the f-first time this evening. It's just... three of us right now."

"How exciting. And where will you be meeting up?"

I sigh. That issue came up earlier today, and I'm not too fond of the outcome.

"We d-drew straws. They're c-coming t-to my room tonight."

Lilly nods understandingly, but her mother looks a bit confused.

"You look a bit apprehensive about it."

"Ummm... L-Lilly and Hisao are the only two people I've ever let into my room before."

I'm quite aware of the possibility that they'll find my room empty, dull and devoid of personality , especially Naomi who tends to speak her mind from time to time, and that might be enough to instantly kill my motivation and what little self-esteem I've been trying to gather for this.

"Would you like to use my room, Hanako? Mother and I will be away for most of the evening, so nobody will bother you here."

Karla will apparently be travelling the country the upcoming week in order to look for attractive neighborhoods to settle down in if they want to go through with the plan of migrating back to Japan. That means she won't be in the area for several days, so she and Lilly are going out tonight and probably won't be back until rather late.

"Ummm..."

I strongly consider taking Lilly's offer, but there are a few problems with it. First of all, if this meeting turns out well, it won't be the last time we get together, and I might end up playing host at some point in the future again. I can't keep relying on Lilly for that. Also, the others will be able to immediately tell that this isn't my room and might start speculating why I'm so reluctant to invite them over to my place. That speculation, especially with Naomi, might be worse than the real thing.

"Thanks, but... they'll probably s-start thinking bad things about me if I won't even l-let them into my room."

Lilly's mother toys around with her hair a bit and looks at me with a serious look in her eyes.

"I guess this must be kind of intimidating, but sometimes the only way to move forward is to take a bold step and have faith that it'll turn out alright."

"Faith?"

"Yep. It can help from time to time, you know."

Lilly takes the teapot and holds it out for me.

"If you're not going to use my room, please at least use my tea set. Seeing that you were the one who picked it, I feel it is also partially yours anyway."

That might not be such a bad idea.

"Okay then. I'd better go and make new tea."

We leave Lilly's room, head down to the kitchen area, and I start boiling water for a new batch of tea. Judging by the fact that Lilly and her mother are carrying their handbags, the two are just about ready to leave. As I start filling up the teapot, Lilly turns to me.

"Hanako, I know that Naomi is part of this little club too, but you said there were three of you right now. Who is the third member?"

"I am."

We turn around to find my fellow editor standing in the kitchen doorway wearing her favorite red-and-white cap, carrying a flat, black bag with one hand while wearing an orthopedic brace on the other. Lilly's mother smiles and returns Jun's bow with a polite one of her own.

"Yamazaki, wasn't it?"

"Good evening."

Karla shifts her gaze to the bag Jun is carrying.

"You brought a laptop along?"

She nods.

"It's my own. We can use it to type up what we come up with and look things up if necessary."

Lilly's mother frowns.

"Do you have internet here? I didn't notice any network sockets in the wall of Lilly's room."

I shake my head.

"There aren't any. But I've seen people checking their mail on laptops in the common room before, so the building probably has Wifi."

"That makes sense."

Jun nods enthusiastically.

"There's a Wifi router in the common room's TV cabinet. The network isn't password-protected so anyone with a laptop who wishes to access the internet can log onto it."

"Mother, now that one of Hanako's guests has already arrived, perhaps it would be a good moment for us to be on our way."

I use my hand to hide a small amused smile. Lilly has a point of course, but I noticed she visibly cringed for a moment when the discussion turned technical. Lilly's never been very comfortable with her computer illiteracy.

"I guess so. You'll say hello to Inoue for me, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, have fun you two. Bye."

Lilly and her mother wave goodbye and walk out of the room while I'm left with Jun who seems eager to leave.

"Shall we go, Hanako? This laptop is getting a bit heavy, so..."

"Oh... ah... Sure."

We leave the kitchen and make our way to the door of my room. Once again my anxiety flares up a bit. Jun isn't someone whom I expect will immediately criticize me for the way my room looks, but she'll definitely think *something* when I let her in.

"Hanako?"

"J-Just a moment."

I unlock the door to my room, and we go in. I walk right up to my desk and put the tea set down so I don't have to see the look on Jun's face. There's no immediate reaction either. When she finally says something, it isn't even a reaction to her surroundings. I'm not sure whether to feel relieved or worried.

"...can I put my laptop on your desk? It'll be easier that way."

"Ah, sure."

She walks up to my desk, plugs her laptop into the nearby power socket and starts it up. The room is quiet except for the subdued humming of the computer. The silence starts feeling really heavy to me, but it doesn't seem to bother Jun. I haven't really known her for very long, but one thing I've learned about her is that she isn't very talkative most of the time unless a subject she's specifically interested in pops up, at which point she can get quite verbose. I don't think it's shyness in her case... I've seen her put Naomi in her place when the latter said something that Jun thought was ridiculous and that's a pretty big thing seeing that Naomi is her senior. It's just that she doesn't like to use twenty words to say something that can also be said with ten.

"..."

"..."

While I'm still struggling to think of a way to make conversation, Jun has finished booting up her system and is now running her internet browser to test the network connection. That suddenly makes me wonder about something.

"Ah... Jun?"

"Hmmm?"

"Ah... You... often visit the computer lab, don't you?"

"Yes. I think that's where we first saw one another. It was some time before you joined."

"Why... do you go there if you h-have your own laptop?"

"This is a really old model, and it isn't always stable. That's why it took so long to start up. It can't handle graphically intensive websites well. Or message boards where a lot of pictures are posted."

"Oh."

"Hanako, what do you like most? Writing or editing?"

"I like the idea of writing. I just... don't have much experience yet."

"Maybe now that I'm back at the club you can do more writing. I'm sure Naomi can find plenty of things for you to do."

"Maybe... I'd still like to do a bit of editing if that's okay. It's... umm..."

Safer. People are less likely to criticize me, because I didn't actually create anything for them to criticize.

"...fun too. Do you like editing?"

"It's a fun job to do. I've been told that I'm very particular about spelling and grammar, so it's nice to put that to good use."

"Told by whom?"

"Some people online. I don't think much of it. I usually make an attempt to type correctly, on message boards even if one of my arms is in a cast or brace, so it's not too much to ask others to do the same, is it?"

For some reason she rolls her eyes while she says that. I wonder why.

"No. But... if you prefer editing then why did you join a writing club?"

"Editors and researchers are useful for writing clubs too. When Naomi invited me, I told her I wasn't really up to writing stuff myself, but I'd be happy to assist you with yours."

The conversation falls silent again until I'm startled by a sudden movement from the door handle. Someone just tried opening the door. Jun throws me a puzzled look.

"Did you lock the door after we got in here?"

"F-Force of habit."

I quickly unlock the door and notice someone with bleached hair and a file folder under her arm walking down the hall and away from the door.

"N-Naomi."

She turns around and waves.

"Hey! I was already heading for the kitchen to check for you there. Is Jun already inside?"

"Y-Yes. C-come in."

I let Naomi into my room and my heart skips a beat when I see her take a long, long look around the room. Surprisingly, the expected 'What the hell?' doesn't come. Instead, she merely keeps sweeping my room with an analyzing gaze that feels strange coming from her. Eventually, her eyes fall on my cabinet containing my two dolls. A smile suddenly appears on her face.

"Hey! This one looks a lot like Satou. That's probably not a coincidence, is it?"

I'm taken a bit off guard by her sudden switch from analytical observer to her usual self, but manage to stammer out a response.

"It... was a g-gift from Lilly. Hisao p-picked it out for her."

"It looks really cute."

Jun taps her fingers on the teapot next to her laptop to get Naomi's attention.

"Do you want to have some tea? It's still warm and pretty good."

"Yeah, I'd like some."

A bit relieved by Jun's attempt to divert Naomi's attention away from my room's interior, I pour some tea for her and myself, and we take a seat on my bed while Jun remains seated on my chair. The atmosphere is fairly relaxed as we drink our tea and just sit there, but I still feel a bit on edge. I wonder if that's because there are two people whom I haven't known for that long sitting in my room right now. Ever since I came to Yamaku, this room has been the only place where I could always go to feel safe and secure. The knowledge that I'll have nowhere to run off to if something happens that sets my anxieties off makes me feel uneasy and a little bit cornered.

"...Hanako?"

"Ah... Y-yes?"

"I was asking whether it's okay to get started."

I really need to stop spacing out over this. I'm not going to be able to pull my weight here if I can't put my mind at ease.

"S-Sure."

Naomi gets up, scrapes her throat, pauses for a bit of effect and then throws her fist up in the air.

"Welcome to the first meeting of our new club, people. It would be grand if we could start cranking up pieces tonight already, but let's start with the most important thing first."

Jun looks at the folder Naomi took along with her.

"You spoke to Mister Hoshino about recommendations, didn't you?"

"We'll get to that later. The most important thing for now is deciding on a name for ourselves."

"Ummm... D-do we really need a name? This isn't an... official club, is it?"

"Of course we need a name. I already felt cheesy saying 'our new club' the first time and having an official name makes things easier. We need to know what to say when referring to the club. It's also a matter of principle."

Jun looks puzzled at that.

"Why is it a matter of principle?"

"If we don't even have the creativity to think up a name for ourselves, what does that say about our ability to come up with stuff to write about?"

"I can't really argue that point."

Naomi grins.

"Okay! Brainstorm time, girls! How are team names made up?"

Jun thinks for a moment and then starts typing on her laptop. A few seconds later she moves aside to reveal a website containing information about the Japanese baseball league.

"Yomiuri Giants. Hanshin Tigers. Tokyo Yakult Swallows. Chiba Lotte Marines. Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks."

"Okay, so those teams often use animal names or some other impressive-sounding noun and combine it with the area they're from or the company that owns them. That's not a bad way to come up with a name. For us that would probably be Yamaku then. We just need a noun to go with it. Maybe animals. How does 'The Yamaku Kittens' sound?"

There's a short silence followed by a giggle from all three of us. I think that name sounds way too cute for a writing club. Jun smilingly shakes her head.

"That may be a better name for a cheerleaders' squad. Maybe we need to go with something that refers to writing or writing implements. 'The Yamaku Pens' or 'The Yamaku Pencils' perhaps?"

Those might be better suited for a writing club. Naomi doesn't look completely convinced though.

"Doesn't sound bad, but I think it lacks a little punch."

"There aren't that many writing implements. I hope you're not planning to go with typewriters or word processors."

"Hehehe, that sounds horrible. I don't know, maybe we ought to look at it from more than one angle. Hanako, what do you think?"

"Ah... I'm... n-not sure. I don't r-really have any better ideas."

"What's the last team name you've heard lately? Baseball teams don't count."

"Ummmm... Oriental Express?"

"Huh?"

"In Scotland... Lilly and her sister won a p-pub quiz under that name."

"Heh, that sounds kinda cool. Do you remember any more names?"

Akira listed a whole bunch of them when we left the pub, but I don't remember them all.

"Ummmm... A lot of them w-were related to beer or drinking like ummm...'Beer today, Gone tomorrow'. And some were some self-mocking names like... 'Beauty School Dropouts'."

"Hmmm, a slightly playful name may be cool too."

Jun turns back to her laptop and types a few more words. The page she's looking at must be pretty funny, because she lets out a soft giggle but when Naomi comes over she quickly clicks the page away.

"Hmmm... Well, some of those pub quiz team names are pretty creative, but I don't know how I'd feel about referring to us as 'Oh no, my pen's running ou...' or 'One wheel short of a unicycle'. It'd probably get old after the second time."

Naomi nods.

"Yeah, so playful is okay, but over-the-top is bad..."

"Maybe we should go with the pen or pencil angle after all."

Suddenly Naomi snaps her fingers.

"How about... The Broken Quills?"

Jun and I instinctively exchange a baffled look.

"What?"

"Ummmm... W-what?"

"You girls know what a quill is, don't you?"

"Yes, but what about the broken part?"

"It's not meant to be insulting, but simply a little playful. I mean, if you use Yamaku in the name and people wonder what the heck the word means and look it up, they'll know what kind of school this is anyway."

"Just because we attend this school doesn't mean we're... like... damaged beyond all use, right?"

Naomi pumps a fist into the air as if Jun just proved her point.

"Just like a quill you break in half. It may not be exactly like an ordinary quill, but you can still use it and you can even write masterpieces with it if you have the inspiration and the drive. We may be attending this school and have reason to do so, but with inspiration and drive we too can create some great things!"

I exchange another baffled look with Jun. Naomi's reasoning, as twisted as it is, kind of makes sense, but only in a very morbid way.

"I'm still not completely sold, to be honest."

"Hanako?"

"I'm... not really sure... either."

"Consider it, okay? And take some time to think up some alternatives. We'll get back to this the next time. Let's get to the other topic of tonight."

Naomi takes the file folder she brought along and fishes several sheets of paper out of it.

"Aaaaand... here are our challenges. Look them over and let me know what you think."

She passes a few pages to each of us, and I start look through mine. I'm impressed by how many our Japanese teacher managed to find in only a few days. There are a few contests organized by online writing communities, but most of them are hosted by various literary clubs associated with high schools and universities in the region.

"Wow... A p-poetry contest."

"I have one about essays here."

Jun scratches her cheek.

"Did you girls notice that most forms mention a word or page limit?"

Naomi nods.

"I think Hoshino picked those out on purpose. He probably wants us to start small and not spend months writing a single piece. Hanako and I have exams in Januari after all."

She smirks.

"If we're going with the essay assignment, I suggest we make them about those exams. Plenty of stuff to write about."

"Such as?"

"How stupid they are. You spend three years working your butt off trying to get good grades and yet all those grades end up not meaning crap as far as your admission goes. Just a handful of days in three whole years that have any significance whatsoever. You sleep through high school and have a lucky break at the end and you pass. You work hard and have a bad day or two and you flunk. Does that sound fair to you?"

Looks like we've hit a personal pet peeve of Naomi's.

"If you don't like exams then how would you do it?"

"I dunno. Instead of stuffing the whole national exam into one weekend maybe spread it out throughout the year so you only have to memorize a little bit at a time and get a chance to make up on the next run if you miss one or do badly? Or maybe hold the exams four times a year. Now you lose a whole year of your life if Murphy screws you over on the wrong day. It's complete bullshit."

Wow, she's really passionate about this. Jun looks at Naomi, then at me, then back at Naomi again.

"I don't think an essay needs to be completely objective, but I doubt the word 'bullshit' will look good in there."

"Duh. I can reword it a bit."

Jun looks at one of the forms again and smirks.

"We probably won't win a prize with that subject."

"Why not?"

"Because the essay contest is hosted by a university. They might not take well to us criticizing their method of accepting students."

Naomi grumbles.

"It's a conspiracy."

Jun rolls her eyes.

"I may know of a few internet forums that are suitable for venting about that if you're interested..."

"Okay, okay. Next."

"The rest seem to be about short stories."

"Mine too."

"That's probably the best place to start. So what options do we have in terms of subjects? Jun?"

"I have science fiction and slice-of-life here. The rest allows the participants to pick their own genre."

"Hanako?"

"Hmmm... Slice-of-life, fantasy and drama. The rest leaves it up to us."

"Mine are fantasy and romance. Looks like we have plenty of options. What do you say we write down our two favorite options and compare them all?"

Jun and I both nod in agreement. As I take a piece of paper to jot down my preferences, I notice that Jun has finished her cup of tea. I take the teapot to refill her cup only to find out that it's nearly empty.

"I'll... ummm... go and make some more tea."

"Great. Thanks."

I leave my room, teapot in hand, and make my way to the kitchen. So far everything's been going rather well. I'd still like to get back though. What would happen if Naomi started snooping around and found my birth control pills or the diary I kept until Lilly's father got hospitalized? I don't think there'd be a second meeting if that were to happen. At least not with me present.

After boiling some more water and refilling my teapot, I start walking back to my room. As I do so, my thoughts return to Naomi's rant about the exams. It came as a surprise to hear her get so worked up over something like that. I guess there's still plenty about her that I don't know.

03

I make it to the door of my room and reach out to push it open when I'm suddenly startled by a loud crashing noise followed by a shriek. I freeze. That sound came from behind my own door. What's happening? I uneasily open the door and look inside.

Jun's no longer sitting at my desk. She's standing up, her back pressed against the nearby wall, and there's a terrified look on her face. There are several things lying at her feet. A box of tissues, a desk lamp and an alarm clock. My things. They're usually on the shelf just above my bed. Did Naomi accidentally knock them off?

"She... She suddenly got like this..."

04

My gaze shifts to Naomi who hasn't moved since I opened the door. She's still sitting on my bed, but there's something strange about her posture. It looks like she's leaning - no, slumping - against the now empty shelf. Just when I'm about to walk up to the bed and ask if she's alright, her head snaps back as if an invisible person just walked up to her and punched her in the face. At the same time, she violently swings her left arm as if trying to slap someone. I cringe as I hear her hand crash into the shelf. That sounded like it hurt, though Naomi doesn't even acknowledge it. That certainly explains how all my items suddenly ended up on the floor. I look at Jun again. Judging by the freaked-out look on her face, this is probably the first time she's seeing Naomi having an epileptic seizure. And truth be told, the sight of Naomi, eyes rolled back, lips slightly blue and movements spastic and unnatural is an extremely disturbing sight even though I've witnessed this spectacle plenty of times myself over the years.

"What should we do?"

I really don't know. If we were in class, Natsume or the teacher would jump in and take care of this. But right now it's just Jun and me, and neither of us really seems sure what to do. Again, Naomi's hand violently hits the shelf. I know enough about epilepsy to remember that epileptics sometimes suffer

concussions from banging their head against a wall or floor during a seizure. The least thing I can probably do is making certain that won't happen this time.

I walk over to the bed, grab hold of Naomi and try to get her to lie down to the best of my ability. I'm promptly rewarded for my efforts as one of Naomi's flailing arms hits me hard in the side.

"Ow!"

I quickly back off, grimacing and rubbing my side. That was unexpected. Jun worriedly gets a little closer, but quickly steps back when one of Naomi's legs kicks the air. I don't think it's a good idea for someone as physically fragile as Jun to try and get anywhere near Naomi. Some time ago she accidentally tripped and broke her hand while trying to catch herself. I don't want to imagine what would happen if Jun took a hit from one of Naomi's thrashing limbs. I doubt the results would be pretty.

"Are you alright?"

I quickly nod. I don't think I'm the one we should be worrying about right now.

"Is... is it always like this?"

I nod again. Well, it's like this most of the time. There are times when she simply appears to black out, but my mind isn't really clear enough to give Jun a detailed account on Naomi's condition as far as I've experienced it.

"Hanako, we should... probably get help. Don't you think?"

My first thought is ironically that I don't want some random nurse barging into my room. Then I realize how selfish and unfeeling that is, and I feel guilty for even thinking it.

"Y-Yes, we probably should. But w-we can't leave her alone like this."

Jun is obviously looking to me for advice on how to deal with this, but unlike someone like Natsume, I really don't have any experience handling this sort of thing.

"Hanako?"

"...Natsume. You s-should go and fetch Natsume. I'll stay with Naomi."

"Right."

As Jun walks out of the room I focus my attention back on Naomi. She's still flopping around like a fish out of the water, and she's threatening to fall off my bed because of it, so I take a deep breath and push her as far back onto the bed as possible, making sure she keeps lying on her side. I'm currently racking my brain to remember what my first aid training said about seizures again, but one thing I remember is that it's best to lay victims on their side so they don't risk choking on their own saliva. Judging by the large dark stains that have already formed on my pillow, that's certainly something to keep in mind with Naomi.

"Hanako?"

The door opens and I see Jun in the doorway. Did she find Natsume already? It's probably been less than a minute.

"Did you already find...?"

Jun points at something near my feet.

"I just thought of a better way to get a hold of her. Could you toss me Naomi's handbag?"

I take the handbag Naomi left near the nightstand and give it to Jun. She opens it, takes a cell phone out of it, quickly presses a few buttons and then puts it to her ear. That's a pretty smart move. I don't have Natsume's number saved on my phone and apparently Jun doesn't either, but Naomi unsurprisingly does.

"Natsume? This... ah... is Jun speaking. Something's happened to Naomi."

"It's... ah... actually still happening as we speak."

"No, we're in Hanako's room right now."

"I'll tell her. Thank you."

Jun puts down the phone and turns back to me.

"Natsume's on her way. She says that the best thing to do is to let the seizure run its course and not to put anything in her mouth or restrain her in any way."

"Umm... O-okay."

"She also said that if the fit lasts longer than five minutes, you'll have to use this and then warn a nurse."

She reaches into Naomi's handbag and takes something out of it that looks a bit like a marker.

"It's an injection pen that's applied to the thigh. It contains a rather strong anticonvulsant for emergencies."

I instinctively look at my alarm clock on the ground only to notice it's not displaying anything right now.

"Umm... W-when did this start?"

"I'm... not really sure. I think 3 minutes ago."

I really hope Natsume gets here before it comes to that. Naomi isn't thrashing around as badly anymore, but she's definitely not lying nice and still either, and I wonder if, nervous as I'm feeling right now, I'd be able to keep my hand steady enough to jab that thing in just the right place without messing up, especially with 'the right place' twitching every second or so. Without really thinking about it I put one hand on Naomi's thigh and make a few stabbing gestures with the other hand in an attempt to practice the motion. It is then that I suddenly notice something. Naomi's inner thigh feels a bit moist and when I look down, my eyes fall on a dark stain on the blanket. My eyes widen in shock as I realize what happened and I can only barely suppress a gasp.

Jun looks at me with a worried expression.

"Is something the matter?"

"N-No."

This is getting worse and worse. First my clubmate has an epileptic fit right in front of us. Then it turns out I might have to apply an injection in order to stop the seizure, and now I find out that Naomi has voided her bladder in the process. What's taking Natsume so long?

"Just one more minute. Is it... just my imagination or is she quieting down a bit?"

The twitches seem to start getting more infrequent. But there's still a trinkle of drool coming down her lips, and a small puddle has already formed on the pillow her head is resting on. I take a tissue from the box on the floor and start wiping Naomi's cheek. Just when I get started on the pillow, a knock on my door draws our attention. A moment later, Natsume enters the room.

"How is she?"

Jun makes a helpless gesture.

"It might be better for you to have a look yourself. I'm afraid I'm not very familiar with this."

Natsume approaches the bed, and I consider moving over, but then I remember the stain on my blanket, and I decide that I can at least try to make sure Jun doesn't notice, so I remain in place trying to block the spot.

"Was it like this the whole time?"

I shake my head.

"N-No, it was... like it usually is in c-class."

We remain silent for some time and watch as Naomi's convulsions become more and more infrequent until eventually they stop entirely. Just when I'm about to ask what to do now, we can see Naomi's eyes open just a little bit, and she lets out a soft moan.

05

"Ooh...."

"Are y-you alright?"

Natsume positions herself close to Naomi's face and speaks to her in a soft voice.

"It's okay. I'm here. So are the others."

"What...is...g-going...on..?"

There's more than a hint of fear in her voice and it pains me to hear the usually confident and up-beat Naomi talk like this.

"You had a seizure. But it's over now. It was just a seizure."

"W-What...who...?"

"It's over now. Do you remember where you are?"

"...n-no..."

"Do you know who I am? Or who these girls are?"

She tries to open her eyes a little bit more and look in our direction, but when she does so there's no immediate sign of recognition.

"...no..."

"Do you remember your name?"

"...n-no..."

The fear in her voice starts becoming more pronounced, and I can even sense a hint of panic. She sniffles before the next words leave her mouth.

"W-what...is going...on...?"

"Just close your eyes and relax. Let it come back to you. It will. It always does."

"...but..."

I softly place a hand on her shoulder.

"Just r-relax, Naomi. It'll be okay."

As Naomi closes her eyes again while letting out a pathetic whimper, I whisper Natsume's name to try and get her attention, and when she looks at me I make a little gesture with my head towards the Naomi's groin. The fact that she closes her eyes and groans softly suggests that Natsume has gotten my meaning. After some deliberation, she gets up and looks at Jun.

"Jun, will you do me a favor? There's usually a nurse on duty in the dormkeeper's office, and otherwise there'll be one doing rounds outside. Could you go and give her a summary of what just happened?"

Jun looks a little puzzled.

"Is it necessary to bring a nurse in here?"

"No, but if we report this right now, Mutou won't be expecting Naomi to show up in class tomorrow morning, and it'll save me an explanation later. Just stress that the seizure is over and that the situation is under control."

"Well... okay."

Jun shrugs her shoulders and leaves the room. As the door closes, Natsume silently sighs.

"What a mess."

It is, in every sense of the word.

"N-Now what?"

Natsume thinks for a moment.

"Do you happen to have a spare blanket?"

"In my closet."

"I'd like to use it. Also..."

She takes Naomi's handbag, takes a room key out of it and gives it to me.

"I'd like you to go to her room real quick and get a few things from there. You're probably faster on your feet than I am. I need you to retrieve her pajamas from under her pillow and some clean undies..."

I blush a bit as Natsume casually peeks under Naomi's skirt.

"...white ones if there are any. She keeps them in her dresser. There should be a washing bowl and a wash cloth in the bathroom next to her room."

"Ummm... O-okay."

Trying not to think too hard about this, I leave my room and hurry over to where I believe Naomi's room is. Good thing we swapped room locations before drawing straws to determine where to hold our meeting. A few minutes later, I return to my room with the items Natsume requested. Natsume's still at Naomi's side, and Naomi's still lying completely still. She's obviously still very much out of it.

As I put the items I retrieved on my desk, Natsume gives an appreciative nod. Before she can say anything though, the door opens and Jun comes back in. I instinctively move in front of the bed in order to prevent Jun from spotting the stain on my blanket. Natsume coughs softly in order to get our attention.

"It'd be rude of me to ask you to leave your own room, but would it be a problem if you gave Naomi a bit of privacy? You can wait in her room if you like."

Jun and I both nod our heads in unison. I personally don't think this is something I'd even want to see anyway. Before we leave, Jun asks if I'd mind carrying her laptop. When I walk out of my room with her laptop, I notice she's carrying my lamp and alarm clock along with her.

06

"Wow."

After we got to Naomi's room, Jun plugged in the lamp only to conclude it didn't work anymore, even after swapping its bulb with the one from Naomi's desk lamp. So she removed the fixture, started tinkering with the wires, and after putting the fixture and the bulb back in, my lamp was working again.

"Your lamp is rather sturdy. The impact merely caused one of the wires to get loose."

She takes my alarm clock and starts using a screwdriver from her laptop bag to get it open. I look at her in awe.

"I... never realized you knew how to fix things like that."

Jun smiles humbly.

"I'm not some sort of gadgeteer genius. I've just spent a lot of time around electronic devices."

"A lot of time?"

"My father runs a small store that sells consumer electronics, and he tended to take damaged devices with him to tinker with them before disposing of them. I couldn't have any physically intensive hobbies, so he gave me my own devices to experiment with to pass the time. Flashlights, digital clocks, portable CD players, hairdryers...even an old Gameboy with a cracked screen."

She points at her laptop bag.

"I asked a laptop for my birthday a few years ago, but instead of buying one for me, Father started bringing discarded laptop systems home with him that I ended up salvaging for parts that still worked. The system in the bag is a bit like Frankenstein's monster. There's stuff from at least four different systems in there."

Something tells me that Jun would have been a great fit for the science club, and if it had existed at the start of her first school year she may very well have ended up joining it instead of the newspaper club.

"I'm impressed. Did you f-fix many of the things you were given?"

Jun smilingly shakes her head.

"I learned a lot from taking apart those devices, but especially in the beginning I often merely ended up putting those things out of their misery. *giggle* I guess breaking stuff really is a second nature to me."

I smile awkwardly. Hearing Jun poking fun at her own condition sounds a bit off-putting to me, but she's hardly the only person around here with that habit. Naomi occasionally jokes about her epilepsy, and Lilly makes light of her own blindness all the time. Even Hisao has occasionally started making little jokes about his condition. I've never been able to poke fun at my own scarring. Do I simply lack a sense of humor, or is it the fact that others have made fun of my appearance so often that makes it seem inappropriate to joke about it? Lilly said that a little self-mockery can help you put things into perspective. While I'm pondering all of this and more, Jun has been examining the insides of my alarm clock, and she softly shakes her head.

"I don't think there's much hope left for this alarm clock. The impact from Naomi's haymaker damaged several capacitors, so even if I got it running again, it would remain unreliable and lose power ever so often. There's not much use for an unreliable alarm clock that resets itself every few days. You're better off setting your phone's volume to maximum and using its alarm function. At least until you can get another alarm clock."

"Thanks f-for having a look. At least you got my lamp working again."

"It's okay. I needed to do something to get my mind off what just happened anyway. That was really disturbing."

She gives me an unsure look.

"I wonder if we set it off in some way. Like... Maybe my computer screen triggered it?"

"I... don't really think so. I think they just h-happen from time to time without needing to be triggered. Look at her room."

Naomi's room is pretty distinct. Unlike mine, it's very colorful with posters on several walls and tons of little touches to make it feel more personal. What's immediately noticeable is the extremely thick carpet that covers pretty much the entire room. Also, instead of a bed there's merely a futon on the floor and nearly half of that futon is covered with all sorts of plush toys including the toy Nessie I brought from Scotland for her.

"I noticed. Maybe those plush toys aren't merely there to cushion her in case of a seizure, and she simply likes them, but this room seems geared at preventing injury in case she has an episode here. With a carpet this thick, she might not even need a futon."

"It has to be difficult to keep it clean though."

"Yes. I wonder how they clean it after a seizure. It has to be a real chore to get the spots out."

Spots? I freeze and stare at Jun. Did she see after all?

"I... ummm... meant saliva spots."

The brief look we exchange has pretty much given it away though. I know that she knows, and she knows that I know. What follows is a short but uncomfortable silence that Jun eventually ends up breaking.

"So... ah... it seems like we both saw what happened."

I don't really know what to say, so I simply nod.

"I wasn't completely sure myself until you carried in that washing bowl..."

She grimaces uncomfortably.

"...that Natsume is using right now to... I suppose it's going to take a while before she's back to normal, and you don't let someone sleep a whole night in soiled undies, but it's still a bit..."

Those were my thoughts as well, though Natsume probably has her reasons. Jun grins awkwardly.

"I heard a rumor about Natsume and Naomi once. That they're... together? This thing kind of plays into that, don't you think? Do you suppose it's true?"

"Of course it's true!"

"Ah!"

We both jump in surprise as Natsume comes walking into the room carrying a folded blanket and a plastic bag with what look like clothes inside. She has a scolding expression on her face, obviously having heard Jun's words.

"And what I did just now was totally because I'm turned on by that sort of thing."

Jun blushes a bit, but also giggles at Natsume's obvious sarcasm.

"It does sound rather silly when you put it that way. I hope I didn't offend you."

"You didn't. I know the rumor. I just thought that only a certain part of the male student body attending here actually took it seriously. You know - the innocent manga-educated kind? "

Jun laughs out loud.

"Well, I often pretend to be an innocent manga-educated male whenever I go online. I suppose part of the mindset sticks around at times whether you like it or not."

"There have been times when Naomi has helped me get dressed whenever my arthritis got so bad that I had trouble doing it myself, so she and I are fairly comfortable in each other's presence. She's my best friend, but we're not in a relationship any more than Hanako and Satou are in a relationship. I think our friendships are actually very similar. Heh... and maybe viewed in the very same light by the male student body until recently."

My heart promptly skips a few beats when I hear Natsume make that comparison. How have other students been looking at Lilly and me anyway?

"Ah... ummm... There w-weren't r-rumors about me, were there?"

"A few, after you and Satou started hanging out together. I mean, you never really interacted with other people before around here, and then suddenly you started having lunch with Satou nearly every day in addition to visiting her room in the evening. Since neither of you had a boyfriend, how could you have been anything *but* lesbians? You had to have been, seeing that girls having tea and cookies together is not exactly tantalizing."

"B-B-B-But...!"

THAT MAKES NO SENSE AT ALL!

Jun gives me an overly cheerful smile, obviously finding this conversation extremely funny.

"At least you hooking up with Nakai must have quelled those rumors just a little bit, though I bet people are now wondering whether Satou is secretly part of the relationship or not."

Please be joking. Please be joking. Please be joking.

"We're... j-just f-friends."

Natsume scrapes her throat.

"Point is: if I were a lesbian, I probably wouldn't have done what I just did. I would have felt like a creep. This was simply a little nursing chore..."

I have to admit that in contrast to the way she was speaking to Naomi while calming her down, what I saw of Natsume's actual handling of things looked rather clinical and detached. The few times I allowed Hisao to apply my moisturizer lotion for me, there was no way I would have mistaken his touch for that of a hospital nurse.

"And can we maybe lay off that subject now and switch back to the reason we're here right now?"

That's more than acceptable to me. I quickly nod.

"H-How is she right now?"

"Sleeping like a baby. I managed to get her her jammies on, changed the blanket, and then I stuck around until her mind was clear enough to recognize me and comprehend the fact that she just had a seizure."

She looks at me.

"I'm sorry to ask this of you, but would it be okay if Naomi spends the night in your room? It usually takes her brain some time to recover from a seizure, and she could use the rest right now. You can spend the night here if you like. You don't have to worry about Naomi going through your stuff. She'd never betray your hospitality like that, and besides, she'll probably be too sore to even make it out of bed tomorrow morning though I'll try to help her make it to her own room after she's had a night's sleep."

I reluctantly nod. I guess I can stay here. Or I could simply ask Hisao if I can stay over.

"O-Okay then."

Jun gives Natsume a worried look.

"Is she always like that when she comes out of a seizure?"

I'm a bit curious about that as well. I learned at the first aid training that people who just had a seizure are often in a disorientated and confused state for some time afterwards, but since Naomi's usually carried to the nurse's office on a stretcher after a seizure in class has died down, I've never really seen the aftermath until today. It was kind of disturbing to see Naomi act like a lost and frightened little child rather than the bundle of energy she usually is.

07

"Most of the time. She usually suffers from brief memory loss after the seizure ends and waking up not knowing what happened, where you are or even who you are can be really terrifying to a person. That's why I asked you not to get a nurse. I figured leaving her in an unfamiliar room with a person she doesn't know would discomfort her even more."

"Speaking of discomfort, has that... ah... thing with the bedsheets happened before?"

Natsume stares at the floor for several seconds before replying.

"Never in class, and I thank my lucky stars for that. It's happened twice or thrice in my presence over the years, and if there have been other occasions, I doubt that Naomi would have told me about them."

Natsume's expression takes on a tinge of sadness.

"Those epileptic fits are demeaning enough as they are, but I think that for the most part Naomi's resigned herself to the fact that they happen to her from time to time. But this is... different. After the first time this happened with me present, Naomi spent a good deal of the week avoiding me, and even afterwards she was really awkward with me for some time. I had been hoping to save you two the trouble of having to deal with that by cleaning things up before she became aware enough to notice what happened. This night's events will probably remain a big blur in her mind, so if you two don't slip up, she won't ever know what happened other than the fact that she had an episode. Ignorance can be bliss sometimes."

Jun and I nod understandingly.

"I w-won't tell anyone."

"Me neither. I guess some things are bad enough to even embarrass Naomi."

Natsume gives Jun an amused smirk.

"This may surprise you, but Naomi's actually quite self-conscious about how others perceive her."

Judging from her expression, that does indeed surprise Jun.

"She doesn't come across as someone who ever keeps a low profile."

"You have to remember that it's impossible for someone like Naomi to be completely inconspicuous, whether she likes it or not. Even if she goes out of her way to avoid attracting anyone's attention, it's usually only a matter of time before her condition kicks in and forces her to create a public spectacle. So it's not so much the question whether Naomi ends up sticking in people's minds or not, but merely for what reason."

Jun raises an eyebrow.

"Are you saying that Naomi goes out of her way to define herself to people before her condition has the chance to do it for her? Even if it means acting a bit like a goofball at times?"

Natsume nods.

"Naomi's worst fear is probably that people end up remembering her merely as that one girl who has fits in class."

"I see."

There's a momentary silence as Natsume's words sink in. I don't know about Jun, but what Natsume said about Naomi resonated deeply with me. I wonder for a moment how the people from my former schools remember me. There's no doubt in my mind that I'll live on in their memories as just that one panicky recluse with the hideous scars on her face. They might remember the nicknames they made up for me, but I don't think anyone remembers my actual name anymore by now. For a long time, I was probably headed for a similar fate here. With luck, I'll be able to avoid that this time.

Jun absentmindedly fiddles with her screwdriver a bit before turning to Natsume.

"Doesn't Naomi take medication to prevent those episodes?"

"She does, but most of the medication she's tried so far has only been able to decrease the frequency of her episodes. If she was able to suppress her seizures completely, I don't think she'd be attending here. She's tried a lot of different meds over time, but most either didn't work or forced her to deal with very unpleasant side effects. One of the few treatment drugs that seemed to work for a while nearly ruined her social life in the past."

"Her social life?"

Natsume nods.

"One of the drugs she tried seemed to work at first, without immediately noticeable side effects like skin rash or drowsiness, but it later turned out that the dose she needed to keep her episodes at bay had an effect on her mood."

"You mean it made her depressed?"

"No, more like agitated... irritable. Kind of like a permanent case of PMS. It started to take an ever increasing strain on her relationships. After a falling out with one of her best friends, she decided that having fits in public was still better than not being herself anymore and other people believing her to be someone she isn't."

I'm not really sure what to think about that. Naomi always made the impression on me of being someone who didn't care what others thought of her. But judging from what Natsume just said, it seems like deep inside she cares very much about that. Before this meeting I remember being very anxious about making a bad impression and straining my relationship with Naomi and Jun. Now I start wondering whether Naomi was perhaps just as worried as I was and just didn't show it.

We sit there in silence for a few minutes, and then Natsume slowly gets up.

08

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to call it a night. Thank you again for letting Naomi use your room, Hanako. I'll wash your blanket for you together with Naomi's clothes, so don't worry about that. I'll also go over there tomorrow morning and make sure she gets back to her own room. I might be a little bit late in class, but when Mutou reads the nurses' night report I don't think he'll make a big deal out of it."

"T-Thanks. What about Naomi?"

"Well, it's Saturday tomorrow, and we'll only have classes until noon. Naomi often says that after a hefty seizure, her muscles feel like she jogged up Mount Fuji in one go. I suspect the trip from your bedroom to hers will be all the physical effort we can expect out of her tomorrow."

I exchange a glance with Jun. She nods as if she just read my thoughts.

"Ummm... M-maybe we c-can v-visit her tomorrow after classes and... keep her company?"

Natsume smiles.

"You should. I think she'd really like that. Just be prepared to hear her complain every ten seconds or so about how sore her muscles are."

"O-Okay."

Natsume says her goodbye, promising me I'll be able to get back into my own room before classes start tomorrow. After she leaves, Jun also starts getting up.

"I'd best be going as well. We both had a rough evening."

"Are you... okay now?"

"Yes. I was just a little freaked out when it happened, but I'm fine now."

She sighs.

"When you think about it, that epilepsy of hers is a pretty messed up condition. It's not just the seizures and the memory loss and the medication and that incident with your blanket. If you look at this room, you can tell that it's geared towards someone who could go into convulsions almost completely at random. That's gotta be so creepy. You take a bath, you risk drowning. You walk up a staircase, you risk breaking your neck. How does she put up with it?"

By joking about it and living her life to the fullest without worrying too much, it seems.

"With... a s-smile, I think. Knowing her..."

"I wouldn't want to trade places with her. My condition isn't exactly a blessing, but I'd still take mine over hers, thank you very much."

"..."

Jun opens the door, but before she walks out, she turns around and smiles awkwardly at me.

"This sure was an unusual first meeting, was it not? I wonder if this is going to be a regular occurrence."

I giggle.

"I hope not."

"I've been thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Maybe 'The Broken Quills' isn't such an inappropriate name for us after all."

We both let out a laugh, mostly as a relief from the insanity of this evening.

"M-Maybe not... Shall we tell Naomi tomorrow that we accepted her suggestion?"

"Let's do that."

"Hisao?"

I softly whisper the name of my boyfriend, but receive no reply. He's probably asleep already. After Jun left, I realized I didn't really feel completely comfortable spending the night in an unfamiliar room, so I snuck into the boys' dorm and asked Hisao if I could stay over, which he had no problems with. Now that we're lying in bed, I'm absentmindedly fiddling with my hair as I'm thinking about the events that took place this evening. Especially Jun's words after Natsume left have been nagging me almost non-stop.

(My condition isn't exactly a blessing, but I'd still take mine over hers, thank you very much.)

I didn't tell her that, but my first reaction to her statement was to agree with it. It took me a while to let that sink in and realize how shocking that was.

I'm not particularly happy with the way my life has turned out. There's nearly a decade of my life that I'd like to erase from my memories if such a thing was possible, and I'm not even 20 yet. Unlike Lilly, Hisao, Jun and Naomi, people only need a single glance at me to be able to tell that something's seriously wrong with me. I'll have these scars for the rest of my life. Even though it's no longer as bad as it used to be, I'm also still a nervous wreck at times who gets panicky about stuff that other people wouldn't even think twice about. I have very few people in my life, and I tend to anxiously avoid those I'm not familiar with. My scars come with their own set of physical limitations. All in all, my life's hardly enviable. And yet...

Would I want to trade my life with any of them? Would I want to walk on eggshells all the time like Jun, knowing a casual misstep could severely injure me and spend a large part of my life dealing with one bone fracture after another?

Or Natsume, who has to deal with chronic pain and stiffness of her joints on a regular basis even though she's in the prime of her life?

How about Naomi, who has to deal with the combination of sudden dramatic seizures that make her the center of unwanted attention whenever they happen and medication that she doesn't always react well to?

Would I want to trade places with Lilly, who can only navigate places unsupervised if she's memorized the layout? Who is dependant on others for several basic things and who can never read normal books or watch movies?

Do I envy Hisao his life, who is regularly confronted with his own mortality, has to take a truckload of medication every day and who knows that a sharp shock, exertion or simple scare could kill him?

I'm not really sure anymore. I probably have more trouble functioning in everyday life than any of my friends, and yet my life may very well be a lot more normal than theirs in a decade or so. That notion keeps whirling around in my head for quite some time. Before sleepiness finally gets the better of me, one thought sticks in my mind, and to my surprise it is accompanied by a sense of curiosity rather than anxiety.

I wonder what my life will be like a few years from now on.

09

Chapter 40 (Akira)

01

Yuichi Imai.

I hesitate for a moment before pushing the buzzer underneath the label that bears his name. The last time I visited this place things went downhill pretty quickly. I kinda wonder if it was a good idea to come here. Still, I guess it beats spending the Sunday evening in my hotel room or at some random bar. Besides, if I hadn't told Lilly last night that I'd be having dinner at Yuichi's place today, she probably would have spent the entire evening trying to convince me to visit our parents' home together with her today. At least now we got to spend that evening relaxing, catching up and hanging out in her dorm room together with Hanako and Hisao. I had a pretty good time. It's good being back in Japan for just a little while. The weather's nice too. Octobers in the UK are a lot colder and wetter from what I've heard.

I hear the intercom crackle a bit and then a familiar voice greets me.

"Akira?"

"Yo."

A high-pitched beep sounds, and the door to my right slowly swings open.

Last night while hanging out with my sister at Yamaku I was able to pretend that nothing had changed. For a little while at least. Can I do the same with my ex-boyfriend? Would that even be a good idea? I'm not sure. I make my way up the stairs until I reach the front door of his apartment, which opens as I approach. My former boyfriend steps out, gives me a friendly wave and we get inside. As he closes the door we stand there awkwardly for a moment. This used to be the point in time where we'd share a kiss, but since we've broken up that's not exactly appropriate anymore.

"...Dinner's almost ready."

"...Neat."

I take off my shoes and get ready to put them away, but before I do so I turn to my ex and give him a determined look.

"Yuichi, I appreciate you inviting me over, but let's get one thing out of the way first."

"...You don't have to say it."

"Yeah, I do. I just want to make it clear that me accepting your invitation does *not* mean I'm here to rekindle our relationship. Okay?"

"Fair enough."

I wonder. Personally I'd be surprised if we get through the evening without him trying to convince me to give things another chance.

"So Akira, why *did* you come here?"

I anticipated that question.

"Well I never hated hanging out with you. As long as we keep expectations realistic there's no reason for us not to have a good time this evening."

I fidget a bit. The next part is more difficult.

"Also... I feel kinda bad about the crappy way we parted last time. I've promised myself to leave here as a friend tonight."

"Friend, huh?"

"Well, we used to be friends before we started dating. I get that not a lot of couples can manage to remain friends after a breakup, but this breakup wasn't about anything related to you as a person, so maybe we can make this work. I'd like it to."

"Guess we'll have to see. This way please."

He's a little bit more distant than usual, but given the manner in which we parted ways last time that's understandable. Heck, keeping the reason I broke up with him in mind, he has plenty of reason to be bitter. As I enter his living room a very pleasant smell makes its way up my nostrils. It smells like he went out of his way to make something delicious.

"Hey, that smells pretty good!"

"I'll probably be done in a second. Make yourself comfortable."

"Want me to... ummm... help?"

It's not a serious offer. Yuichi's family runs a small restaurant, and he's a pretty good cook in his own right while I'm a pretty lousy one. We both know it. He still finds it extremely funny that my blind sister is better at this than I am.

"Not unless my neighbors calling the bomb squad again is your idea of a pleasant evening."

I give him an angry glare, mostly because it's expected of me, but inside I'm actually relieved. Usually I'd be semi-annoyed by his playful jabs at my sordid cooking skills but right now this familiar little ritual between us feels comfortable and reassuring. If he hadn't reacted the way he did after such a tempting lead-in, I'd probably have been concerned.

"Hohoho, very funny. Let's see if this food of yours is worth tasting or if it merely smells good."

He gets back to the kitchen counter, and I take a seat at the table. I take a moment to look him over while his back is turned.

Yuichi and I have known each other for several years though it wasn't exactly love at first sight between us. I'd like to think my colleagues at the Japanese branch consisted of four groups; those who were friendly to me mainly because I was a Satou, those who silently resented me mainly because I was a Satou, those who were part of both the previous groups and those who made an attempt to pretend I was an ordinary colleague. The latter category consisted of far less people than the former three, although since even I will admit that the sole reason I even got a job at the company was due to my family ties, I can't say I'm surprised about this. Yuichi was one of the people who fit into the last category. We worked at different departments, and he was often away from the office, but we occasionally exchanged small talk during lunch when he wasn't visiting clients.

Shortly after meeting me for the first time, when my colleagues went for a drinking party and I, as usual, turned down the offer to join them, Yuichi approached me and confided in me that he heard some people thought I believed myself 'too good' to associate with ordinary coworkers despite being a

junior employee and that it was probably a good idea to hang out with my colleagues from time to time after work and at least make an attempt to become 'part of the team just like everybody else'.

I was annoyed and even a bit angry at his words and told him that 'everybody else' didn't have a blind kid sister waiting for them at home and that I considered it more important to spend my limited free time with her than hanging out with coworkers and pretending to have fun. He apologized and left, and I later realized that it probably wasn't fair of me to blame him for pointing out what I already knew many people around the office thought about me. In fact, I came to appreciate the fact that he at least tried to do something about a bad situation instead of resigning himself to it and trying to avoid making waves, and he seemed to be understanding of my reasons to stay away rather than dismissive. So the next lunch break I approached him and sincerely thanked him for his concern. We ended up befriending each other soon afterwards.

At some point he asked if I was interested in having a drink with him. I accepted, and I learned that evening that his alcohol tolerance was the exact opposite of mine. While I wasn't even feeling fuzzy yet, he was already three sheets to the wind, and that evening I ended up receiving a drunk love confession that was both excruciatingly awkward and highly amusing. That next day he tried to avoid me of course, but I ended up telling him that I'd be happy to give it a try when the time was right. At that point I simply wanted to be there for Lilly, and I'd feel guilty about spending what little free time I had maintaining a dating life, but if Lilly was old enough to live on her own at some point and he was still interested at that time, I'd be happy to pursue a relationship with him. So for some time we remained friends, and after Lilly moved into the dorms at Yamaku, Yuichi and I started dating.

Yuichi is rather up-front in private which makes our relationship occasionally combative, but most of the time we both do a good job at limiting ourselves to playful teasing and banter. I sincerely like Yuichi and felt genuinely rotten when I had to break up with him, but after having spent some time at head office in Scotland I've become convinced that my decision to migrate to Scotland was the right one.

"I hope you haven't gotten so hooked on chips and sausages that you're no longer able to appreciate a good Japanese dish."

Having finished his preparations, Yuichi walks up to the table carrying a delicious dish of rice, fried vegetables and pieces of fish.

"I think I'll be okay. And besides, I've got something to flush it down with."

I fish a bottle of Scotch out of my bag and triumphantly put it on the table. His eyes widen a bit as he reads the label.

"40%? Are you trying to poison me?"

"Some of my new colleagues would probably take offense at you insulting their favorite liquor."

"Has it become your favorite liquor as well?"

"Nah, I still like beer more whenever I visit one of the local pubs during the weekend. This is more of a special occasion drink. Except there haven't been many special occasions for some time and I don't like drinking alone anyway. I figured I'd bring it along as a gift."

"You're gonna perform a toast?"

"Not unless me having to calling the ambulance again is your idea of a pleasant evening."

I give him an overly cheerful smile, and am rewarded with an annoyed glare. He doesn't like being confronted with the fact that I can hold my liquor so much better than he can.

"I guess that makes us even now. How about a truce? At least until we finish the meal."

"Fine with me. I was actually thinking you could give this bottle to your dad. He's really into 'exotic' liquors, isn't he? You offer this to him, and you'll be his favorite person in the world for weeks on end."

"Hey, that's actually a pretty good idea. I think I'll do that. Thanks."

"Well, let's dig in before it gets cold."

We quietly start eating, and I make sure to give a few satisfied nods during the meal to let him know it tastes very good. After finishing the food we head over to the couch, and I make sure to sit some distance away from him in order to accentuate the point I made earlier. He rolls his eyes for a moment but then shrugs his shoulders.

"I guess a lot has happened at head office since you moved, huh?"

"My arrival didn't really have anything to do with any of that. But yeah, it's been an eventful time."

"Care to share some about it?"

"I think you know most of it yourself by now. Your colleagues seemed informed enough when I dropped by the office two days ago. The rumor mill's still going as strong as it was the first time I came back from Scotland. It's worse than a sewing circle."

"Well, I got the gist of it. Your father got sudden health problems, so he ended up taking part in the negotiation meetings from his sickbed, and several folks over here shifted up the chain of command because Kojima got a promotion. A very significant one from what I've heard."

02

"Sudden health problems, huh? Is that what they're calling it?"

"What would you call it?"

"Health problems is one hell of a euphemism. Chronic back pain is a health problem. That heart attack came this close to killing him. He was lucky Hanako recently picked up CPR."

"Who's Hanako?"

"Lilly's best friend. Lilly and two of her best friends from school were visiting at the time. They were with him when he collapsed. Hanako managed to keep him going until the ambulance arrived. Thank goodness the hospital wasn't far."

"He got a heart attack out of nowhere?"

"Hardly out of nowhere. He had been under the weather for weeks. We figured it was just the stress of the takeover process. We didn't think they were symptoms of an impending heart attack. He didn't bother to tell us."

"Wait... He knew?"

I give him a strong stare from across the couch.

"None of this is gonna leave this room, right?"

"Of course not."

"He's had high blood pressure for years. His general practitioner was only surprised he lasted as long as he did."

"And nobody else knew?"

"Nope, not even Mom. I think it's taken her quite a while to forgive him for that. She took it really hard when she found out that he knew he was a risk case."

"Why didn't he tell anyone?"

"In the end I think it came down to his legacy. It took ages before Granddad retired as head of the business. Dad probably wanted to leave his own mark on the company. He figured that if people knew about his health they'd start pressuring him to take it easy - or even step down. He was probably afraid of not being able to live up to his father."

I smirk briefly.

"The funny thing is that the work culture in Inverness is completely different from the office here, and none of his direct colleagues would consider his actions a noble sacrifice on behalf of the company. They'd all think he was crazy for putting his health at risk for a mere job."

"Eventually you and your mother ended up helping him take care of his legacy, didn't you? Together with Kojima."

"Mom initially didn't feel like flying to the US with Dad still bedridden, but Lilly eventually managed to convince her to bring the whole thing to a close while she stayed behind in Inverness to look after Dad. Kojima went along in order to reassure the board back in Japan, but in practice he was little more than an observer. Mom was the one who has been involved in the negotiation talks since the beginning, and she was most familiar with the people and the American business culture, so she was the one who did most of the speaking with me chipping in on frequent occasions."

"You?"

I tell him about his trouble speaking due to his busted ribs and the conference system we set up so he could still take credit for taking part in the whole deal without having to be present or feel ashamed for barely being able to talk.

"In the end you managed to reach a deal, right? This will probably look good on your resume too."

"I didn't really do much besides act as Dad's voice. He and Mom deserve the credit."

"So, how was it spending over a week with your mom?"

"I didn't really interact much with her. I spent more time with the rest of my colleagues. It was a pretty good opportunity to get to know them better. The system administrator who came with us was a bit

socially awkward, but ridiculously knowledgable in the realm of Japanese manga. Made for quite a bit of relaxing conversation for a recent immigrant like myself."

"You don't think it would have been an opportunity to reconnect with your mother?"

"I think she had enough on her mind already as things were."

"..."

I can tell from his stare that Yuichi thinks I'm making excuses, but that's not the case this time. While we were in the US, I could tell that there was something on Mom's mind. Something that bothered her enough to have several restless nights and the occasional absent-minded look whenever we were alone. It could have been simple worry about Dad, but since Lilly gave us daily updates on his condition, there was probably more to it than that. Maybe she knew all along how things were going to play out with Dad at the company. If she and I had been closer, I probably would have asked her to confide in me. As things were, the only thing I could do was avoid imposing on her too much.

"Anyway, it still felt very satisfying to return to Inverness and report that our company now had three branches."

When Mom and I returned to the mansion, Lilly and Dad were waiting for us. Dad was still in a pretty sorry state, but he nevertheless went outside together with Lilly to greet us. When we got out of the car and stated to Dad that the trip had been a success (which he knew already of course since he had taken part in the meetings), he bowed deeply to us and started saying how proud he was of both of us - now that we'd dragged his bum out of the fire. He was being really formal about it, and it turned out that Mom wouldn't have any of that at that moment. Before he could finish his speech, she stepped forward and hugged him with one arm while embracing Lilly with the other. He seemed surprised and awkward about it, but didn't resist or protest. Lilly, on the other hand, looked happier than I've seen her in a very long time. I didn't really feel like being part of the whole thing, so I took that moment to say goodbye and return to my apartment. They didn't try to stop me, and I'm happy they didn't let me ruin their little moment.

"So I guess your dad's honor was saved. Though from what I heard it didn't exactly last."

"It didn't. It still took us by surprise though. At least it took me by surprise. I wasn't there when he heard the news."

"About Mr. Kojima?"

"That's not his name anymore. He's called Koji Satou now."

"So you now have a new uncle?"

I do. The head of the Japanese branch more or less got the ultimate promotion when Granddad adopted him as a son, heir and new head of the family - and adopted his wife along with him.

"Yeah... Still feels weird to call him that though. I usually settle for his name with a honorific attached to it when we're alone."

"He's kind of old to be adopted though."

"What are you talking about? Last time I heard nearly 98% of all adoptees in this country are adult guys."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Aren't adoptees usually in their late twenties?"

"Yeah and if Dad had been replaced when he was still around that age, they would have plucked a fresh prodigy out of Tokyo University's graduate pool and planted him in the company to learn the ropes, but whoever was going to transfer to another continent where they couldn't teach him the ropes or keep an eye on him had to be a senior executive with experience and loyalty to the company. Koji's worked for the company for decades, and his dad was a friend of the family. They trust him, and they probably felt he earned the opportunity. Even Dad doesn't seem to begrudge him his promotion, though it's possible he's merely putting on an act. It's hard to tell."

"Still sucks for your dad though. At least they didn't expect him to adopt his own successor."

"Koji's two years older than Dad. It's not possible to adopt people older than yourself unless you're willing to use loopholes..."

He snickers.

"You're the lawyer. I'll take your word for it. It would have been weird having an adopted brother old enough to be your father."

"Besides maybe they figured this was already enough of a blow to him as it was. No need to rub even more salt in his wounds."

"He wanted to keep going after his recovery?"

"I think so. His job and what he called his 'responsibilities' have always been everything to him. I think he thought he'd be able to pull it off as long as he kept himself under close medical surveillance."

"But not everybody agreed with him, it seems."

"I guess they felt he wouldn't be able to give his all to the company anymore. Or worse, have another heart attack and die from it. The British would actually find that kind of thing morbidly amusing: The CEO of a company making heart monitors being a heart patient. But black comedy isn't exactly something I think the board enjoys. They'd probably see it as a massive loss of face. Since the company is still a family business, and a Satou had to be in charge, they simply made Koji a Satou and adopted him and his wife into the family."

"How did your dad take the news that he was laid off?"

"They didn't fire him directly. Granddad simply adopted Koji and Dad was told his new brother would be assisting him with his duties from now on, and he was asked to teach his new second-in-command the ropes. They probably expected Dad to take the hint and resign of his own - which he did. I'm not sure how he reacted to the news when he got it since I wasn't there when it was broken to him. When I spoke to him he seemed resigned to it, and he said they told him that at least he'd be well provided for."

I can't help but crack a sad smile at that. Of course Dad received a significant percentage of the company shares in compensation and a position on the board, although since he's so much younger than the rest, he'll have very little say in practice. Still, the hidden meaning behind that way he worded his answer to me was quite clear. Yuichi doesn't need to know that story though.

"Lilly worries about him though. She says he's taking it a lot harder than he likes to let on."

"She's probably right about that."

I look at my former boyfriend with an inquisitive look.

"You're a former family heir too, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but our simple family restaurant wasn't what you'd call a multinational. I was meant to take it over, but I was never really much of a manager to begin with. So eventually my parents adopted someone who had shown interest in managing it and who ended up getting married to my sister."

"What was that like?"

"It's never fun to be replaced, and it kind of hurts your ego. Oldest sons have a special status in the family. It's like an identity you grow up with since early childhood. I was lucky I was never that interested in taking over the business and came to that conclusion early. Your dad spent decades in that role."

"Yeah."

"Losing your employment at a company you've worked your entire life at sucks to begin with. You lose the environment you formerly spent nearly 80 hours a week in. You lose pretty much your entire social circle and all your friends. And you lose your daily routine..."

"I think several of those already vanished when he moved to Scotland. Working culture is different there. People usually work only around 40 hours a week and often seek their friends outside the workplace."

"...but losing your status as patriarch at this point is way more than that. In addition to your inheritance suddenly dropping down from 'everything' to 'nothing' it also comes with a sense of shame and failure. And a loss of purpose. He probably feels like part of his identity has been stripped away and given to someone else."

I don't have much experience with adoptions, so I'll take Yuichi's word for it. If what he says is remotely accurate, it's kind of hard not to feel pity for the old man at this point, despite the fact that I'm still not overly fond of him.

"Well, at least he still has Mom and Lilly to cheer him up. They seem pretty determined not to let him sink further into a depression."

"And parts of their efforts to cheer him up involved moving back to Japan, huh?"

"Yeah, they moved back here permanently not long ago. The decision wasn't made easily. Mom was initially hesitant to leave her homeland again and mentioned that several companies there would have welcomed Dad and would even offer him part-time employment if his health wouldn't allow full-time work. Koji wasn't eager to see them move either. But Lilly and I made a pretty strong plea for moving, and Dad eventually took our side. When she flew to Japan to drop Lilly off, Mom even went to look at some houses afterwards, so she probably expected this outcome already. Our old house was sold some time ago, and they've moved into a new neighborhood. Made a brand new start as it were."

"So, aren't you considering moving back here as well?"

"I didn't move to Scotland for my parents. I moved there for my job. And my job wasn't shipped back to Japan."

"But both your parents and your sister are now living here."

"And I'm happy for her. Lilly still needs her parents despite the grownup appearance she puts on, and now that she's given them another chance I sincerely hope they don't blow it. If she spends enough time with them, they might actually become a family again."

"She's decided to give them another chance, but you obviously haven't."

"They never even apologized for just walking out on us. A heart attack sucks a lot, but it's not an apology. A thank you to me would be appreciated too."

"A thank you?"

"Thank you Akira, for being there for Lilly in our place during her puberty and some of the toughest school years of her life. We appreciate the fact that we can pick things up again now that the hardest part is largely over."

"...you're still pretty bitter about that."

"...I guess I am."

I'd be lying if I denied that this is how I feel. Lilly has her life pretty well in order right now and is hardly in need of any parental oversight anymore. Mom and Dad can now tell themselves that they're good parents by merely hanging out with her. How easy. I noticed that this train of thought kept returning to me whenever I saw my sister and our parents interact lately. I guess it's not healthy for me to think or feel like that, but it's been on my mind a lot, and it's one of the reasons I decided not to accompany Lilly to our parents' new place today. I realized I just don't feel comfortable seeing them interact.

"You think you'll get an apology?"

"Naw. Especially not from Dad. He'd probably feel it'd weaken his position as head of the family. As if his failures don't exist as long as he doesn't admit them. Doesn't work that way with me."

"Well, offering apologies isn't exactly a family trait to begin with."

"Okay, what does *that* mean?"

"That palm print was still on my cheek the morning after you left last time."

I sigh. Last time we were together was when I came by his place to invite him to a weekend trip to our family's summer home in Hokkaido. I planned to tell him about the job offer I took while we were there, but the damn office rumor mill had already caught up with me by that time, and Yuichi was quick to confront me with what he learned about my upcoming departure. I wasn't proud of my decision to move, and when we got into an argument I was prepared to take his reproaches in stride. I managed that just fine at first until the moment he argued that I was a lot more like my parents than I cared to admit. That was the one thing he shouldn't have said. I lost my temper, gave him a hard slap

across the cheek and stormed out of his apartment with the intention of never speaking with him again. I felt crappy about it afterwards but still didn't speak to him until we ran into each other this week while 'uncle' Koji and I were at the Japanese office for a few days.

"Who exactly used to like leaving hickeys on my neck?"

"I know which one of the two I'd rather receive."

"Fine. I guess I shouldn't have slapped you. I'm really sorry about that. But that remark you made was still way out of line."

"It wasn't really an intentional attempt to hurt you. It was more like... an angry observation."

I narrow my eyes at his words, but he shows no sign of backing off.

"What exactly was it you said back then? It was something like: 'Life isn't a fairy tale. You can't set it up and expect it to stay that way forever; sometimes stuff happens that you have to roll with, even if it means hurting yourself or others.', wasn't it?"

"My job would have hit a pretty abrupt dead end if I hadn't taken that offer. Heck, at least over there people won't start pressuring me to quit my job and start making babies when I turn 30. You said before that you understood my situation. Has that changed?"

"It hasn't, but I kind of wonder if maybe your dad has been in a similar situation in the past and thought the same thing as you at the time."

"He was worried about his job if he had refused? Is that what you're saying?"

"Is it that hard to believe, given what's happened recently? As head of the company he could at least guarantee you a job long enough for you to learn the ropes and pass the exams required to get your law degree, but only for as long as he maintained that position. Maybe that's part of what he meant when he said he'd be guaranteeing your financial future by accepting his promotion and moving to Inverness. Who knows what his replacement would have done. People usually aren't given a job in a legal department without a solid university degree, so maybe your dad figured that giving up his influence in the company would have made things complicated for you too."

I never really thought of it that way. I always assumed that they had no choice but to stick with Dad and that he could do whatever he pleased, but maybe that wasn't the case after all.

"You think that the threat of replacement was an issue even then?"

"In most other countries family businesses underperform compared to their competitors. Over here it's the exact opposite. There are two reasons for that. The first one is the fact you can pick an heir from the academic cream of the crop if none of your own sons is up to the challenge. The second one is that the biological heirs who do take over their father's business are extremely motivated to perform well because they know that their job and family position can be given to someone else if they mess up. One of the reasons I wasn't eager to take over my dad's restaurant was the fact I didn't like the idea of living with that kind of pressure for a job that didn't even catch my interest. But yeah, I think he knew. You can't motivate someone if he doesn't know that he has a lot to lose. And a company heir who willingly tosses aside his responsibilities doesn't easily get a second chance, here or anywhere else, because he'll be seen as unreliable from then on. And with two daughters to provide for, including a blind one..."

"...okay, okay, makes sense, I guess. But even so..."

"Hmmm?"

"It's not like Mom and Dad saw each other that often during their marriage. Dad has had to deal with long working hours for as long as I can remember. Usually when someone gets promoted and has to move and his family can't come along, he just goes to live on his own and visits his family on Sunday every weekend or whenever he has the time. Why did he have to request Mom to accompany him and not us? I get that Mom's been a great help in getting him settled there but she could have advised him over the phone or simply spent some weeks there. I get that he was probably lonely there, but they've been slowly growing apart ever since they moved, so in the end it might have done more harm than good to his marriage. Or they could have taken Lilly along with them. There are good schools in Scotland too. Heck, they could have phoned her more often."

"I won't try to justify any of that."

A brief silence. He tosses me a can of beer that I catch and open with a grateful nod. Looks like he still remembers my favorite brand.

"You're angry that I walked out on you like this?"

"You said your father was rather lonely. Are you happy over there?"

"I think so. I still try to speak with Lilly over the phone twice a week or so. Company culture at work couldn't be more different. I start at half past 8 each day and go home at 5 in the afternoon. That's 6 hours less than I used to work here. There's overtime from time to time, but it's an exception rather than a rule. Meetings are quick and people skip the small talk. There's a lot of focus on efficiency. People are pretty direct and not afraid to respectfully challenge their superiors. We're expected to give our all, but overall I think I like it there. I've had more free time in these last two months than I had in my last two years here. Colleagues generally don't hang out after work and get-togethers aren't mandatory, but I've joined a gym that some of my new colleagues go to, and there's some people I met there that I sometimes visit a pub with during the weekends. All in all, I think I've managed to adapt well and fairly quickly, even though I still feel like a fish out of the water at times. But I felt the same at the Japanese branch, so that makes no difference."

"How about your new boss? How's he doing? He's older than you, so the change must be bigger for him. "

"There's a lot of competent people there, but the place has to be managed like a western company because that's what the employees are used to. Even for Dad it was a massive culture shock and he had Mom to advise him on how to deal with things. I think that's part of the reason the job was so stressful for him. Mom has a deal with Koji that she'll give him all the advice he wants when he needs it and will frequently drop by in Scotland to help keep an eye on things and to help smooth over any conflicts or misunderstandings. In return, Koji's wife will be taking care of Dad's parents instead of Mom."

"She didn't come along?"

"Koji's wife doesn't even speak English. She'd be utterly isolated and miserable there. That does make it more lonely for him though. I've been trying to occasionally spend time with him and keep an eye on him so he doesn't end up in the same situation as Dad."

"That can't be bad for your career prospects."

"I want to go and get a good deal of experience here, but I'm not sure if I wanna work there forever. I've spoken with some of my colleagues, and I've learned that it's pretty socially acceptable in the UK to leave your job if you get a better offer somewhere else."

"No company loyalty huh?"

"Not to the point of working several hours of unpaid overtime a day and sticking around until the boss goes home. People see the whole thing as a way to earn a living, rather than as a social obligation to their boss. I've done some thinking, and maybe I'll leave the company someday as well. I still like it there, but I'd also like to tell myself I got somewhere without having needed to use my family relations as a crutch. I'd even be willing to take a slight drop in pay for the ability to tell myself I'm in a certain position solely because my boss thinks I'm more qualified for it than any other person."

"So all in all you've settled yourself pretty nicely over there."

From the tone of his voice that's not merely a neutral conclusion.

"...maybe I'll return to Japan someday, but certainly not now. This isn't just about Mom and Dad. I want to know if I'll be able to set up a life there and feel like I'm at home there. It's something I've wondered about for a long time. Lilly was sad to hear that but nevertheless said she'll be supporting me all the way. I get that you're angry because I took this decision so quickly, but..."

"I don't blame you for taking the job in Scotland without a moment's hesitation. It sounds like you made the right decision back then and that you still stand behind your choice."

"But...?"

"What stung was the fact that you probably made the decision to end our relationship in that same split-second. Like it didn't matter to you at all."

"That's not true."

"Last time you came here you didn't visit me to tell me about your decision to migrate. You visited me to break up with me. You already decided for the both of us by that point."

I sigh wearily.

"Don't tell me you were going to suggest a long distance relationship, Yuichi. Like I said I have no idea when and even if I'm going to return to Japan. And we barely had enough free time to maintain a normal relationship when I was still living here. Why set ourselves up for disappointment?"

03

"I was more thinking along the lines of asking for a transfer myself."

"What?"

"I would have mentioned that to you last time if you hadn't been in such a hurry to break up with me."

"You'd give up all your friends and family here just to make a new start there?"

"Don't tell me that's a crazy idea because you've done exactly that yourself."

"Your situation is completely different from mine and besides... I couldn't possibly ask that of you."

"You could have. You just didn't. Or wouldn't. Look, I'm a pretty worldly person, I'm a good English speaker, my parents aren't expecting me to take care of them anymore after they retire so it could have worked. Heck, a temporary working visa just to test the waters for a while could have worked as well."

"Could have worked?"

"You already broke up with me and insisted on being just friends. I'm not going to drop on my knees and plead for a second chance. Not when it was never my wish to see our relationship shot down to begin with."

I came here prepared for attempts to convince me to give things another try, but this is not something I saw coming. Is he really serious about this? Seems like it. Maybe he's right. Instead of wondering if there was a chance to save our relationship after accepting Dad's offer, I immediately started thinking of ways to break up my relationship with Yuichi without hurting him too badly. I kinda wonder if he doesn't deserve someone better than me. Still, the way he worded it suggests he's still open to giving it a try. Practically speaking it shouldn't be too hard. It would just take a little time to arrange a working visa. Koji will almost certainly greenlight the transfer if I ask him. He knows what it's like to live far away from one's partner.

I can't believe I'm actually seriously considering this. At the start of the evening I was loudly insisting I wasn't here to revive our relationship. So much for my determination.

His words are loud and clear. He wants to transfer too and give our relationship another try if I apologize profusely and tell him that I want him back. That'll be a serious blow to my pride, though it might just be worth it. Maybe.

I need to think. Somewhere. Without him staring at me.

"I'll... uh..."

"Sleep on it?"

I let out a resigned sigh.

"Maybe. But not here."

"Fair enough."

I don't think we'll be able to have any more small talk after this. Yuichi must have read my expression as he gets up and tosses me another beer can.

"One for the road."

"...Yeah."

As I put my shoes back on and walk out the door there's a painful silence between us. I give him an awkward wave and then walk down the hall to the elevator with a very confused feeling in my gut. Before entering my car I take out my cell phone and dial the top-most number on my contact list.

"..."

"Good evening. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Yo..."

"Akira. So good to hear from you. "

"Had fun with the folks today?"

"Your presence was missed here. The three of us went on a rather long walk today. Long for Father at least. He needs to rebuild his stamina, and Mother and I also felt that he needed to get out of the house more. It just doesn't seem right that he spends most of his days doing little more than sleeping in and reading on occasion."

Sounds like the old man is still struggling. My thoughts return briefly to Yuichi's words earlier about losing one's position as heir at this point in life. I make a mental note to tell Lilly about what my boyfriend said this evening since I think she'll find it interesting.

"It's only natural he'll need some time to sort things out and fill that sudden void in his life."

"How was your dinner with Yuichi?"

"...are you busy right now?"

"Just drinking tea with Hanako."

"I know it's already late, but err..."

"...when do you think you can be here?"

Wow, she caught on pretty quickly.

"In 35 minutes. No, make that half an hour."

"We'll be waiting."

A grateful smile appears on my face.

"Thanks Lils. You're the best."

04

Chapter 41 (Hanako)

01

Bbeeeep - beeeep - beeeep

An ear-piercing whine comes from the alarm clock near the bed, and I annoyedly swat at it in an attempt to make it shut up.

"Ouch!"

Unfortunately, somebody else was in the process of turning it off already, and as a result my hand ends up slapping his.

"S-Sorry!"

"That's not exactly a nice way to say good morning."

"Then... Maybe this makes up for it?"

I give my boyfriend a quick kiss as a means of apology. He smiles in response.

"Yeah, that ought to do it."

He yawns, stretches out and then slowly gets out of bed, putting on his boxers in the process. I look at his alarm clock. It's still really early in the morning. Hisao always sets his alarm clock this early during the week, so he can go running on the track before class. At least, when the weather permits it. As autumn gave way to winter, he's been forced to put off his track visits more and more. And now he's carefully brushing aside his curtain to see if that will be the case today as well.

"And...?"

"I don't know. It's not exactly dry, but it's not exactly pouring either."

I wrap the blanket around myself, walk over to where he's standing and peek through the gap between the curtains. I can clearly see raindrops falling from the sky. It might just get worse before it gets better. I bet it's kind of cold outside as well.

"It's raining again."

"It's not really raining, it's merely drizzling."

"Are you really planning to go running?"

"I'm not sure yet. I don't want to risk catching a cold, but I doubt I'll have much opportunity for running in the upcoming months."

"You could maybe use the fitness facilities in the auxiliary building after classes."

"I would if they were open in the morning. I'd rather use the afternoon to study."

He walks over to the shelf holding his medication and starts opening the various bottles standing there. I'm not sure if that means he has decided to go to the track anyway or if he simply feels he might as well get that part of his daily routine out of the way. In the meantime, I keep looking out the window.

"I think... it's starting to rain harder."

He walks back to the place where I'm standing and peeks past me.

"I don't really see anything different. Maybe it just seems to you that way."

"Eh?"

He grins.

"Maybe you'd just like me to get back to bed."

I smile.

"Wouldn't... you... too?"

He chuckles and nods, but doesn't really say anything. He just keeps staring out the window, still trying to make up his mind. I hesitate for a moment and then decide to help him a bit. Before I can have second thoughts, I walk back a few steps and use my hand to tidy and straighten my hair.

"H-Hisao...?"

"Hmmm?"

02

He waits for me to reply, and when I don't say anything back, he turns around to look at me. As he does so, I straighten myself out and then let go of the blanket, allowing it to slowly slide down to the ground. I can see his eyes grow wide at the sight of this bold gesture. I avert my eyes and blush heavily as I feel his gaze wander up and down my body, but I resist the urge to cover myself up again.

"Ummm..."

He doesn't say anything. He just keeps looking at me. He probably doesn't even know how to react. Nevertheless, there's a small trace of a smile on his face. Trying hard to ignore the shaky feeling in my legs, I slowly walk up to him, press myself against him and start kissing him deeply. During a breathing pause, I look into his eyes and do my best to give him my best smile.

"Hisao... W-why don't we go back to bed?"

As I say this, I gently press my right index finger against the side of his face, using it to tickle his earlobe before moving to a little spot on the side of his neck.

"Ah!"

I giggle as I watch him shudder. I remain focussed on his neck for a little while longer before running my finger down to the inside of his elbow. Over the course of the last four months, I've discovered countless little spots I can tickle or stroke to get a reaction out of him or get him aroused, and I can find most of them even with my eyes closed.

A playful kiss on his cheek.

"...Hisao?"

His breathing speeds up as I tickle his nipples before moving downward and putting my hand on the part between his legs.

"H-Hanako..."

He starts thrusting his lower body against my hand, and his own hand starts wandering across my body before stopping between my legs.

"S-Shall we...?"

I start instinctively grinding my private area against his hand, first slowly but then faster and harder.

"Y-You're not giving me a great deal of choice, are you?"

I giggle again, withdraw my hand and then, as a final tease, sneak it into his boxers and softly tickle him between his legs for just a split-second before withdrawing again. From what I just felt, I could tell that a visit to the track is the last thing on his mind right now. I walk back and sit down on the edge of the bed, looking at him expectantly. He waits for a moment and then takes off his boxers, rolling his eyes as he catches my gaze.

"Well, it's pretty clear I'm not exactly in good shape for running at the moment."

"Pfffff..."

I quickly press my hand against my mouth to stifle a laughing fit. It's true that running would probably be uncomfortable for him right now. The alternative activity on the other hand...

"Shall we?"

I lie back, close my eyes and open my legs a bit to show him that I'm ready. A few seconds later I feel him get on top of me, and we let our mutual desire overtake us...

03

"Hanako!"

After getting back to the girls' dorm and having a shower and a quick bite, I put my books for today in my backpack and get ready to make my way to the school building. Just when I reach the exit, I hear someone calling my name.

"Natsume."

My classmate and clubmate slowly walks up to me as I turn around to face her. I notice she's still using a crutch to get around, just like last week.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

Natsume looks past me at the rainy weather outside.

"I don't think it's going to stop raining before classes start. I take it that you're not planning to sprint through it?"

I pulled a sprint through the rain from the boys' dorm to the girls' dorm this morning, but I'd rather not arrive in class completely winded and out of breath, so I shake my head.

"I have an umbrella in my room. M-Maybe it's a good idea to go and get it."

"If you're heading out now, you can share mine."

She opens her backpack and takes a rather small folding umbrella out of it.

"Oh... ah... Thanks."

"It might be better if you hold the umbrella. It's a bit awkward to hold a crutch in one hand and an umbrella in the other."

"Sure."

I take Natsume's umbrella from her and fold it open. As I do so, I notice it's moist.

"You've... already been out this morning?"

"Yes, for a little walk. It's difficult, but the nurse said that it's especially important to remain physically active even during the bad times."

We start walking, and I do my best to match Natsume's slow pace while holding the umbrella above our heads. Natsume's reason for attending Yamaku is because she has rheumatoid arthritis, and if Naomi is to be believed, she's had a particularly bad spell last week. I don't really have as much interaction with Natsume as I do with Naomi, but she, Naomi and I usually join up these days whenever we're required to work in groups of three, and we also have to work on stuff together during our activities at the newspaper club from time to time. All in all, even though we're not extremely close we still get along pretty well.

"How... ah... is your arthritis today?"

"A little better than last week, though maybe that's just because I've had a higher dose of medication over the last few days. I think I'll manage as long as it doesn't get any worse. If it does, however, I'll be in big trouble."

"Because of the upcoming National Center Test for University Admissions?"

"Yes. I can't cram if I'm in constant pain, but I won't be able to study if I'm completely drugged up on painkillers either."

"I'm... sure you'll do fine. You've always had very good marks in class."

Natsume gives me a surprised look for a second or two but then catches herself and smiles.

"Thanks."

"I-Is something wrong?"

She shakes her head and smiles again.

"It's nothing. I never realized you paid attention to my grades. I sometimes just forget that we've spent nearly three years in the same class already. Sorry."

I get where she's coming from. Until last July I wasn't really that much of a classmate to Naomi and Natsume, but more someone who was present in class without really being part of it. Like a phantom of

some sort. Looking back, I feel a sense of regret that it's taken me this long to start opening up to my neighbors in class.

"It's okay."

Natsume nods, and her smile slowly disappears again.

"Good marks aren't really enough though. More important is the upcoming National Center Test. From what I've seen of it, they call the preceding period 'examination hell' for a reason."

"From what you've seen?"

"I have an older cousin who went through this thing four years ago. He eventually made it into the university he wanted to attend, but near the end he was really hanging on for dear life. He was like sleeping only a few hours a day, and he lost several kilos in weight in the process. He was afraid that if he slept more than four hours, he was guaranteed to fail the tests. My aunt said he looked like a zombie by the time the exams started."

"That sounds... really excessive."

"Well, we are competing on a national scale, you know?"

"I guess... all we can do is our best."

It probably helps that while I'm aiming for a good university, I'm not trying to get into the really famous ones like Tokyo University or Kyoto University, which are usually restricted to the cream of the national crop.

"I guess you're right."

We reach the school building, and I shake the raindrops off Natsume's umbrella before folding it up again and giving it back to her.

"Thanks. By the way... Were you away from the school grounds yesterday?"

"Huh?"

"Naomi wanted to stop by your room yesterday, and she went there several times over the course of the day, but she said that neither you nor Satou answered her knocking."

"Lilly spends most of her Sundays at her parents' home since they moved back here, and Hisao and I went on a date yesterday that lasted for most of the day."

We decided that yesterday was going to be the last date we'd go on until the exams are over, so we took our time and spent most of the day away from Yamaku.

"Oh, okay. Well, I'm sure we'll hear what it's about when she gets to class this morning."

"She didn't tell you already?"

"No, she said she wanted to tell you first. So if I had to make a guess, I'd say that it's related to that unofficial writing club the three of you started."

"The Broken Quills?"

Natsume rolls her eyes at the name that Naomi came up with for our club, but then nods.

"Yes. Naomi said I didn't need to wait for her this morning. It's possible she's somewhere around here telling Jun about it as we speak."

"I'm a little curious now."

"It's probably something good. We spent most of yesterday studying together, and there were several moments where she'd start grinning like a loon completely out of the blue. Still wouldn't tell me what was going through her mind."

We make it to the classroom, and I take a quick peek inside before entering. I notice Naomi's not here yet, but Hisao is, and he already seems absorbed in one of his study books. I quietly walk up to him, whisper a quick 'hey' and then quickly move to my own seat while hoping that nobody caught the knowing look we shared. I take out my books, but before I start studying, my thoughts return to this morning's earlier events. Before today, my way of taking the initiative was simply dropping a hint or two and then leaving things up to him. Today has been the first time that I've actively seduced him. I wonder what he thinks of me now that the adrenaline rush has settled down. Did I act inappropriately?

04

"There you are!"

My gaze jumps from my study books to the doorway, and I see my friend with the bleached blonde hair standing there sporting the biggest grin I've ever seen in my life. Natsume wasn't kidding when she said Naomi was in high spirits. I'd probably be happy for her if her attention wasn't focussed directly on me right now. As it is, I'm feeling very uncomfortable.

"Guess what? Guess what?"

Naomi, without breaking stride, walks right up to me, and I'm completely aware of the fact that all the students who already made it to class are looking at us right now. I instinctively get up and back away. Naomi, however, seems too excited to notice.

"W-What?"

"We totally rock! Mwah!"

"Eek!"

I yelp in surprise as my upbeat neighbor steps forward and lands a big wet smacker on my left cheek. My face instantly turns bright red, and my classmates' gazes, which were aimed at the two of us until just now, are now all directed squarely at me. Feeling like a deer in the headlights, I back away until I'm pressed against the wall.

"Ah... I... ummm..."

"Hey Inoue!"

Just when I'm about to consider making a break for it, the annoyed voice of my boyfriend cuts through the murmur.

"Why don't you go and get yourself a girlfriend of your own instead of hitting on somebody else's?"

I'm not sure if this remark was intended to divert attention away from me or if he's simply voicing his annoyance with Naomi's behavior, but regardless of the intention, the class bursts into laughter and people focus away from me and back on Naomi, who grins sheepishly and sticks her tongue out at Hisao.

"Is that jealousy I smell, Nakai?"

Natsume groans and gives Naomi a hard poke in the ribs with the handhold of her crutch.

"Stop being such a bonehead. What's this all about, and why is it necessary to make such a spectacle out of it?"

Naomi excitedly smiles at her best friend and produces a piece of paper from her handbag.

"Tadaah! Check this out!"

Natsume leans forward to read the paper Naomi's holding, but before her eyesight can focus, Naomi turns and presses it into my hands.

"You read it first, Hanako!"

Still feeling a little nervous, I take the piece of paper from Naomi and attempt to read it without letting my classmates' stares get to me.

Despite my frantically beating heart and nervousness, I manage to keep myself together long enough to read the piece of paper which turns out to be a certificate and I let out a surprised cry as I realize what it means.

"Oh!"

A proud smile appears on my face for a moment, and Hisao's previously annoyed frown gives way to a curious expression as he notices this.

"What is it, Hanako?"

"Umm... W-we won something in one of the writing contests we signed up for."

"Really?"

He walks up to me, and I hand him the certificate.

"It says here that your contribution made third place in the writing competition for high school students organized by a section of the Letters Faculty at Osaka University. The prize money is a sum of 20,000 yen."

Naomi once again gives an excited thumbs-up.

"Isn't it awesome?"

Takashi Maeda, who sits in front of me in class, gives Naomi a grumpy glare.

"You raised all this ruckus for a third place?"

Naomi narrows her eyes and shoots a withering look of her own right back at her classmate.

"Tell me Maeda, how many contests have *you* participated in? Ever won anything? Have your artistic talents already been recognized by people in the field? Holding expositions already?"

Natsume rolls her eyes, gets up and puts a hand on her best friend's shoulder.

"Alright, relax already. You could have been more subtle about this whole thing, but I think it's a great achievement for both of you. I mean, it's not like you girls have had years of experience, right? I really am impressed."

Naomi beams at her friend's words.

"That's kind of what Hoshino said. He reminded me that there were close to 200 participants, so in the end we still did well."

Hisao gives me a proud look.

"I'd love to hear more about that, but..."

He looks at the doorway, and we notice that Mutou has just arrived in class.

"...it looks like it'll have to wait."

05

"...and I don't think I need to stress the importance of being well-prepared for the next week. You are all free to spend this hour and the afternoon studying for whatever subject you believe will need the most attention. Be sure to make the most of the time you still have."

I can hear a few soft sighs. Mutou isn't really telling anyone anything new, but I suppose it's part of his job to keep harping on this.

Somewhere around the middle of next week, we'll have mock exams. They're the closest thing to a dress rehearsal for the National Center Test we'll be taking in January that we're going to get. Like the real ones, they'll be held over the course of two days and even though the results officially don't matter, students who underperform will be expected to take part in a heavy dose of supplementary lessons until mid-January to catch up in the subjects they did badly in. That alone seems to be a good motivator for everyone to study as hard as they can in order to get a good grade next week.

"If you want to study in small groups, that's fine as well."

I can distantly hear Misha asking Hisao to explain a math problem to her, so I open my own study book without waiting for my boyfriend to join me. As I resume reading through the chapter I started on earlier this morning, I hear Natsume whisper to her best friend.

"So, what was your winning story about?"

"Hehehe, no more rolling your eyes this time? I see you're finally starting to take The Broken Quills seriously. Better late than never."

Natsume sighs impatiently.

"Very well... Hanako?"

I look up from my work to see Natsume smile playfully at me.

"Ah. Yes?"

"Can you help me with this chapter here?"

"Uh? Ummm... Sure."

Natsume moves her chair next to mine and sits down at my desk.

"So, about that story of yours..."

Naomi gives her friend a mock-offended look.

"Hey, don't ignore me like that. I was going to tell you already."

She takes her own chair and joins us at my desk before nodding at me to indicate it's okay for me to tell Natsume what she wants to know.

"Ummm... The name of the story is 'The Missing Star'. It's about a blind student who joins his school's astronomy club. It's... a short story we submitted for that particular contest."

"A blind student, huh? Based on somebody we know?"

"Not really, although we did ask Hideki for some input."

"That's pretty neat. So, do you two literally write such a story together? Or do you write stories on your own and share the credit?"

"They're all... team efforts."

Naomi takes this moment to jump into the conversation.

"We kinda work like this: one person submits a proposal or a rough draft and the other fills in the blanks for a bit before handing it back. We then switch it back and forth once or twice more, each time refining it a bit more before letting Jun give it a final check for errors or plotholes. We have a couple of rules in place. No scrapping the other person's ideas, merely refining them or asking them to be reconsidered. No new ideas after the story's been switched back and forth once. And no mechas, zombies, ninja's, pirates or characters belonging to existing works."

Natsume grins.

"You've really been restraining yourself."

I was pleasantly surprised about that as well. Jun insisted on the zombie/ninja/pirate/mecha rule because she was worried that Naomi would spend all our meetings coming up with inane and clichéd ideas, but it turned out that a lot of her proposals were remarkably sensible.

"Naomi's really put forth a lot of good ideas. Most of the ideas we ended up using were hers."

"Aw, everyone has ideas. Making something workable out of them is another thing altogether and Hanako's got a real knack for that."

Natsume smiles at our little exchange of praise.

"Sounds like you girls really grew into your roles. You may be a natural team. It's nice to see your efforts paid off. But have you actually turned a profit? Those contests need entry fees to pay for the prizes, don't they? And I recall that you signed up for several over the last few months."

Naomi beams proudly.

"Well, Hoshino secured a small budget to pay for part of it and we got ourselves a sponsor for the rest."

"A sponsor?"

I nod.

"Lilly's mother spoke to us before our second meeting, and she agreed to sponsor us as long as we didn't go overboard."

"Wow, that's really generous of her."

Naomi enthusiastically nods.

"Yeah, she's a really awesome person."

Natsume giggles and gives her best friend an evil smile.

"And a really smart investor as well. Since she's paid nearly all of your entry fees, she's probably entitled to nearly all of your winnings too."

"B-B-B-But....!"

I just barely manage to hold back a giggle myself at Naomi's mortified expression. I don't think that Karla's even a tiny bit interested in our prize money. Our winnings are probably little more than pocket change to her.

"Hmmm... We should probably tell her that we won something... and offer her a share. I don't think she'll accept it. Lilly's family is... not poor. But it's the polite thing to do."

Naomi sighs and then nods.

"I guess we should. Could you call or mail her about it?"

"Sure. I'll send her an e-mail this lunch break."

"Great. Be sure to thank her again from us."

"Okay."

Natsume gently nudges Naomi's side to get her attention.

"So, assuming your sponsor rejects her share, what do you intend to do with the spoils? And who is going to get to keep the certificate?"

"Hmmm..."

Naomi takes a moment to think about that.

"I guess we could draw straws to determine who gets to keep the certificate. Or maybe we could pass it from one member to the other every week. Or maybe..."

Her face suddenly lights up, and a smile appears on her face as she holds out the certificate to me.

"...we could simply let Hanako have it."

"M-Me? But why me?"

"Jun and I have plenty of posters hanging on the walls of our room and lots of other decorations as well. It'll stand out more in your room, and while you're studying, you can look at it as a reminder that we can do anything if we put our mind to it!"

I think she's trying to say that my room's the one most in need of additional decorations, and I might be the one most in need of motivational means to stay positive. I could be wrong though. It's not really like Naomi to be this diplomatic. Still, the hint about my room's atmosphere aside, it's a pretty sweet gesture.

"Ah..."

"Go ahead, take it. Just don't forget it belongs to all three of us."

"Well... Okay then. But... I'll just k-keep it safe on behalf of our club."

"Works for me. Now about our prize money, do you have any idea what to do with your share?"

Not really. Hisao and I went on our last date before the exams yesterday, and I'm not sure if my share will be enough to treat him anyway.

"No."

Naomi smiles.

"Are you coming to our little get-together on Friday?"

I'm not sure yet. The newspaper club always goes to a little coffee shop in town to hang out after a new issue has been printed. I've been avoiding those outings up until now, due to my difficulty in socializing with my fellow clubmembers. But Naomi's never stopped inviting me, and now that I've gotten slightly more familiar with the various people in the club, coming along with her is slowly starting to lose its intimidation factor.

"I'm... not sure yet."

"It's the last outing we'll have. That makes it kind of special. Also..."

That's a good point. After this week's release, Naomi, Natsume, Hideki and I will be officially putting our club membership on hold in order to focus completely on our exams.

"...we'll be taking a group photo that afternoon, and it just wouldn't feel right if some of the members weren't there."

I guess I could give it a try this once. I don't want the other members to regard me as a spoilsport either.

"...I'll come along this time then."

"Awesome! It's a date! Friday afternoon after we finish printing. Don't forget. And afterwards..."

We suddenly hear a stern cough from the front of the class.

"Inoue!"

We look up from our books and notice that Mutou is staring at Naomi, along with half of the class. Seems like Naomi delivered her last statements a little bit too loudly. Natsume exasperatedly shakes her head, and Mutou gives Naomi an admonishing glare.

"It didn't sound like you were discussing any subject matter just now."

"Sorry teacher. We just had to make an arrangement for our club's group photo, and I suddenly wondered..."

"Is this relevant to this class's homeroom session?"

"...since homeroom classes will be replaced with cramming sessions after next week, would this week be a good opportunity to have a class photo taken?"

Mutou looks puzzled.

"Is something wrong with the class photo that was taken at the start of the school year?"

"Well, not every student in this class is in that one. Maybe it's worth taking another one."

"Hmmm..."

I can see Mutou's eyes shift briefly to my boyfriend. I can tell that he's not fond of the idea of having his star pupil missing from the class photo that'll probably appear in the yearbook.

"...seeing that every pupil of this class is currently present, are there any objections to having a photo taken this afternoon?"

No reactions. I presume that that's a silent approval.

"We'll reserve some time in the afternoon for it then."

06

"Thank you, Kawana. You can tell your friend that he took a good picture."

Mutou nods at Misaki who came to show him a copy of the class photo she printed out. About 20 minutes ago, we took the class photo Naomi proposed this morning. Misaki Kawana, the girl who sits in front of Natsume during class and who is a member of the photography club, took a friend from her club along who was willing to operate the camera and quickly dropped by the copyshop afterwards to print out a preview for our teacher.

"Should we send the picture to the student council, teacher?"

"Yes, they're the ones who'll be in charge of the tasking people to put the yearbooks together."

"We'll do that then. Have a nice day, sir."

Misaki makes a stiff bow and leaves the room. Now it's just Mutou and me. After the photo shoot, Mutou approached me and asked if he could speak to me after class. I wonder what it's about. I really hope it's nothing bad.

"Go ahead and take a look."

He hands me the printout, and I look it over. A smile appears on my face. I think it looks pretty good. I'm standing next to Hisao of course, and I'm turned slightly towards him so my right side is less visible. We're standing fairly close to each other, so I'd like to think that people who pay close attention to the photo can deduce that we're a couple. Then again, this might just be wishful thinking on my part.

"It appears you approve of it."

My gaze shifts back to Mutou, who appears to have been observing me while I was looking at the picture.

"It's a... nice photo, I think."

Mutou nods and takes the printout back.

"If I recall correctly, this is the first time you've taken part in this sort of thing."

I nod.

"I've been... thinking lately that... maybe... it's okay if people... look back on that photo in the yearbook and remember... that I was part of this class too."

"I think that would be more than fine and not just with me. I suspect that you were the reason for Inoue to make that suggestion about having another photo taken and not Nakai."

"P-Probably."

He smirks.

"I must admit that I find you and Inoue an odd pairing."

I've heard that before. And in truth, I do still have difficulty dealing with Naomi's occasional antics from time to time, like that smacking kiss earlier this morning. And yet for each impulsive thing she does, there's usually another sweet and kind action to make up for it, like lending me that camera for my vacation or suggesting that class photo to Mutou. I also learned from Natsume that part of Naomi's restlessness is a mild side effect of the medication she's taking, so I do my best to take Naomi's personality quirks in stride and focus on the good parts.

"She can be... quirky, but she means really well."

Mutou nods curtly.

"It's good to see you making some more friends. How are you doing these days? In a general sense, that is."

The last few months have been very good to me. In addition to still being in a relationship, I've managed to strengthen my friendship with Lilly. I was initially worried that Lilly and I would start drifting apart now that her parents are living in Japan again and we do see each other slightly less now that Lilly spends each Sunday at her parents' home, and I attend meetings of the writing club several evenings per week. But while Lilly keeps the Sundays open for her parents, she keeps the Saturdays open for me, and over the last few months we've gone on several 'girl dates' together, just like the ones I took her on when she was still in the process of deciding whether to move to Scotland or not.

In addition, I've started to enjoy the little meetings of our writing club, and even when we don't end up writing a lot, I still feel it was at least good hanging out. I never really talk a lot during those sessions, but they're still rather fun to attend. I'm slowly warming up to my fellow newspaper club members, too, and we recently started exchanging greetings whenever we run into one another in the hallways. After nearly three years, I'm slowly starting to become part of this school and its student body, and I've found myself feeling sincerely sorry that it'll all end at the start of next spring. I never expected to ever feel this way again after my accident, but surprisingly enough I'm feeling rather happy with my life right now.

"I'm doing... fairly well... at the moment."

Mutou waits for a moment to give me the chance to say more, but when I remain silent he continues.

"Your Japanese teacher informed me of the prize you and Inoue won. He was quite pleased. He said you have potential."

I blush a bit. Seems like news spreads quite quickly around here.

"Of course, potential in itself is hardly enough to land a good job. A good education will be vital in order to build on and refine that potential. I heard that you've been considering your options and that you've picked two universities to potentially attend."

I meekly nod. Naomi and I both plan to study Journalism and Media after graduation. Mister Hoshino said that he was certain that we'd get plenty of opportunities there to take creative writing courses if we were interested.

"He looked through your application forms and was puzzled by what he saw. Your first choice of university is Kasshoku University, a large and well-regarded university, but your second choice is a school that most students of your capabilities wouldn't consider unless they had no other options. He wanted me to present you a list of alternatives he deemed more fitting to your level."

"Ummm...."

"I looked at your picks myself, and I picked something up that I believe Hoshino overlooked. Both schools of your choice are located in Chiba. And that happens to be the very city Nakai's school of choice is located in. In fact, you two are aiming to attend the same university after graduation, although you're shooting for different faculties."

Looks like he found me out. I embarrassingly nod my head. Hisao was the first person to take interest in Kasshoku, and while its science program is supposedly well-regarded, this choice was also one of practicality as the university is located in the same city his parental home is located in, meaning he can move back in with his parents to cut down on living costs. Lilly and I looked up the university as well and found that it'd also be able to suit our educational needs, so we both decided to try and get in there as well. Neither Hisao nor Lilly has put forth a second option, but since both are really good at the subject they'll be studying I don't think they'll have that much trouble making it in as long as they can pass the national test.

"If you make it into the same university as he does, there won't be a problem, but if you end up going to that second school you're planning to apply for, I believe you'll be doing yourself a serious disservice."

"Ummm..."

"As your homeroom teacher, I can understand your reasoning here. But as a teacher, I still feel compelled to point out that the choice of whether and where to continue studying after high school is one of the most important decisions of one's life. It's a decision with very long-term consequences. More so than anything else right now."

I'm getting a vague feeling of what he's trying to say without actually saying it. I'm in a relationship right now, but not every high school relationship lasts all the way until marriage. I don't want to think about it too deeply, but what if I picked a university of lower calibre so I could stay around Hisao and he ends up breaking up with me at some point? But if I went off to study in another city, would our relationship even last? I'm not so sure how well either of us would do in a long distance relationship.

"Think of it this way, Ikezawa. The decision of many companies to hire you will depend for a large part on whether you've attended a reputable university. The other factor involves interviewing skills. As it is, someone else may be better at sweet-talking his way through a job interview, but if you have better credentials than the competition you'll still have a good chance of being hired. You should see this as an opportunity to even the odds in your favor. Here at this school we make it a point to push all our students to try for the very best universities they can possibly get into in order to compensate for possible disadvantages they might have on the job market later. It is always better to attend a reputable university and appear slightly overqualified for the job of your choice later than to be passed up again and again."

That's not a bad point. One of the selling points of attending a prestigious university used to be that it came with an almost guaranteed job offer afterwards. That's not really the case any longer, but the name of one's university still carries an extreme amount of weight. And if there's one thing I *don't* have faith in, it's my ability to not bungle up a job interview, so I guess I really don't have much choice except to try and compensate in the credentials department as much as I can.

"So... Another alternative option then?"

"If you're going to pick alternatives then they should at least be serious considerations. They'll have additional entrance exams, but you'll be studying the same material for all the ones you partake in, so it shouldn't cost you extra time to prepare. I have a few pamphlets in my desk, so if you have time, we can go over them and get this out of the way before the afternoon is over. I know of a few universities that hold entrance exams on a day you won't already be taking one."

"O-Okay then."

He gives me an awkward smile that is meant to be reassuring, but I think his smile is a bit weird. If anything, it makes me slightly nervous.

"It's good to keep in mind that if everything goes well, your second choice won't matter much in practice. Hoshino believes you have what it takes to make it in as long as you study hard enough and I have no reason to doubt his assessment. Your grades have really picked up over the last few months. Particularly your Japanese. I wonder if that's because of your social life is improving or if it's simply because you seem to have a clear idea of what you want after you graduate here."

"M-Maybe both. But... it also helped that I have one tutor who wants to b-become an English teacher and another who is planning to teach science."

A proud expression appears on my homeroom teacher's face.

"So... Nakai has made a definite decision?"

"For now..."

Lilly's opinions about teaching may have influenced him to some degree, but the deciding factor has undoubtedly been the fact that he's already been acting as a science teacher to some degree over the last several months. Not just to Lilly and me, but also to his fellow clubmates.

The science club currently counts eight members, which is quite impressive considering the fact that it was just Hisao, Mutou and Kenji before the summer break. The majority of the new members are junior students since most third years at this school have either already joined a club or have no intention of becoming part of one regardless of what it is about. As club president and Mutou's star pupil, Hisao's dutifully taken it upon himself to help his fellow club members out whenever a subject gave them trouble. He usually did these tutoring sessions during club hours, but there were also times when he'd drop by a member's room to help them get a better grasp on the material.

Lilly and I were very impressed when we learned how serious Hisao was taking this task, sometimes even dropping by the computer lab or library to read up on a subject some more in order to better help his fellow club members. That was also the time when Lilly first started putting the idea of teaching science as a career into Hisao's head. And despite the fact that Hisao first took to his new activities in an attempt to compensate for his mentor's confusing lectures, Mutou seems to have taken Hisao's career aspirations as a personal compliment and has been all too happy to encourage his protegee's plans for the future.

"Too many students simply go to university because they feel that it's expected of them, not because they want to develop themselves and hone their specific interests into talent. But the best students know that passion, ambition and a clear goal give all their efforts meaning and are a better source of motivation than a mere desire to go with the flow of society."

I really managed to get him going. I don't think this is really meant to be a discussion, so I obediently nod my head.

"Speaking of motivation, have the two of you considered visiting the open house day this weekend?"

"Open house day...?"

He probably said something about it, but I'm not exactly sure when. Was it this morning while Natsume was interrogating Naomi and me? Mutou sees the blank expression on my face and shakes his head.

"I brought it up during homeroom classes two weeks ago. Kasshoku University is organizing an open house day for high school students who are thinking about enrolling there. They're probably hoping to get a few more last-minute applications before the Center Test starts in January. The event takes place this upcoming Sunday."

Now I remember. Hisao and I did take note of that, but never made an actual decision on whether to go or not.

"We're... not sure yet."

"If you're serious about enrolling there, being able to take a brief look around and get a feel for the place may just provide you with an additional boost of motivation. You will both need to study hard to pass your exams, and every bit of motivation should be welcomed."

"We'll... consider it."

"Very well. Let's look at some of your alternative options then and hope it will turn out to be nothing but a formality."

07

"You're considering attending a university in another town if you don't get into Kasshoku?"

Lilly and Hisao seem surprised as I tell them about the talk I had with Mutou.

"Well... M-my first choice hasn't changed, but Mutou said that I shouldn't underestimate the importance of getting into a good university."

I'm not exactly standing 100% behind my decision, but when Mutou made his point I didn't really have a solid argument against it. Besides, with some luck I'll do well on my exams, and I won't have to worry about alternatives. Unlike Hisao and Lilly however, I do feel that I need alternatives. After all, if I don't get into some university or another, I'll be homeless after graduation. I'm trying not to worry too hard about that for the time being, knowing I could probably stay with my friends for a while, but it's not a matter I can easily ignore. I looked up what renting a place would require, and it seems most estate agencies demand a tenant to have both a steady job and a family member willing to act as a guarantor in case of a layoff. I don't qualify for either criterium. And then there's the high costs.

"I suppose that is a good point. What university you attended still matters greatly to many companies."

With the conversation dried up, we get back to studying. The last months, Lilly, Hisao and I have made it a habit to study together so we can compare notes, help each other on difficult subjects and keep each other motivated. I was worried at first that we'd just end up chattering all night long, but it turned out that we've been able to exercise enough self-restraint to make these cramming sessions productive. Lilly and I are sitting on Lilly's bed, our backs against the wall, while Hisao's sitting at Lilly's desk.

As I finish another chapter about the late Edo period, I hear Lilly sigh softly and shake her fingers.

"Are your fingers getting tired?"

"A little bit. How long have we been studying since our last tea break?"

Hisao instinctively looks at Lilly's braille alarm clock before rolling his eyes and checking his watch.

"About an hour. Maybe another short break is in order."

"Very well then. But let's continue within 15 minutes."

Hisao gets up and gets us both a cup of tea from the thermos bottle we've been using during these studying sessions to keep our drinks warm. I take a sip from my cup, being careful not to spill anything on my nightgown, and turn to Lilly.

"Your mother already replied to the mail I sent during the lunch break."

"About your prize? What did she say?"

"She said she was very proud of us and that we didn't need to worry about splitting the prize money with her."

"I wouldn't have expected any other reaction from her. Do you already have any idea what to do with your share?"

I nod.

"We're not splitting the money. Naomi said that since we've earned the money as a team, we should also spend the money as a team."

"So what will you be spending it on?"

"A... 'girls night out'... as Naomi called it. The next issue of our newspaper comes out the upcoming Friday, so our club members go to a coffee shop in town to celebrate the release as usual. Naomi, Jun and I will go there too, but leave early and take a bus to the city. We're going to look for a nice p-place to have dinner and then do k-karaoke afterwards. Whether we do anything else depends on how much of the prize money we'll have left."

"Wow Hanako, that sounds like a lot of fun."

I think it does. I still prefer the quietness of the nearby town over the bustling of the city, but things will probably be okay as long as I stick close to my friends. Natsume pointed out that Naomi tends to sing off-key, but said she thought we'd nevertheless have a good time. I am kind of looking forward to it. Since we won't be submitting anything else for the time being due to the exams, this will be a good way to bring closure to the activities of our little writing group.

"I... hope so."

Hisao smiles playfully.

"That does mean you'll have to study twice as hard during the weekend to make up for the fact that you won't be able to do much cramming on Friday."

"I'll do my best to catch up on Saturday."

That reminds me about what Mutou said earlier about that open house day on Sunday. Maybe it's a good idea to bring this up with Hisao and Lilly.

"Ummm... Do you remember that open house day that Mutou talked about before?"

Hisao frowns and then nods.

"Right, he brought that up during homeroom some time ago. Are you planning on going there?"

"I'm not sure. Mutou mentioned it again today and recommended going. As a source of motivation."

Lilly smiles.

"Even though we can't really spend too much time away from our study books, it might be a very good idea to go there and have a look. I agree with Mutou's suggestion. It might motivate us to try even harder."

Hisao doesn't look convinced yet.

"It's pretty far away from here. We'd have to get up really early and we'd be back really late."

"Maybe I could ask my father to take us there by car. I will need someone to help me navigate the area, and I can't ask any of you since each of us will be visiting a different faculty."

"If it's not inconvenient for him, and he'll be able to handle a lot of walking..."

Lilly's smile fades for a moment.

"My own pace isn't very fast, so I'm sure he'll be able to keep up. And he has... plenty of free time right now."

"Sorry."

Lilly's smile returns, and she makes a quick hand gesture in order to dismiss the matter.

"It's fine. I'm sure it'll be a great experience for all of us."

"Hanako? Shall we go there the upcoming Sunday then?"

I'm not really sure about the great experience part, but I don't think Hisao and Lilly will go there if I don't come along. I was pretty nervous before the trip to Scotland, and that turned out really well, Mister Satou's incident notwithstanding.

"O-Okay then."

"Maybe this would be a good opportunity for you to check out the dorms there as well, Lilly. You can determine how easy they are to navigate."

"Hmmm..."

Lilly doesn't immediately respond to Hisao's remark, and I happen to know why. She told me recently during one of our outings, but I suppose she hasn't told Hisao yet.

"I'm not certain about that yet. I've been trying to convince my parents to let me live on my own after graduation. I'm used to handling life in a dorm by now. I'd like to take another step towards independence. I feel that my time at university is the perfect time to brush up my domestic skills a little more. After graduation from university, I want to be able to focus completely on my job without having to worry about still getting used to running my own household. College time is probably the perfect time to get this matter out of the way."

I silently smile. It's typical of Lilly to be planning this far ahead already.

"So what did your parents say?"

Lilly's smile falters a bit.

"Convincing them hasn't been very successful so far. Mother seems... willing to give the possibility some consideration, but Father hasn't reached that point yet."

"Well, letting a child live on his or her own would be kind of scary for any parent at first and surely there are plenty of additional challenges for someone who can't see."

"I am well aware of that. However, I've faced many of these challenges already when Akira and I were living together, and I was able to handle myself decently."

"Did you remind them of that?"

"It's a bit tricky to make that point without coming across as offensive. There may be another way to ease their minds a bit."

"How?"

Lilly pauses for a moment.

"Perhaps they'd reconsider if I had a roommate to keep an eye on things. I was wondering..."

She suddenly turns to me and puts an arm on my shoulder.

"Hanako, I realize this is getting ahead of things a bit, but assuming we'd both do well on our exams, would you be willing to consider becoming that roommate?"

I reel in shock. Is Lilly really asking me to share an apartment with her? I didn't see this coming at all.

"B-But... M-me?"

"I think you would certainly be the most suitable person. I've been meaning to ask you this at some point anyway. I wouldn't mind a bit of company, and we could split household chores between us. That way, I can still get in whatever practice I need. And it will be good to have someone around that I trust in case there are things that need to be done that require eyesight."

"B-But..."

I stop myself before I can comment that I wouldn't be able to afford my half of the rent for something as expensive as an apartment. I doubt Lilly and her family would even accept my money to begin with. Maybe I should give this some consideration. It would certainly be the best solution to my approaching housing problem, and it would probably help with my studies if I have a nice, quiet place to return to after school hours, rather than a dorm filled with people I don't know.

"...roommates..."

"I cannot give you a guarantee that you moving in with me would be enough to sway Father's mind, but it's worth a try. And it would be the ideal way for the three of us to stay in contact with one another without having to neglect the new people we'll be meeting."

"I...ah..."

I cannot argue with any of Lilly's points. I'd like to stay in contact with Lilly no matter what, and if we become roommates that means Lilly can spend time with me at home, and I won't have to worry about me preventing her from hanging out with the new friends she'll make on campus.

08

"I... ah... would like that."

Lilly beams at those words.

"Really?"

I recall what Miss Yumi once said about taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. This is probably one of those opportunities, and if Lilly can pull this off, I don't think I'll feel sorry about it afterwards.

"R-Really."

"I am truly happy to hear that Hanako."

Lilly smiles happily and pulls me into a loving hug. I giggle as I return the embrace, and we cuddle for a little while. Lilly and I are close enough now for me to not feel uncomfortable about displays of affection of this kind. Hisao, on the other hand, rolls his eyes.

"What is it with all those girls throwing themselves at you today?"

Lilly playfully grins at Hisao.

"Jealous?"

"The answer's still no."

Lilly opens her mouth to reply, but her words are cut off by a noise that I recognize as Lilly's ringtone.

"Would you mind if I take this?"

"Go ahead."

Lilly breaks off our hug and makes her way to the phone which is lying on top of her dresser.

"Good evening, Lilly Satou speaking."

She smiles.

"Hello Mother."

"I'm doing well. We're currently studying for next week's mock exams."

"Yes, like a dress rehearsal for the real ones."

"Yes, all three of us."

"She told me that you replied already. It's great, isn't it?"

"I have been told that the money will be put to very good use."

"Yes, I've been with Father all day yesterday. We actually went to visit Grandmother and Grandfather together. It's a shame you couldn't be there. I asked Father to postpone the visit until you were back in the country, but he said rescheduling might be inconvenient."

"Hmmm... Perhaps it would be best to talk about that later."

"You're coming back on Sunday already? That's good to hear."

"Ah... Making it to the airport to welcome you back may be a problem. We just made plans for the upcoming Sunday."

Lilly smiles.

"We're going to see what our future looks like."

09

Chapter 42 (Hanako)

01

"Hmmm... Notepad and pen - check."

I'll probably end up taking some notes.

"Study books - check."

To study in the car. Fortunately I can read just about anywhere without getting motion sickness.

"Lunchbox with extra large lunch - check."

They probably have a cafeteria there, but I bet it'll be really crowded, and we'd be standing in line for half an hour. Better to bring my own lunch.

"Pocket change for vending machines - check."

"Sweets for consumption during the trip - check."

"Cell phone - check. Battery's fully charged too."

I look at the cell phone lying on my nightstand. I've been using it as an alarm clock ever since Naomi accidentally wrecked my actual one, and I keep putting off buying a new one. It might be a good idea to use both my phone and an actual alarm clock on the day of the exams. Can't be too careful.

Did I forget anything? I have my wallet with me. Hmm, can't think of anything.

A knock on the door interrupts my thoughts.

"It's open!"

The door opens behind me, I hear someone walk into the room, and the next moment someone kisses me on my left cheek.

"Hey there. Good morning."

I turn around, kiss my boyfriend back and smile at him.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah. And you? Did you stay up late yesterday?"

I nod.

"I studied until eleven, but I think I've caught up now."

Since Naomi, Jun and I were busy with our outing the whole Friday evening, I spent most of the Saturday afternoon and evening holed up in my room in an attempt to compensate for the time lost. It practically melted my brains, but I feel I caught up with Hisao and Lilly now.

"You did remember to eat yesterday, right?"

I'm not a kid, Hisao.

"Just a quick bite, but enough to keep going."

Hisao looks at my bed and notices something that wasn't there before.

"Hey, aren't you going to introduce me to your new roommate?"

I show him the teddy bear that is lying near my pillow.

"I... haven't thought up a name for him yet. But Naomi got it for me from a crane game at the arcade."

"He certainly looks cute. I just hope he'll have the decency to sleep somewhere else when I stay over."

I chuckle and nod my head.

"Sure."

"So, have you packed everything for the trip?"

"I think so. Is Lilly ready?"

"I saw her outside the dorm just a while ago. I think she's ready to go."

"Let's go outside then."

We leave my dorm building and make our way to the parking lot. As we approach the gate, we see two tall figures standing nearby. I easily recognize Lilly, but I have to look twice before I recognize the man next to her as her father. Of course he's not wearing his business suit today. Instead, he's wearing dark pants and an inconspicuous light-grey vest under his long coat. His glasses are different too. These ones soften his appearance a bit. But the biggest difference is his body language. He still looks formal, but I notice his shoulders are a bit more slumped than before, and there's a slightly tired look in his eyes. He also appears to be a bit thinner than before. He looks like he's aged a decade in those few months. I wonder if Lilly is aware of that.

"Miss Ikezawa, Mister Nakai. Good morning."

He politely bows as we approach, and I notice that his bow towards me is particularly deep.

"Good m-morning, Mister Satou."

"Good morning, sir. It's been a while. How are you feeling?"

"A lot better, thank you."

I'm not sure if I quite believe him. From the few things Lilly has told me, I know that her father's physical recovery has been going fairly well, but he's had a lot of trouble adjusting to life at home and he's quite at a loss what to do with his life now that he no longer has a daily job.

Hisao turns to Lilly.

"Now that we're all here, it might be a good idea to get going. It's still a pretty long ride."

Lilly's father raises an eyebrow.

"Are we still not one person short?"

"Huh?"

"Hey guys! I didn't keep you waiting, did I?"

Greeting us with a cheerful wave, Naomi comes running up to us.

"Huh? Are you coming along as well?"

Lilly nods.

"Hanako asked me yesterday if it was okay if she accompanied us. Since we still had room in the car, I saw no reason to decline."

I smile sheepishly at my boyfriend. I did plan to tell him that, but I've barely been out of my room yesterday, and we didn't see each other for very long.

"Sorry I didn't tell you."

"Eh, it's okay."

Naomi looks past me at Lilly's father.

"You must be Mister Satou. Pleased to meet you. I'm Naomi Inoue."

Lilly's father answers Naomi's bow with one of his own and introduces himself in return.

Naomi smiles at Lilly's father.

"Um... is your wife here too? I'd really like to talk to her again. She's been this really strong motivator for our club. Hehe... both clubs actually."

Lilly's father shakes his head.

"My wife has been in Scotland this week and is currently on the plane back home. I am afraid that my company will have to suffice for today. I will be sure to give her your regards."

"Awww."

Naomi is visibly disappointed, but then gives a resigned nod.

"Yeah, that'd be great."

Lilly tries to give Naomi an encouraging smile.

"I'm certain you'll be able to talk to her again. She'll be present for our graduation after all."

And with that consolation, we head for the car and hit the road.

02

"Ummm... Anybody want another piece of chocolate?"

"That sounds good. Thank you Hanako."

This is probably the third round of chocolates we've gone through already, but it's been quite a long ride, and we've got to keep our brains in top gear so we can keep studying. Well, at least that's true for Lilly, Naomi and me. Hisao's just looking out the window.

"Hisao, do you often get car sick if you read on the road?"

"Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. I remember when my father drove me to Yamaku, I was reading pretty much the entire way there, and that was the same route as we're driving right now."

Lilly's father raises an eyebrow and looks at Hisao through his rearview mirror.

"I take it then that you are originally from Chiba? Are you planning to move back into your parental home?"

"That's the idea. Living five minutes away from school is a luxury I'm going to miss, but I have my own room at home, and my parents work long hours, so I'd welcome the extra privacy."

Naomi grins.

"Eh, you shouldn't see it as a lack of privacy. You ought to see life at the dorms as a good way to meet lots of interesting new people with whom you might not interact as much if you weren't living on campus. Heck, they say that university years are the party years of your life. Not that I can go overboard with parties myself of course, but I bet it'll still be awesome."

Sounds like somebody is looking forward to her time as a university student. I am not so eager to move accommodations myself.

"I'm... not really a party p-person myself, but..."

There was Lilly's proposal, but I wonder just how much chance she has of changing her father's mind.

"Father, do you remember that conversation we had previously about... accommodations?"

"I do. But is now really the proper time to bring that up again?"

"Would you be willing to reconsider if a person like Hanako moved in as a roommate to keep an eye out?"

"A person like Miss Ikezawa or Miss Ikezawa herself?"

"Hanako herself. I... ah... have reason to believe she'd be interested in the opportunity if it was presented to her."

I can see his eyes giving me a long analyzing look that sincerely unnerves me.

"Miss Ikezawa, is that so?"

"Y-Yes... ummm... sir."

"You are not merely saying that because it would convenience my daughter, are you?"

"N-No. I'm... not very good with people, so... having a bit m-more space and only having to s-share the facilities with my best friend would be very convenient for me too."

Lilly's father furrows his brow as if weighing every word I just said.

"Hmmm..."

"Sir?"

I look at my boyfriend who's remained quiet during this discussion and now suddenly speaks up.

"Yes, Mister Nakai?"

"Would you mind if I shared something with you that caught my attention about this?"

"Go right ahead."

"I don't think sharing a place with a blind person is something that works out well for everyone. If you're sloppy by nature and leave stuff lying about or don't put things back in exactly the place where you found them, you'll usually make things harder rather than easier for your roommate."

"That makes sense."

"But I've seen Lilly and Hanako prepare a meal together a few times in the past and they seem to have a system in place between the two of them that allows them to work almost in perfect unison. Hanako seems to know exactly how to arrange things so Lilly can easily find them, and she's always very meticulous about putting things back in exactly the right place when she borrows stuff from Lilly's cupboard. I don't think it's an exaggeration when I say that Hanako is easily the best roommate Lilly could ever wish for."

I blush from this unexpected avalanche of praise. It's true that I'm somewhat used to Lilly's preferences related to chores and cooking, but I don't consider that trait to be nearly as impressive as Hisao is making it out to be. Lilly, on the other hand, smiles and gives an appreciative nod.

"I could not agree more with that assessment, Hisao."

I kind of wonder if this is going to make any difference whatsoever. I'm not really sure how useful I would be to Lilly in everyday life once she's memorized the layout of the apartment and the neighborhood. I don't think of myself as an extremely reliable safety net, and if Mister Satou's not willing to rent an apartment for his daughter, what are the odds of him wanting to do the same for a relative stranger. Unless...

A realization suddenly dawns on me.

Unless he felt he owed that person something. Didn't he say before that if I ever needed anything, I only needed to ask? If he's serious about that and he knows that I'd like having a small place of my own together with Lilly, would he refuse? Could he? Wait a second... Is Lilly counting on that? Is that why...?

No, Lilly seemed genuinely happy when I said I'd like to be her roommate. I believe she sincerely desires my company. I also don't think she'd like it if an obligation to me was the only reason her father would allow her to live on her own. But even so, Lilly's employing a pretty devious strategy, and when I look at Mister Satou, I notice that he opens his mouth to say something, but then merely sighs, shakes his head and gives his daughter a long, hard look.

"It appears that you inherited your negotiation tactics from your mother. Well, if you want me to take all of this into account and reevaluate my opinion, I am willing to do so, but I cannot make any promises."

"Thank you Father. I greatly appreciate it."

03

"Wow, it's really big. I hope I won't get lost here."

"Could you describe it to me, Hisao?"

"If the map we're looking at is any indication, this place is the size of a city block."

"Have you already located the places we're supposed to be heading for?"

"Let's see. You and your father have to be in the building on the northwest side of the campus. The faculty building I'm heading for is located on the east side and Hanako and Naomi are set for the building just to the north of here. Geez, we're spread all over the place."

"Seeing that we're all applying for different studies, it's no surprise we're set to visit different faculties."

Lilly's father turns to us.

"I propose that we meet up back here at the entrance after we are finished for the day."

We all nod in agreement. Hisao checks his watch.

"At what time should we be back here?"

"I have looked up the day's program online and I believe it ends at half past 3. So I suggest we meet back here at four o' clock."

At least somebody came prepared. Since I spent most of yesterday cramming for the upcoming mock exams, I didn't even think of looking up today's schedule. And it seems like the same is true for the rest of us.

"Fine by me."

"Sure."

"O-Okay."

Lilly gently takes her father's arm.

"We'll return here at four o' clock then. Shall we be off then? Have fun everyone."

Lilly's father bows to us and then walks off into the crowd together with his daughter. Hisao looks me over before picking up his backpack.

"Are you going to be okay?"

Looks like he picked up on my nervous mood. Over the course of last week, I've kept telling myself that I'd be okay today, since I've lately been able to walk Yamaku's hallways with only some mild discomfort every now and then. Looks like I've been fooling myself into thinking it'd be that easy. Ever since we've passed the gate, I've been feeling an unusually oppressive atmosphere.

"Y-Yes, I'm okay."

"Keep an eye on her, okay?"

Naomi rolls her eyes at Hisao.

"Geez, have a little faith. We'll be just fine."

"Well, good luck today."

"Y-You too."

I sigh softly as I watch my boyfriend disappear into the mass of people. Naomi picks up her backpack from the floor and gestures towards the buildings ahead of us.

"Shall we go too?"

"N-Not too fast, please."

I take a deep breath and then we start making our way through the crowd. I make sure to keep to Naomi's left side and stick as close to her as possible while keeping my head down. When we finally reach the entrance to our building, Naomi grabs two pamphlets from a desk near the door and hands one of them to me. I fold it open and look at its contents.

Information sessions and presentations: (start every 45 minutes. 9:15 - 15:15)

- History of journalism (classroom 1-1)
- Journalistic writing (classroom 1-2)
- Research and analysis (classroom 1-3)
- Researching media and culture (classroom 2-1)
- Advanced reporting (classroom 2-2)
- Political reporting (classroom 2-3)
- The media and popular culture (classroom 2-5)

Closing session: (15:30 - 16:00)

- The internet, social media and the future of journalism (lecture hall 1)

"Information sessions, huh? They're probably kinda like ordinary class sessions we can attend if there's still room."

"P-Probably."

"So, any special requests?"

"No. You?"

"Let's check out 'Research and analysis' first."

I nod and we go off to find classroom 1-3 where the lecture about that particular subject is being given using the map on the back of the pamphlet as a guide. As we reach the classroom, Naomi looks inside.

"Swell, there's like 4 seats left. Shall we?"

I cautiously peek into the room from behind Naomi. There are indeed a few seats left, but they're all on the left side of the room. If I sit there, everyone will probably be able to see my scars.

"Ummm... What about t-the classroom next t-to this one?"

"Huh?"

"We could do this one later."

Naomi looks puzzled for a second and then shrugs her shoulders.

"Well, okay."

Classroom 1-2 fortunately has several more vacant seats, and I make my way to the back of the classroom as quickly as I can. Naomi hurriedly moves to the seat next to mine. I feel guilty about forcing Naomi to put up with this. The last thing I wanted was to throw her into the babysitter's role.

The next 45 minutes are mostly spent listening to a long story about what makes a well-written article, but I'm having trouble taking notes due to the thoughts whirling around in my head.

I've been a bit antsy over the course of the week, but for the most part I've been able to keep myself from getting too worked up about it. I actually felt fine this morning, but the moment we reached the campus entrance my agoraphobia almost immediately kicked in. Despite Yamaku's campus being far from small, the school itself is definitely not very large and houses only around 250 students or so, so things are usually rather peaceful aside from the hallways and cafeteria during lunch break. It's such a contrast to this place which is both massive and crowded. Especially the classrooms are a lot larger and more crowded here. It reminds me a bit of my middle school, and I'm not so sure whether that's a good thing.

Finally, the teacher in front of the class looks like he's finishing up his story. I instinctively start gathering my stuff and prepare to quickly slip out of the room, but before I can get up I see Naomi subtly shaking her head at me, and I realize that I just stopped short of making a huge mistake. While the teachers at Yamaku were informed of some of my circumstances and tolerated my tendency to leave class early in order to avoid the crowds, I don't think there'll be such leniency here. I merely would have made a spectacle out of myself. That would have been disastrous. I quickly give a nod of understanding and put my backpack back down before I attract anyone's attention.

We wait until other people rise from their seats, and then I quickly get out of the classroom with Naomi in tow. After we get a safe distance away from the classroom entrance, Naomi turns to me and points down the hallway.

"Want to try 'Research and analysis' again? We might have more seats to choose from this time."

"O-Okay."

We quickly head over to classroom 1-3, which is still in the process of emptying. As the stream of people moves past us, I hurriedly hide behind Naomi, which is only partially effective since I'm a bit taller than her. Eventually people stop coming out of the classroom, and Naomi and I both carefully walk inside. Naomi gives a little nod with her head.

"Are we going for a spot on the right in the back again?"

"Y-Yes please."

04

"Are you sure that this is okay?"

Naomi looks a bit uncertain upon taking her half of my lunch from my hands.

"Sure. I p-packed a very large lunch anyway. It's too much for me to eat all by myself."

"Well, okay then. Thanks a lot."

"N-Not a problem."

So far we've been to three of the presentations that were offered, and the faculty's program for the day has a window of 45 minutes reserved for lunch break, meaning we still have about half an hour before we have to return to the faculty building. I, for one, really welcome this opportunity to get a little break. Naomi wanted to drop by the cafeteria at first, but I managed to convince her to go and find a quiet and secluded spot for us to eat our lunch. Naomi didn't bring any lunch herself, probably counting on getting to buy her lunch around here, but I got her to abandon that idea by promising her half of my lunch. Fortunately I already anticipated the possibility of Naomi not bringing a lunch of her own, and I prepared a particularly large lunch myself this morning, so neither of us is in danger of going hungry.

"The sky's kinda cloudy though. If it starts raining, we'll have to run back or we'll get soaked."

"Do you... want to go b-back already?"

Naomi shakes her head.

"I take it that you had a reason for coming here, and I don't mind either way, so we're better off staying here for a while longer."

'Here' being the spot I picked after we left the faculty. It's a bench near the sports field a few minutes walk away from the journalism faculty. Since there are barely any other people around here, this spot feels nice and safe.

"T-Thanks."

Naomi gives me a worried glance.

"I... uh... know that this whole trip was to gain inspiration and motivation for the upcoming exams, but you're looking neither inspired nor motivated right now."

I answer Naomi's words with a sad nod. Looks like even she picked up on it. I'm so disappointed in myself right now. I *should* be motivated and inspired. This is the school I've applied for. The school that Hisao, Lilly and probably even Naomi will be attending. The first choice I've put on my application form at Yamaku. The one chance I have to easily stay in contact with my best friends and keep my relationship with Hisao going. Despite the fact that I can't afford to let my anxieties take control of me, the massiveness, crowdedness and unfamiliarity of this place started getting to me the moment I set foot in here. Naomi gives me a sheepish look.

"You really don't like crowds, do you?"

"I don't like it... when p-people look at me. Or ask me about... you know. So I t-try not to be in p-places with lots of people."

Naomi nods understandingly.

"Yeah, that makes sense. If it's a consolation to you, I'm not fond of large crowds either. I prefer smaller groups of people to big masses."

"You?"

"Surprised?"

A bit. Naomi's a pretty social girl who has an easy time interacting with others, and her bleached hair draws way less attention than my facial scarring. Of course, her epileptic seizures make even my scars seem inconspicuous.

"Because of y-your... ah...?"

"...fits."

I awkwardly nod as Naomi bluntly finishes my sentence. Naomi acts about as easygoing about her epilepsy as Lilly does about her blindness, at least most of the time, but I'm not completely comfortable discussing the subject with her yet.

"Hmmm. Have you ever heard of the 'bystander effect'?"

I shake my head.

"Put simply it means that the more people are nearby when something bad happens to you, the less likely they are to do something. If you have a seizure while there are like one or two people nearby, they're very likely to do whatever they can to help. If the same thing happens, and there are 40 people nearby, all they usually do is stand there and stare. Nobody likes to risk screwing up in front of others, so nobody lifts a finger even while you're banging your head against the pavement and suffer a concussion as a result."

The brief bitter glint in Naomi's eyes suggests that she might not have made that example up just now.

"Anyway, I mostly go into town with others for that reason. This isn't a problem when I'm with Natsume or you and Jun since you know how to act when I short out, which is a real load off my mind."

"Uhhh... You... really feel better while we're around?"

It seems Naomi has more faith in me than I have. If she has a seizure in a public spot, and there are 40 people looking at her, that would also mean there'd be 40 people looking at me. And 40 people looking in my direction may just be enough to shut me down too. That'd leave Jun, and I'd rather not let her near Naomi while the latter is thrashing around on the floor.

"Yeah, I do. By the way... I didn't remember you being so high-strung two days ago, and the part of town we were in was kind of busy too."

There's a pretty big difference between the streets of the city and the hallways of the building we've spent the last few hours in. While I'm not completely comfortable walking through the city either, it helps when I remind myself that I never have to be on the streets for very long and that I can relax once I reach my destination. This place, however, will be where I will be spending the next years of my life from morning until afternoon. If I'm going to feel on edge all day long, how will I even function?

"It... probably helped that it was rather dark while we were there, and I... know my way around that part of the city a bit."

Naomi looks at me with a worried frown as she reads my expression.

"Were you hiding your anxiety and merely pretending to have fun? You weren't, were you?"

"N-No, not at all. I... really liked the day before yesterday."

That's not a white lie. After our get-together in town, Naomi, Jun and I took the bus to the city where we first had a great meal in a quiet little sushi restaurant. Then we went for a 2-hour long karaoke session until all three of us became a bit hoarse. And finally, after hearing that the arcade was a favored spot for Hisao and me to spend our dates, Jun dragged me there to engage in some competitive gaming sessions.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"I also had fun. It was pretty enlightening too. I never would have guessed you to have such a nice singing voice. Or Jun to be that crazy about video games."

I blush at Naomi's praise.

"Jun... didn't really surprise me that much. She likes computers, after all."

"Heh, yeah, but I don't think every girl who merely 'likes computers' acts like a kid in a candy store when you take her to the arcade."

I giggle. I don't think I could have described Jun's disposition more perfectly than Naomi just did.

"I think... she simply doesn't have many other friends who like to play games... particularly video games."

"Makes me wish I could have been there all the time."

Naomi reasoned that a darkened arcade hall filled with flashing displays was a very bad place for an epileptic to be, so she waited for Jun and me in the entrance hall. At first we were worried that she was going to be bored out of her mind, but after we finished our gaming binge, we actually found her in the company of no less than three large plush animals she procured from the nearby crane games.

"But then... we wouldn't have those nice plush toys you won for us."

Naomi grins proudly.

"And don't you forget it."

On the way back I asked Naomi if she was interested in coming along today. I felt a bit bad that a not unimportant reason for bringing her along was the fact that I expected my anxieties to get the better of me if I had to attend this event completely on my own, and there's no way I could have asked Lilly or Hisao to skip their events and come along with me just so I could hide behind them.

"I won't. And ah... Thanks again for c-coming along today."

"I'm enjoying myself here, so don't sweat it. Besides, it's the least I can do back for someone who lets me stay over every once in a while."

Two weeks ago, Naomi had another seizure during a session of our writing club although she thankfully didn't mess up my blanket this time, and we let her spend the night in my bed again. Natsume joked the day after that maybe Naomi ought to start paying me rent.

"That's... okay."

Conversation dries up, and we finish our lunch without making further small talk. I feel my nerves slowly easing although I'm not sure how long that is going to last. As Naomi suggests going back, I quickly check my watch. It's nearly one o' clock. Only three more hours to go. I can do this.

05

"...and many of the people now covering our politicians are alumni from this school."

I try to take a casual glance at my watch without making it too obvious that I'm checking the time. It's 15:10 right now. Only five more minutes. We arrived fairly late, and most seats were already taken, but since this was the only presentation we hadn't attended yet we couldn't just skip it and visit another one. We're sitting right in the middle of class right now, and I'm having the impression that the person on my right, a slightly thin-looking girl with a silver-colored hairpin is staring past my bangs. In fact, I can almost swear half the class is watching me, but I'm afraid to turn my head. I consider covering the right side of my face with my hand, but that will only make the scarring on the back of my hand more noticeable.

"There's also the matter of several political leaders in the Liberal Democratic Party as well as some in the Democratic Party of Japan and the Japan Restoration Party being graduates of this university. This creates a bond that can be used to your advantage to improve your working relationship with the politician you're assigned to cover..."

I've been on my guard ever since we returned here from our lunch break, and I'm feeling drained right now.

"Since Kasshoku has good ties with the five largest newspapers in the country, graduates of this school will have a good chance to get into the various kisha clubs you need to be part of in order to have direct access to the members of our legislature."

I've only been able to pick up fragments of this last presentation, so I really hope Naomi's been taking notes.

"...and there's information about Japanese kisha clubs obtainable online for those of you who wish to learn more. That is all for today. In 15 minutes, the faculty head will close off today's events with one last presentation in the hall one floor down. We are hoping to see all of you there."

As the teacher finishes and people start getting up, I breathe a sigh of relief. Eventually the teacher follows his audience out the door, leaving just Naomi and me in the classroom. Naomi walks up to me with an annoyed expression on her face.

"Man, I thought political reporting was gonna be awesome, but from what that guy just said, I get the impression that it pretty much involves working your butt off to get put in a club, get assigned to one politician and then repeating the exact same press releases that everyone else in your group is getting. That's kind of boring, not to mention a pain."

She grins.

"Heh, what if I actually made it into the exclusive group of journalists assigned to covering one of the bigwigs and then shorted out? Can you see the headlines? 'Female reporter chews up prime minister's sofa during epileptic fit?' That'd be kind of awesome."

If that actually happened, I don't think she'd be laughing anymore. I merely shrug my shoulders at Naomi's remark.

"We'd b-better get going."

"Right. I doubt that hall is going to run out of seats anytime soon, but we'd better not press our luck."

"Eh... hall?"

Naomi looks confused.

"Yeah, they're gonna tie the whole thing up in that lecture hall in 15 minutes, aren't they? That's what that guy said. It's on the program too."

"B-But... We were g-going to meet at the entrance at four o' clock. If we attend that last p-presentation, won't we be late?"

I didn't think about it before, but it seems our program finishes later than Lilly's. Looks like every faculty here has made its own schedule for today without worrying about the others.

"Only a bit. The campus entrance isn't that far from here. If we return there now, we'll be sitting there twirling our thumbs for like 40 minutes."

I personally wouldn't mind that much. We have our study books with us, and there are some benches there.

"But... They might g-get worried."

"Only if they make it there before we do. The other faculty buildings are farther away from the entrance than ours is, and from what I saw earlier today, Lilly and her dad have a very slow walking pace. If we set a brisk pace for ourselves after we finish the program here, I bet we could still get to the meeting point before they do."

Naomi does have a point. While Lilly and her father are the punctual type, they do have a rather slow pace, and knowing them, both will probably try to take it easy for the sake of the other. While I'm not fond of the idea of attending yet another presentation in a probably crowded room, Naomi seems eager to attend it, so the best I can do is probably to go along with her suggestion as a way to thank her for coming along with me today and putting up with my nervousness without complaining even once.

"Well... O-kay then."

"Great. We'd better get a move on before they run out of seats."

We quickly leave the empty classroom, and I'm relieved to find out that the hallways are a lot emptier right now than they've been the whole day. As we reach the bottom of the stairway, Naomi points to a stream of people trickling into a room through a set of double doors.

"That's where we need to be."

We hurriedly join the small crowd and make our way into the hall beyond the doorway. Upon passing through the doors though, I let out a horrified gasp and instinctively move behind Naomi as I find out why the hallways were so empty just now. The hall we've just entered is huge and filled almost completely with people already, leaving only the occasional empty seat here and there.

The first thought that enters my mind is how much of a mistake it was to come here. No matter how interesting this lecture is going to be, I don't think any of it will end up sticking in my mind.

"Uhh..."

Naomi turns around and looks at me with an uncertain expression.

"Erm..."

"I'll... be... okay."

I doubt Naomi believes me, but she nevertheless nods, and we walk up to the rows of seats that still have vacant spots. Naomi suddenly stops and points at one of the empty seats.

"I think this is a good spot for you."

It's a seat at the very end of one of the rows. Merely being surrounded by people on three rather than four sides might make the experience just a little less harrowing for me, but since it's only a single seat that means Naomi will be sitting somewhere else. I give Naomi an uncertain glance, but then nod and sit down after shoving my backpack under my seat. The person sitting next to me still appears to be in a conversation with his neighbor and didn't pay attention to me when I sat down next to him, so I pull up my collar a bit and pray he doesn't take a closer look at me.

Ugh, I hate crowds. Is this the place where I'll be getting the majority of my courses if I end up enrolling here?

I take a careful look over my shoulder to see where Naomi is sitting. It takes a bit of effort, but I eventually manage to spot her thanks to her bleached hairdo standing out among the mostly dark-haired crowd. She's sitting in the middle of one of the rows near the back of the hall, quite a distance away from me. It makes me feel even more isolated here.

I notice that the stream of people flowing into the hall has dried up, and one of the people standing near the doorway, a slightly older gentleman, closes the doors and activates the large screen on the back wall before walking up to the microphone.

06

"I would like to welcome you all for taking time out of your busy schedule to visit us today. We hope you have been finding your visit educational and enjoyable so far..."

I check my watch again. 25 more minutes to go. Just 25 more minutes. I catch the person sitting next to me taking a peek at my right hand and quickly cover it with my left.

"...and there are some who say that the rise of the internet will spell an end to newspapers and possibly even journalism. Let me say that one of these claims is an exaggeration and the other one is untrue. Newspaper readership is still extremely high in our country, newspapers will always continue to exist in some form or another and journalism maintains its role in society as it always has..."

20 more minutes to go. I notice that the person next to me is whispering to his neighbor. I wonder if they're talking about me.

"...news organisations will have to get used to no longer being the ones to have the scoop on images of unexpected events as random passersby will often use their cell phone to take a picture of these events as they witness them and upload it to their weblog. But there is more to news than a picture of an event as it takes place..."

15 more minutes. I wonder what Lilly and Hisao are doing right now. Are they already waiting for us? No, it's still too soon. I hope we can quickly get out of here when this lecture is over. Being in the room with so many other people is slowly getting to me. I don't recall feeling this way when Hisao and I went to see movies, but then again we'd usually try for the smaller theaters, and we'd always go and see movies that had been out for some time so we'd know in advance the theater wouldn't be filled to the brim. It helped that it was usually dark too. And that Hisao was nearby. I wish Naomi was sitting closer.

"...it is up to the reporter to provide the big picture of events through investigative journalism. A random witness may help the world see the where and when of an event, but the public will always turn to the true journalist for answers on questions that eyewitnesses cannot answer such as why and how..."

10 more minutes. I wonder if closing my eyes will make a difference. If I can't see the crowd all around me... No, the idea that someone could be staring at me without me being aware of it is even more maddening.

"...of course, there is no need to take my word for it. If you take a look at the statistics of the last decade, you can see that they follow the trend that was just discussed."

The man in front of the microphone stops speaking and uses his remote control to show a series of slides containing graphs and numbers. He slowly and quietly runs through the slides, pausing after each one to give the information time to sink in.

7 more minutes. I hope Hisao and Lilly had a good time. Maybe they have been inspired by today and their enthusiasm will find its way back to me. I think when we get back I'll just let Naomi recount today's events for us. She's been having a good time today, aside from having to put up with my nervousness. Yes, that's a good idea. I smile a bit to myself. If Naomi, Lilly and Hisao all had a good time and are enthusiastic about today, I'll surely feel a lot better as well by the time we're back at Yamaku. I could even...

07

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by the loud noise of a cell phone piercing the silence in the hall, and I can see the speaker turning his head towards his audience. A sense of foreboding sneaks into the pit of my stomach as I realize that that sound came from somewhere awfully close and that sensation is replaced by a feeling of pure dread when it dawns on me why.

08

THAT'S MY CELL PHONE THAT'S RINGING!

My phone! I've been so focussed on keeping my anxiety under control today that I completely forgot to turn it off. I can see the speaker sweeping the rows of seats with his gaze, annoyed that someone interrupted his lecture. I hastily reach down to open my backpack, but as I do so I suddenly become aware that my neighbor is looking at me. Not merely a quick glance, but he's LOOKING STRAIGHT AT ME. My hand instinctively flies up again to cover the scarring on my face.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

I can see one of the people sitting in front of me slowly turning around, and when the full realisation of what's happening right now hits me, I feel a sudden and painfully tight sensation in my chest as if my rib cage is rapidly shrinking and squeezing my heart and lungs until they're ready to pop.

I need to turn it off. I need to turn it off right now!

I frantically reach down with my free hand to open the backpack under my seat and get my phone out, but my hand movements have suddenly become jerky and shaky from the stress and I'm struggling to even get hold of the zipper.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

One by one, more heads are starting to turn in my general direction as the ringing sound mercilessly continues.

Whoever you are, stop it! Stop it already! What did I do to you? Stop it, stop it, PLEASE!

The pain in my chest is becoming nearly unbearable, and despite my frantic breathing, it's like the oxygen in the room is slowly disappearing. I realize that people may be noticing the scar tissue on my

hand and I quickly switch hands, using my left hand to hide as much of my face as I can while desperately trying to open my backpack with my right hand.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

More and more people are starting to turn around, and I feel as if their gazes are piercing right through my hand, mercilessly taking in and appraising my damaged features.

Don't look at me please don't look at me quit looking at me STOP LOOKING AT ME!

I'm feverishly tugging at the zipper of my backpack in an attempt to get it open, but my shaking hands and the sudden stiffness in my fingers make that almost impossible. I might be able to open it if I use two hands, but I'm too frightened to move my other hand away from my scarred face. In a sudden act of despair I suddenly kick my backpack with the heel of my foot, aiming for where I believe my cell phone is located. A little voice in the back of my head, presumably the voice of my quickly dwindling rationality, asks me what the hell I'm doing to something that I usually consider valuable. It's true that I normally consider my phone, itself a present from Lilly and the attached phone strap a gift from Hisao, a valuable possession. But in the current situation that dreadful object is my worst enemy in the world. Just when I prepare for another frantic kick...

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrrii...

...the ringing suddenly stops. An almost unnatural silence follows as I realize that despite the fact that that cursed contraption is no longer ringing, I'm still at the center of attention right now. Despite the pain in my chest and my head, despite the feeling of terror that's nearly overwhelming me and despite the fact that I'm having real difficulty breathing, I sit completely still without moving a muscle, without blinking, without breathing, my hand still covering the right side of my face. I feel like a cornered rabbit being eyed by a predator who's been pursuing me and who is now considering whether I'm tasty enough to be ripped to pieces.

Continue the lecture continue the lecture please I'll never ask for anything else in my life just don't put me through this again.

I see the man holding the presentation looking down at his notes and extending his hand to the microphone and I prepare to say a silent prayer of relief, but before he can resume his lecture...

09

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

...the infernal sound resumes, destroying what little hope I had left to get out of this in one piece. The tight, squeezing sensation in my chest immediately returns, worse than before.

More and more gazes are trained upon me and hear a few soft chuckles in the distance that set the hair of my neck on end. I squeeze my eyes shut, but can't prevent tears of fear from flowing down my cheeks.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnnnnggg

Ever since that house fire permanently disfigured me, I've been uncomfortable around crowds of people. Every time I had to get near one, I expected someone to call out 'Look at her face!' and then everyone would turn towards me and gasp in horror. Hisao, Lilly and Miss Yumi always said that that was never going to happen, yet it's exactly what's happening right now and it's a million times worse than it ever was in my imagination.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg

And the most frightening part of all is that I can feel that this is going to get even worse. I can barely breathe, my heartbeat is both frantic and unsteady, and it's getting harder to think straight with every passing second. First fear about dying or passing out, followed by fear about not dying or passing out. I can feel a pressure building up from within, and the prospect of that pressure eventually getting released in one way or another in front of everyone here terrifies me more than anything else. And I know I won't be able to stop it when I reach that point.

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg

I manage to suppress a crazed giggle with supreme effort. My mind is growing increasingly irrational and the sense of panic has driven it to a point where I feel that it's about ready to snap. I don't know what's going to happen, but *something* will happen if this keeps up. Maybe I'll faint and everyone here will gather around me to take a close look at me. Or maybe I'll go crazy and start screaming or laughing like a lunatic. Or maybe it'll be something even worse. That thought makes me even more frightened than I already am.

I have to get out of here I have to get out of here now.

I can faintly sense someone walking down the aisle and approaching me from behind. They've spotted me. Someone's getting closer, and he'll point me out to the rest and it'll all be over for me.

Stay away from me don't look at me get away from me!

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg

The footsteps are getting even closer.

I have to get out of here I have to get out of here!

I struggle to regain control of my body and maintain what little grip on my sanity I still have.

I have to get out of here I have to get out of here!

Rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg - rrriinngggggg rrrriinnngggg

LET ME OUT OF HERE!

Chapter 43 (Lilly)

01

"Hmmm. No response this time either."

"Perhaps she is taking a restroom break right now."

"Perhaps. But since it's nearly four o' clock already, I'd be surprised if they're not already at our meeting point. The building they went to was rather close to the entrance if I recall correctly."

"Maybe we should head back to the entrance ourselves after all."

"It would be rude to show up late without letting the others know."

I absentmindedly pick my phone back up and dial Hisao's number this time. Maybe I'll have more luck with him.

"..."

"Hey Lilly."

"Hisao, good to hear from you. How was your day?"

"Tiring, but very interesting. They gave some pretty interesting workshops over here. I've just left the faculty building, so if I keep a steady pace I can be at our meeting spot in ten minutes. I hope you can forgive the slight tardiness."

"Ah... About that; the last lecture at the English faculty took longer than expected and we landed in the middle of rush hour here. I suggested to Father to take a little break in the building's cafeteria. Today was a rather busy day."

"Is your father alright?"

He's not exactly in peak condition yet, and he seemed a bit tired earlier, which is why I offered to take a break here rather than immediately take the rather long walk back to the entrance. I'd like him to save his strength. Of course, I can't tell Hisao that or Father will overhear and might feel that I'm being a busybody.

"Yes, he's fine. Hisao, would it be a problem for you to come over to the English faculty building and join us here?"

"Well, it's probably not that much further from here than the entrance, so I don't mind."

I smile.

"Much obliged. Father and I will be sure to treat you for your trouble."

"Okay, I'll be there in about ten minutes."

I hang up and turn to Father.

"Hisao will be here shortly."

"We'll still need to get in touch with Miss Ikezawa and Miss Inoue."

"Hmmm... Maybe I should wait a bit. It's strange that Hanako has her cell phone turned on and yet isn't responding to my calls."

"But we cannot simply keep them waiting at the front gate. It will still take them some time to get here. I assume you do not have Miss Inoue's number?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Hanako got to know her through the newspaper club. I've never really interacted with her much."

"Despite the fact that she's friends with Miss Ikezawa and she seems to admire your mother?"

I nod while absentmindedly dialing Hanako's number once more.

"I don't have the passion for writing and journalism that the three of them seem to share, or I'd probably have befriended her as well. It's not that I dislike her. She seems to be a kind-hearted person who's always cheerful and in high spirits, and Hanako seems to enjoy hanging out with her. It's just that I already have plenty of friends at school and one can only maintain so many friendships at the same time."

I smile as I hear the sound of Hanako's phone being picked up...

"Hanako?"

02

"Where the HELL ARE YOU?"

...only to nearly drop my phone in surprise as an angry voice on the other end of the line snarls at me.

"H-Hanako?"

"It's not Hanako, it's me."

It's Naomi. But what's gotten into her?

"Ah... What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm at the entrance and you guys aren't. So again... Where... ARE... you?"

What's going on? Why is Naomi answering Hanako's phone? And what is she so angry about?

"W-We're at the English faculty's cafeteria. I wanted to ask if you'd be willing to come over here and let us treat you to something to eat."

I hear what sounds like a desperate sigh on the other end.

"You called... just... for... that?"

"Y-Yes... What's going on?"

"Stay put. I'm on my way over to where you are."

"Why are you answering Hanako's phone? Where is she?"

"No idea."

An ominous feeling worms its way into the pit of my stomach at Naomi's words.

"No idea? What happened? Did you lose sight of her?"

"Something like that. Stay where you are. I'm on my way."

"We could head towards the entrance ourselves and meet up half-way."

"Not needed. You've already done enough for one day."

What's that supposed to mean?

"Naomi... Naomi?"

No more response. She must have hung up the phone. What happened? Naomi's tone was really hostile... venomous even. I can make neither heads nor tails of it.

"Is something wrong? You look very upset."

"I just called Hanako's number, yet Naomi was the one who picked up the phone. She said she has lost sight of Hanako and is heading this way. She sounded really... angry about something. I don't really understand what's going on."

"Hmmm... If Miss Ikezawa has gone missing yet she has left her phone with Miss Inoue, finding her here will be quite difficult."

I don't even want to think about that right now. I hope Hisao and Naomi are here soon.

"Hmmm... I think I see Mister Nakai near the entrance over there. Perhaps you should get up for a second, Lilly. You are almost certain to draw his attention that way."

"How are we supposed to tell Hisao that his girlfriend has gone missing?"

"Until we know the details, it may be best not to mention the matter at all. Undue worrying will only cause stress."

"Ah..."

I'm not sure if I'm completely comfortable with that, but since I don't really know what's going on either, all we'd be doing until Naomi gets here would be throwing speculations back and forth.

"Hey Lilly. Hello sir."

"Hello Hisao."

"Good afternoon, Mister Nakai. Have you had a good time today?"

"Yeah, it was pretty interesting. They had a whole group of first-years who had a wide range of basic scientific experiments going that you could take part in like building a primitive electromagnet or creating different colors of fire. It's kind of a cheap way to reel people in, but it's pretty effective nevertheless. I've built up a pretty impressive list of experiments that are easy to do at the science club. It might help the guys attract more new members at the start of the next school year."

"It sounds like you had fun."

Hisao pauses.

"No nerd-related comeback this time?"

I smile awkwardly. Hanako and I often joke about how Hisao has gotten slightly nerdier since he founded the science club, and what he just said was indeed practically begging for a playful little jab, but after the talk I just had with Naomi I'm not in a teasing mood anymore.

"Maybe some other time."

"You didn't have fun today?"

"I did."

"One of the things Lilly and I attended today was a student panel reciting various excerpts from English poetry and literature. I believe the students participating were first-years as well. Perhaps the two of you will be in their place next year."

"I think I'd like that..."

I notice Hisao's voice trailing off as he finishes his sentence.

"Hisao, is something the matter?"

"I thought I just saw Naomi among those people near the entrance. Her hair's pretty easy to spot."

I guess this is it.

"Yeah, it's her alright. She looks pretty winded. Did she run all the way over here? Hey, where's Hanako?"

I hear someone running up to us followed by the sound of heavy breathing.

"Naomi, what on earth is going on? Where's Hanako?"

"Don't tell me you two got separated."

"I...that's..."

"Damnit, you know she doesn't handle crowded places well."

Hisao sounds agitated. He's probably as worried as I am right now. Naomi lets out a joyless laugh in response while trying to catch her breath.

"H-Hahaha... R-Really? You... learn s-something... new every day."

"What on earth is that supposed to mean? What happened?"

"Hmmm, you had better get seated and take a few moments to catch your breath, Miss Inoue. Then you can tell us what has happened."

I hear Naomi sit down next to me, and we anxiously wait until her ragged breathing slows down. She finally lets out a loud sigh as she puts something on the table that's probably a backpack.

"If you guys have any suggestions on how to find her, I'm all ears, because I'm fresh out of ideas."

"Miss Inoue, it would probably be better to start at the beginning. You and Miss Ikezawa lost sight of one another. Yet you are carrying her backpack. You did not just get separated in the middle of a crowd, did you?"

"...no."

Another silence.

"She... uh... We were still attending a lecture when her phone went off. She... probably forgot to turn it off. She kept it in her backpack, so she couldn't immediately take it out and turn it off either..."

Oh no! I didn't even think of the possibility of Hanako not having her phone turned off or Hanako's and Naomi's program taking longer than mine. How could I have been so stupid? I hear Hisao let out a pained groan.

"Are you saying that she became the center of attention, panicked and then ran off?"

"Something like that. I... uh... didn't even know it was her phone at first. Nobody's ever called her in my presence before, so I didn't know what her ringtone sounded like. When that second phone call came and I realized it was probably Hanako whose phone was ringing, I tried to make my way over to her, but she got up and ran away just before I got to her."

"Make your way over to her? Was that classroom so crowded you had to push your way past several people just to get to her?"

For a moment Naomi doesn't answer. When she finally speaks, her voice is little more than a whisper.

"It... wasn't a classroom. It... it was a lecture hall. And most seats were occupied too. Like... perhaps... around 150 people. Maybe 200. And... *sigh* I bet a lot of those were looking in Hanako's direction by the time she finally lost it."

200 PEOPLE? It feels like my blood suddenly freezes in my veins, and for a few seconds my reaction is to deny it in my mind. Surely she's exaggerating. This couldn't have happened. Because if it's true... If it's really true then... then I...

...then I did something truly unforgivable to my best friend.

"Shit."

But the sound of Hisao softly cursing under his breath hammers home the point that this is all too real. The thought of Hanako's terrified expression in the middle of a crowd that's becoming more and more aware of her presence with every passing second is enough to make my blood curdle, and for a moment I feel like I'm going to pass out.

"Oh my God..."

For several long seconds nobody knows what to say. Then Hisao speaks up with a baffled tone in his voice.

"You and Hanako attend a lecture in a large and crowded HALL, and you thought it was a good idea to take a seat... I don't know how far... AWAY FROM HER? What on earth were you thinking?"

"Hey, don't give me that! I thought I'd give her a seat near the edge of the room, and there weren't too many of those left! Besides, it wasn't me who called her... TWICE!"

"THAT'S NOT FAIR! I DIDN'T KNOW YOUR PROGRAM ENDED LATER! IF YOU KNEW THIS IN ADVANCE THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU LET US KNOW BEFOREHAND?"

"WE WOULD HAVE MADE IT TO THE ORIGINAL MEETING POINT IN TIME IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THIS SUDDEN CHANGE OF PLANS OF YOURS! WHAT THE HELL WAS UP WITH THAT ANYWAY? WAS IT REALLY TOO MUCH TO WALK FOR A FEW MORE MINUTES?"

"I WAS JUST TRYING TO...!"

"Lillian! Inoue! Nakai!"

We all fall silent as the stern and authoritative tone in Father's voice cuts our argument short.

"We are all worried here, but pointing fingers and making a public spectacle will *not* help us find Ikezawa. And people are looking at us right now."

"Sorry Father."

"Sorry..."

"Yeah, sorry."

I realize with some embarrassment that we've just been hysterically shouting at each other. People around here must have wondered what's going on.

"Let us first return to the entrance. It was our original meeting point. If she is, by any chance, searching for us at the moment then that place is where she will be looking for us."

I personally doubt that Hanako is currently actively looking for us, but Father does have a point. Sitting around here won't do much good.

"Okay then."

We get up and head out, going for the quickest pace I can manage. I find it a bit hard to keep up and hold tight to Father's arm, praying I won't end up bumping into people. Apparently though, we're still not going fast enough for everyone as Naomi speaks up after merely a few minutes.

"Say, would you guys mind if I went on ahead?"

Father lets out a soft 'hmmm'.

"Miss Inoue, do you remember where I parked the car this morning?"

"Uh, yeah. I think so."

"When you get to the entrance and Miss Ikezawa is not there, please stop by the car and look for her there as well. We should rule out as many possible locations as we can. We will keep Miss Ikezawa's phone here with us. If you find her, please call us on that number and let us know. If you cannot find her in the parking lot either, please return to the gate, and wait for us there."

"Sure. See you guys soon."

I can hear Naomi's footsteps accelerating and then moving away from us at a rapid pace. Hisao sighs.

"I'd be surprised if she's at the gate or in the parking lot. Those areas are probably the most crowded places at the moment. If anything, she'll avoid them."

"As her boyfriend it is probably fair to assume that you know Miss Ikezawa better than anyone else. Perhaps there are some insights into her way of thinking in a situation such as this that you can share with us. They may prove useful."

"If what happened is anywhere near as bad as Naomi said it was, I doubt she's thinking at all. At least not rationally."

"Certainly she does not act in a completely unpredictable manner whenever she feels seriously distressed?"

"There was a time in class where she just completely froze up. In other cases where she got distressed, she'd usually run off."

"And where would she run off to?"

"Preferably her own bedroom because she can lock the door. Otherwise, the room where we usually have lunch or her favorite corner in the library would probably be where she'd go."

"In other words, places with a sense of familiarity that are devoid of other people?"

"Yeah, although the familiarity-part probably doesn't apply here."

"That leaves us with places where she does not expect other people to find her."

"On an unfamiliar campus this big, that could be anywhere..."

"What about restrooms? They would be suitable for hiding."

"She doesn't really have the habit of hiding in stalls when she's distressed. Maybe because she's afraid of imposing on others by occupying a stall that others could be using. Or maybe she's afraid of being teased as 'Hanako the toilet girl'."

"Like the bathroom-haunting ghost of the same name from the urban legend?"

"Yeah... Though maybe the restrooms are worth checking anyway just to be sure. Just to rule them out."

"It would be improper for either of us to do that checking, so Miss Inoue and Lilly will have to take that upon themselves."

I nod.

"We will if it comes to that."

"It might. We are nearing the gate, and Miss Inoue is waiting for us over there. Miss Ikezawa is nowhere to be seen."

So we'll be searching the campus for Hanako after all. God, I hope she's alright.

As we finally reach the campus' entrance gate, Hisao steps forward.

"No sign of her in the parking lot?"

I hear Naomi letting out a depressed sigh.

"No. Haven't seen her near here either. So... Now what? Search every square meter of the entire campus with just the four of us?"

"I would like to suggest a more refined approach. Can I ask you a question, Miss Inoue?"

"Uhuh?"

"Did you chase after Miss Ikezawa immediately after she fled from the lecture hall? Did you see in which direction she ran off to?"

"Sorry. She left all her things at her seat when she bolted from the room, and it took me precious seconds to gather them. Didn't want to leave them in that hall. When I made it out of there, she was already gone."

"I would like you and Lilly to check all restrooms at the journalism faculty. If she is still in the building, it is likely she will be hiding in one of them. If you find her, please notify us at once and do whatever you can to put her at ease. If you cannot find her in the faculty building, please return to the gate and wait there."

"Well... Okay."

"Mister Nakai, you would not happen to have a photo of Miss Ikezawa in your wallet, would you?"

"I do, but... We're not going to walk around showing random people her picture, are we? Hanako would hate that. She's extremely sensitive about her appearance."

"Not random people. A campus this large usually has some security staff on duty, especially during an event such as this one. We will ask at the journalism faculty where their office is located and ask them to assist us in a search of the campus. Maybe a description of her will suffice, and they will not even ask us for a photo."

"Asking security guards to go and look for her...?"

Hisao doesn't sound completely convinced yet.

"Yes. They know this place much better than we do and can conduct a search with a much greater degree of efficiency."

"If a stranger approaches her, she'll certainly just run off again. And then what?"

"Then we will ask them to keep their distance and merely notify us of her location without approaching her."

Naomi grumbles softly.

"This is kinda starting to sound like a manhunt."

"We have less than two hours before it will be completely dark outside. I believe it is important that we find her quickly."

I give a determined nod.

"I agree with Father. If this helps us find Hanako before it gets dark, we should consider it."

"So... Will the two of us be heading to wherever the security staff is located?"

"Yes. If Miss Ikezawa is found and still in a state of distress, you will probably be the person most suitable to calm her down."

"I just hope they'll take us seriously when I tell them we need help in finding a lost 18-year old girl."

"I will be happy to take the task of explaining the situation off your hands. I assure you they will not turn us down. Shall we go?"

"...Alright."

"I just checked, and it looks like one stall's occupied."

I nod and gently grab Naomi's sleeve so she can lead me into the restroom. This'll be the third restroom on the ground floor we'll be searching. We enter, and Naomi carefully positions me near the door of the locked stall. I manage to concentrate enough to pick up the faint sound of breathing on the other side of the door. I take a deep breath and softly call out Hanako's name.

"Hanako... Are you there?"

No reply.

"Hanako?"

I listen closely once again, but I fail to notice any changes in the breathing on the other side of the door. If Hanako had been here, I'm pretty sure I would have picked up a gasp or an acceleration in the breathing pattern. Sensing that Naomi's eyeing me, I shake my head and extend my hand. I feel how she puts my hand on her arm, and we slowly walk back out.

"Nothing huh?"

"If it had been her, I'm sure I would have picked up a reaction of some sort."

"There's one more restroom on this level. I'm not sure..."

Triiiiiiiiiinggggg

"Whoa!"

Naomi gives a cry of surprise and I can feel her flinch as my cell phone suddenly springs to life. I hurriedly take it out of my backpack. I hear Naomi grumble softly.

"I think I've heard enough cell phones for one day."

"G-Good afternoon. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Lilly."

"Yes, Father?"

"We have found a few people who are willing to help us look. I assume you have not run into Miss Ikezawa yet?"

"That's a relief. We haven't found any sign of her at the faculty."

"If I were Miss Ikezawa, I would try to get out of the building if there were no obvious safe places in the direct vicinity. It is unlikely for her to have tried and hide on one of the higher floors."

That's probably what Naomi was about to say too.

"I think so too. She'd try to make it outside, but the entrance gate might have been too crowded for her to approach."

"Could you put Miss Inoue on the phone for just a second?"

"Of course."

I hand my phone over to Naomi and lean in close so I can still hear Father's voice.

"Yes?"

"Miss Inoue, our search will have the journalism faculty as its starting point and spread out from there. Did you and Miss Ikezawa head straight from the gate to the faculty building this morning or did you go anywhere else?"

"No. We figured we'd have time to explore the campus for a bit afterwards. We didn't want to be late."

"How about during lunch? The cafeteria at the English faculty was rather crowded, and perhaps the same was true here. Did you and Miss Ikezawa..."

"THE SPORTS FIELD!"

My ears ring as Naomi unexpectedly shouts into my phone.

"Hanako wanted to avoid the crowds at the cafeteria, so we went out and had lunch in quiet spot near the running track some distance away from the faculty building! We ate at a bench in sight of the bleachers!"

"Good call, Miss Inoue. Are there any other places outside of the faculty that you have visited today?"

"No, but I have a hunch that she is where we had our lunch break. Maybe we should go over there too."

"The security staff will likely be there before you, so it is probably better for the two of you to finish your search in your current location and then head back to the gate as we agreed."

"...okay then."

"Good. We will hopefully see you soon."

I hear a short beep as Father hangs up the phone. Naomi puts the phone back into my hand.

"I've been an idiot for not thinking of that place sooner. Let's hope she's there. She *has* to be there."

"I hope so too."

"Wanna go back to the gate?"

"Let's check out the remaining restroom and then go back."

"Right."

03

Our search of the journalism faculty having returned no results, Naomi and I return to the gate and sit down on one of the benches. The walking across the campus has left me tired, but my mind feels even more exhausted than my body. The temperature today wasn't that bad for a day in November, but now that the afternoon is coming to an end it's rapidly getting colder, and I shiver despite my fairly thick coat.

"It's getting kinda chilly, isn't it?"

I nod at Naomi but don't reply.

"I really hope she's at the sports field. The sun is already starting to set..."

What if she isn't there? What if we can't find her, and it gets dark? Is she going to seek shelter eventually? What if she stays out here all night and gets hypothermia? What if... No, don't think like this. Don't even start thinking like this. She'll be fine. Please let her be fine.

"Erm..."

I sigh and rub my temples. This wasn't so bad while we were busy walking around the faculty building, but now that we're just sitting and waiting, I have nothing to do except be worried sick about Hanako.

"Hey, you alright?"

"I'm okay."

"I... uh... just wanted to say... uh..."

I hear her shuffle on the bench a bit.

"Sorry about shouting before. You were right. I wasn't being fair. I was taking my stress out on you. We could have phoned you during lunch break that our program ended at four. We just didn't think of it. We thought we'd be able to make it in time."

I never really held Naomi's angry outburst against her. She's probably as worried about Hanako as I am. Still, I appreciate her gesture.

"No, you were right to be angry. I... really did... mess up. I... put Hanako through something horrible and I... I'll take full responsibility for that."

"I messed up too. I should have tried staying closer to her. I should have reacted sooner when that phone started ringing. Hanako never even really wanted to attend that last lecture to begin with. She simply did it to accommodate me, I think. I should have done as she said and skipped the damn thing. I should have taken the hint when we entered that hall, and I saw that look on her face instead of listening to a reassurance that wasn't even remotely convincing. And I couldn't even follow her quickly enough to find out where the hell she went. Urg... And I could hear some assholes softly laughing at the whole thing. If I had known running after Hanako was useless, I would have stayed and given them a few pokes with my injection pen. I have a really funny anticonvulsant in there. Give 'em something to laugh about."

"I occasionally laugh when I'm nervous or uncomfortable. Perhaps the same was true for them."

"Whatever. The gist of it is that I screwed up just as badly, if not more. Hanako's probably sorry she asked me to come along."

That's news to me. I was under the assumption that Hanako simply spoke to Naomi about today during their outing last Friday and that Naomi invited herself along.

"She asked you to come along?"

"Yeah, I don't think I would have attended today's events otherwise. I don't like travelling on my own. I guess... she was hoping things would be less stressful for her with someone else around. So much for that assumption."

"I... am still happy you came along. I didn't want to offend Hanako by worrying about her. She has made some truly remarkable progress over the last few months, after all. But still, someone else coming along so she wouldn't attend today's events all on her own was a relief, and I think Hanako really appreciated it."

"I guess so... At least before I screwed up."

"I don't think you did anything wrong by wanting to attend the full program. That's what we came here for after all."

"Yeah... So erm... No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings."

At least on my part. I'm not sure how Hanako will look back on this. Will she resent us for the part we played in this? No, that's very unlikely. But...

"You know, ever since I met your really awesome mom, I've been wondering what kind of person she'd be married to. When I met your dad this morning, I was... I dunno... Maybe a little underwhelmed. I expected him to be more like her. But seeing how quickly he jumped in to get this mess under control, maybe there's more to him than meets the eye."

Despite the current situation, I manage to let out a proud little smile. I too have been relieved and pleasantly surprised by Father helping us out like this. He's been struggling, emotionally more than physically, ever since he lost his status as CEO and position as head of the Satou clan. Even though he's still officially a board member, Akira mentioned to me that in practice that didn't really mean much since the other three members were many years his senior, and because of that, each of them had much more clout than he did.

He *is* happy to be back in his homeland, but at the same time Mother says that he feels being watched whenever he goes outside for a walk during the weekdays, and as a result he spends most of his time indoors, sleeping in bed or reading in his study. Whenever he goes outside, he drives his car to a part of town where people don't know him and takes a walk there or visits a library. Mother assured him that she didn't think less of him now, and neither did she care what others might think of him. But I'm not sure if her reassurance has made a large difference. Ironically enough, today was supposed to be an inspirational event for him as well. This day may actually have been a success for him from that point of view.

"I'm certainly glad that he's here right now and that it's not just the three of us."

"Heh, speak of the devil... I think I see him coming back. At least I think it's him."

"What about Hisao? And Hanako?"

"No, it's just him. I hope he hasn't lost sight of Nakai."

"No, I don't think that's what happened."

I'm pretty sure he would have called me if they got separated for some reason.

"Gee, he looks a little winded. I guess we'd better give him some room to take a load off."

We both move to the outside of the bench a bit so Father will have room to sit down in between us.

"Lilly... Miss Inoue."

"Father, are you alright?"

"Quite well, thank you."

I notice that his breathing is slightly quicker and more uneven than usual, but probably not to a degree that justifies worrying about him.

"Father... Hanako, did you...?"

"We have managed to... locate Miss Ikezawa."

I breathe a sigh of relief and hear Naomi do the same.

"Thank God."

"Was she there? Where I said she'd be?"

"Yes and no. She was not at the bench you mentioned to us, but they did an extensive search of that particular area and found her hiding behind the small building near the bleachers that houses the distribution substation powering the floodlights. Mister Nakai is currently keeping her company."

"So... Now what?"

"Now we wait until she is ready to leave. We may have to wait until it is dark, and there are no more people walking around the campus."

"Okay..."

"You can wait in the car if you like, Lilly. There is a bit of a chilly wind blowing here."

"I don't mind waiting here."

"Are you not cold?"

"..."

It is chilly out here, but I'm not going to take shelter in the car as long as Hanako is still out there in the cold.

Father lets out an exasperated sigh at my lack of reaction.

"Perhaps the two of you are willing to do me a favor?"

"A favor?"

"The original plan was to stop by a restaurant somewhere on our way back and treat the four of you to dinner. With things as they currently are, I believe it to be best if we head straight back to Yamaku when Miss Ikezawa returns."

"I believe so too."

"Good. Since it might be rather late before we are back, it would be a good idea to purchase some food in one of the cafeterias here to eat during the trip back. It does not have to be a 4-star meal, but it should get us back to Yamaku without going hungry."

I turn to Naomi.

"Would you please come along and get some food with me?"

"Sure."

"Hold out your hand, please."

I do so and feel several banknotes being pressed into my hand.

"Please be sure to buy something that can be eaten on the road with a minimum of fuss and preferably something that does not need to be warm to taste good."

"Of course, Father."

"You think we have enough riceballs?"

"Yes. Between them and the sandwiches we should be well stocked for the trip back to Yamaku."

Fortunately for us, the cafeteria in the nearest faculty building was still open so Naomi and I took the opportunity to buy a bag full of snacks. Now we're simply hanging around near the building's entrance. Father said that he'd call me if he received word from Hisao that he and Hanako are on their way, so there's little for us to do right now. I wish there were other ways to keep busy right now, because I could really, really use the distraction, but I just know I won't be able to put my mind to studying right now, so there's no point in taking out one of my study books.

"Hey Lilly... I mean, Satou?"

"Lilly is fine."

"Ah... Can I ask you something?"

I turn towards Naomi who's sitting next to me. She's been unusually quiet over the last ten minutes or so.

"What would you like to know?"

"If you had been in my place... What would you have done?"

"I don't understand."

"Imagine you'd ask any of my classmates what would be most likely to end in disaster: sending me into a nightclub full of strobe lights or sending Hanako into a lecture hall full of people. Everybody would agree on the latter without question. I mean... She used to break down and run out when one or two people were eyeing her for too long in class. I kinda feel like I really should have known better."

"I don't think you necessarily did anything wrong."

"You don't think I necessarily did anything wrong?"

"Hanako may have been reluctant to follow you into that hall, but she still did so of her own free will. Maybe you overestimated her this time. But it's probably still better than if you had done the opposite."

Hanako often worries that others look down on her, and being overprotective of her merely confirms her anxieties about that."

I found that out the hard way myself. From the way Naomi seems to interact with Hanako, she doesn't run much risk of Hanako jumping to those particular conclusions about her.

"I never really thought about that much..."

"I think your friendship has helped Hanako grow a lot over the last four months. I never imagined she'd do things like join a club, hold writing sessions in her room with others, interview teachers or go out with clubmates. You're probably the first friend she's had who challenges her like that."

"Heh, says the person who convinced Hanako to accompany her to the other side of the world?"

"Aside from that I think my friendship mostly consisted of offering her comfort and company."

"She didn't really have any of that at the time you two met, so I think those are still really important to her. I think she was more willing to move beyond her comfort zone later on exactly because she knew she'd always have you to fall back on."

"...maybe."

"I've always wondered a little bit why they didn't put Hanako in your class to begin with. The two of you might have met sooner, and maybe she'd have made some more friends sooner too."

"If the school had done that it might have backfired. Hanako might have interpreted it as a sign that they wanted to spare the rest of the student body the sight of her scars. Besides, not all of the students in my class are completely blind and even those who completely lack eyesight know what most of their classmates look like. Hanako's scars wouldn't have remained hidden for very long."

"Oh... Okay."

"I also think that the school believed it to be best for her self esteem if she made some friends in class who could see her scars and still wanted to spend time with her. People who were willing to give her a chance to make a new start."

I hear Naomi snorting softly.

"You sure make it sound easy. Do you really think people didn't try?"

"I didn't mean to imply that."

"Because people tried. A lot of people tried. I tried. Natsume tried. Hakamichi and Mikado tried. Even Kawana, Suzuki and Kapur tried. It just didn't work."

I've never had that much contact with the students of Shizune's class, so some of the names Naomi brings up barely ring a bell. I don't really know much about Hanako's time in class before the two of us met. By the time I befriended Hanako, my relationship with Shizune was already turning sour so I couldn't ask her. I wonder about Naomi's perspective on all of this.

"How did the class see Hanako?"

"Most of us got to know the rest through the introduction activities the first week, but Hanako skipped all of those. When she first appeared in class, people were curious about her. But when we approached her, she just panicked, ran off and didn't return for the rest of the day. We never really learned much about her, but some things started falling into place eventually."

"Falling into place?"

"She had this habit of arriving late or leaving early. Sometimes even skipping class altogether or randomly walking out. The teachers ignored it every single time. Hakamichi asked about it once and was told that every student has special needs. So we figured that there was some kind of arrangement with the school in place, meaning that the real reason she was attending here probably had more to do with her behavior than with her scars needing constant medical attention. Eventually words like 'trauma case' started being dropped."

Trauma case. I cringe visibly at the harsh ring of that description of Hanako.

"Hanako's had a very difficult life prior to her arrival at Yamaku."

"Yeah, that was kind of obvious from the start. There are many people in school who can attest that being maimed in an accident can really do a number on you. And I know all too well that others aren't always accommodating or even understanding of your circumstances. Heck, there were several people at my middle school who thought I was a freak. So most people in class tried not to hold her behavior against her. But... other than not rocking the boat there wasn't really much else we could do."

"Not rocking the boat?"

"If you tried holding an actual conversation with her, she'd often clam up or sometimes even run off. So best thing to do was only have some limited interaction with her if absolutely necessary and otherwise pretend she wasn't there. I really didn't like it either, but as long as people didn't interact with her she at least came to class on a regular basis. Nobody wanted to be responsible for her getting low grades. I mean, you could tell she had enough problems as things were."

"How depressing..."

"I don't think people cared that much about what she looked like. We're all in the same boat after all. Heck, in my opinion she's easier on the eyes than many of the boys attending our school. And if you spend some time really interacting with her, you kind of stop paying attention to the burns. But she wasn't exactly generous with the opportunities for interaction, even after she met and befriended you."

I suppose my friendship didn't really do much to take away Hanako's conviction that people saw her as inferior because of her scars. I wonder if perhaps I should have done more to encourage Hanako to have contact with others as well.

"Everybody has their own pace."

This causes Naomi to chuckle briefly.

"It sure is an uneven pace though. For over two years she's like a ghost who's present but doesn't interact with the rest in any way. Then some random new guy transfers in and BOOM... Everything changes. Heh, not that I'm complaining. I got a new friend out of it after all."

"You two are certainly an interesting combination."

"I hear that all the time, but we actually work together very well. I'm good at talking, and she's good at listening. That's actually often a pretty good combination. At the writing club I'm usually the one to throw the ideas around, and she usually writes them down, develops them and fills in the blanks. We recently followed your mom's advice and did a joint interview with one of the teachers for that club column with me asking the questions and keeping the teacher talking and Hanako observing and taking notes. As long as the attention isn't squarely focussed on her, she's really good at that. She has a knack for reading between the lines and filling in the blanks."

That is certainly true, although the same tendency can be a double-edged sword as it has caused Hanako to jump to the wrong conclusions about people in the past due to her low self esteem coloring her vision.

"It's good to hear that the two of you work together so well. She seems to enjoy spending time with you, so I assume that there's a personal click as well."

"In a way. She's still not exactly open with me, and when we interact, it's mostly me talking and her listening. We usually keep to the safe subjects like the clubs, and I like to share new gossip with her since she's not very likely to repeat it to other people. Jun and I are still trying to convince her that being in a relationship doesn't mean she can't participate in our discussions about boys. Still, I'm happy we finally got to know each other a bit. I've been noticing things about her since she joined our club. Like her approaching Mutou and doing an interview so her boyfriend's club can get some new members. Or taking your mom to our club to give a motivational speech. Or letting me sleep in her room whenever I have an episode. Or her and Jun keeping me company the day after while I'm bedridden. The girl obviously has a big heart underneath that shy exterior of hers, and it's only fair I make an effort to be a friend to her because I honestly believe she deserves more of them."

Despite the gravity of the current situation, Naomi's words make me smile.

"I couldn't agree more on that."

A silence. Seems like we're running out of things to say. Maybe we should return to the campus entrance. Father must be wondering what's taking us so long.

"Shall we go back to the gate? I don't want Father to get worried."

"Fine with me. It's already getting pretty dark, so hopefully we won't have to wait too long for Hanako to make her way back to us."

We get up and walk back to where we left Father with me once again holding onto Naomi's sleeve for navigation. Just when we get close to where I think the bench where we were sitting before is located, Naomi suddenly stops.

"Is something wrong? Is Father still sitting there?"

"He's standing at the entrance gate, and he's beckoning us. I wonder if he's heard something already."

We quickly make our way over to where Father is waiting for us.

"Lilly. Miss Inoue. Well timed. I was about to drop the two of you a call."

"Father. Have you heard from Hisao already?"

"I have. He and Miss Ikezawa are on their way over here. I am heading for the car in order to park it as close to the entrance as I can. I believe it to be best if the two of you join me."

"We will."

I feel a sense of relief as we follow Father to the car. With luck, Hanako and Hisao will soon be with us. I'm not sure what I could possibly say to Hanako to properly apologize to her. It's probably best to first find out how she feels before I start trying to make this up to her.

"Father... Did Hisao say how Hanako is doing?"

"I am afraid he did not. Let us worry about that later."

We get into the car, and Father drives it up to the entrance gate. I get the impression that the parking lot is almost completely empty already, for Father is able to return us to the school gate while barely having to make any turns. A few minutes of silence later, I hear Naomi let out a soft cry.

"There they are. Over there. In the distance."

"Yes, they have finally made it here."

"Can you see how Hanako is doing?"

04

No immediate reply. But then I hear a barely audible 'geez...' from Naomi that makes my heart immediately skip a beat.

"Naomi? What's wrong? What do you see?"

"Erm..."

Naomi starts mumbling something but is then interrupted by a short cough coming from my left.

"Inoue, could you please assist Mister Nakai?"

"Uh... Sure."

I hear the car door opening, and I'm gripped by a sudden sense of frustration as I realize I'm being left out. What was it that Naomi was about to say? Does Father really think he's doing me a favor this way?

"Hey... Are you okay, Hanako? You're not... hurting, are you? That looks..."

"..."

But my irritation quickly vanishes as I hear the worried tone in Naomi's voice.

"Naomi, could you take my backpack from me?"

"Y-Yeah sure."

I hear shuffling on the rear seats and eventually I hear the car door slam shut. As it does, seat belts start clicking shut and Father starts the engine.

"Now that we are all here, it is time to return to Yamaku."

"Hey, the two of us just did a little shopping, and we got stuff to eat on our way back. Hope you guys don't mind sandwiches and riceballs."

"That sounds good. I'm kinda hungry. Wanna have one as well, Hanako?"

"..."

When Naomi first spotted Hanako and Hisao, I was relieved. But that relief is quickly starting to turn into concern as Hanako barely seems to be responding to us. As Father steers the car off the parking lot, I gather all my courage, turn around and whisper to my best friend.

"Hanako?"

There is no response.

The food at the Shanghai was good as usual, but the atmosphere has been gloomy. We went here to get a quick meal after dropping Hanako off at the dorm, and now I can hear Hisao and Naomi getting up.

"Mister Satou, thank you for the meal. I hope you don't mind if I leave already."

"I think I'm going too. Thanks for everything. And say hello to your wife for me."

"Are you sure you do not want me to drive you back to school? It is still quite the walk uphill from here."

"That's okay. We walk that road all the time during the week and usually with shopping bags to boot. Besides, some fresh night air will probably feel good right now. You and Lilly surely like to have a little bit of time for yourself too."

"In that case I wish the two of you a safe return and a good night."

I turn my head towards Hisao and do my best to give him my most reassuring smile.

"Try not to worry too much about Hanako, okay? I'm sure she'll be fine once she has recovered a bit."

A short pause.

"...The same goes for you Lilly."

"I will try to keep that in mind."

Hisao and Naomi say their goodbyes, and I hear them leave the room. After the sound of their footsteps has faded away, Father softly clears his throat.

"Perhaps some fresh air will do us good as well. Unless you are still hungry."

I softly nod my head. Father walks up to the counter, pays our bill and we walk out.

"I am afraid that I am not very familiar with this town."

"I know of a place that's probably nice and quiet right now. It's not very far from here."

"Lead the way then."

"Here it is. It sounds quiet enough right now, and I think this area of the park smells nice."

I sit down on the nearby park bench and hear Father taking a seat next to me.

"The odor is a bit hard for me to judge, but I can attest that it is quiet around here. There is not another person in sight. It is a nice place, although I would probably be able to appreciate the area more during the daytime."

"This is a bit of a special place. This is the place where... H-Hanako and Hisao... c-confessed to one another."

05

My voice starts breaking as Hanako's name leaves my lips. I thought I'd be relieved when Hisao and Hanako made it back to us. I was hoping Hanako'd be okay after Hisao calmed her down. But when Hanako finally returned, it became obvious almost immediately that she was far from okay. She must have been hungry as well, but despite several offers she hasn't taken a single bite. Nor has she spoken a single word during the whole journey back. Only when we arrived back at Yamaku and she was about to enter her room, she turned to us and said four barely audible words.

("I will be fine.")

Nobody believed it.

The atmosphere at the Shanghai was quite heavy because of it with even Naomi barely saying anything. And throughout it all, I've been struggling to maintain a reassuring and composed smile in front of the others. Eventually, my jaw started hurting, and my head started pounding, so I was relieved to finally get out of there. And now, with nobody but Father nearby, I hold my head in my hands and let my shoulders slump, trying to keep my tears in check.

"What have I done?"

"You have merely made a small mistake with large consequences, just like the others."

"The others?"

"Miss Inoue made the mistake of having Miss Ikezawa accompany her to that lecture and not staying close to her. Miss Ikezawa herself made the mistake of not turning off her phone, and you made the mistake of phoning her without considering the possibility of them still attending a session. If any of you three had acted differently, what happened today would not have happened."

"Even so..."

"Try not to take all responsibility for today on your own shoulders. Put some of it on mine if you like."

"Yours?"

"You seemed rather insistent on taking a break at the English faculty this afternoon rather than heading straight back to the campus entrance. You did not appear to be very tired yourself, so I am curious for whose benefit that was."

"I was..."

I start to speak, but then think better of it. I don't have any energy left to put on a convincing act, and I suspect that Father has already found me out anyway."

"I'm sorry, Father."

"There is nothing wrong with being protective of others, Lilly. But it is not always a positive trait."

"Father..."

I suppose he's right. I know that my tendency of being overprotective isn't exactly a virtue. But he hardly set the good example today. I wonder if I should bring it up. I don't feel like it's my place to scold or lecture him. He is my father after all. On the other hand, he probably didn't realize how much he offended me. Maybe I should speak up.

"When Hisao and Hanako approached the car a few hours ago, Naomi seemed shocked by something, but she didn't say what it was. I had the impression that you... discouraged her... from sharing her impression with me. I would have... really appreciated... being let in on the fact that Hanako injured herself."

"How did you find that out?"

"I picked up the faint smell of antiseptic in the car while we were driving back. I also paid close attention to the sound of her footsteps, and it sounded like she was limping slightly."

"Impressive."

"I probably would have found out eventually. I don't understand what's wrong about having Naomi tell me this immediately."

"It is one thing to beat oneself over the head over what happened today, but it is another to ask others to provide you with a cudgel."

So he feels that I was burdening Naomi by putting her into the role of bearer of bad news.

"It is more a matter of principle. If I was able to see, I would have been able to see Hanako's situation for myself. But since I lack eyesight, I often rely on others to describe a situation for me, whether it's a good or a bad one. If others are denied the opportunity to act as my eyes, it feels as if my blindness is being taken advantage of. And that feels... bad to me."

That's probably as polite as I can phrase it. For nearly a minute, Father doesn't respond. Then he lets out a soft sigh.

"When Miss Ikezawa was found, she was sitting against the side of the building in what seemed to be a fetal position. We immediately noticed a small hole in her pants near one of the knees and a wound underneath as well as some grazes on her hands. I think it is safe to assume that she tripped during her flight from the building and took a rather nasty fall."

"Oh no..."

"I had the guard who found her go and fetch us a few supplies so Mister Nakai could clean the wounds and put a gauze on her knee."

He sighs softly.

"When we reached the spot where she was hiding, Mister Nakai approached her, sat down next to her and embraced her. But she just kept staring straight ahead as if he was not even there. I remained with Mister Nakai until the guard came back with the medical supplies and during that whole time I do not recall her moving even once. It was a very... unsettling sight."

I notice that for just a moment his voice trembles slightly. How bad could it have been if even Father was rattled by it? How did this day, that was supposed to be so inspirational, become such a nightmare? The idea of Hanako sitting there, nearly catatonic and covered in grazes, breaks the last bit of restraint I have left, and tears of grief and guilt start flowing down my cheeks.

"Oh, H-Hanako. I'm s-so s-sorry..."

I can't recall the last time I've felt this miserable. My mind is swirling with all kinds of emotions - all of them bad.

I feel anger at myself and at the situation. Hanako's already been through so much. She's already endured enough misery for a lifetime and didn't deserve being put through this.

I also feel a maddening sense of helplessness and desperation. I'll apologize to her tomorrow, but I know in advance that that's not going to change much. I want to do more, but I can't think of anything.

And more than anything else, I'm really worried. Hanako was doing so well lately. She still wasn't extremely outgoing, but she was slowly but steadily rediscovering how to enjoy life again after nearly a decade of focussing completely on survival. Her grades were steadily climbing, too, and my impression was that she'd easily be able to handle her entrance exams as long as she kept studying hard for it. But how much motivation will she have left now? Will she have recovered from today's events in time for the mock exams later this week? What if she fails them and is forced to take all those extra classes - because of me? What would that do to her? What if this has an impact on her performance in the actual exams? The national tests are less than two months away. What if she fails her exams? What will she do then? Where will she go? No... Don't think like that. Don't even start thinking like that. Just... keep it together. Stop... worrying... already.

"Lilly?"

"I've f-failed her so b-badly. How will I even f-face her after t-today?"

I feel embarrassed about Father having to see me like this, but it took all my strength to stay composed in front of Hisao and Naomi, and if I keep this bottled up inside for any longer, I'll probably end up breaking down in the dorms. At least right now there's nobody around but him and me... I think. The

only sounds I hear right now are the whistling of the wind through the nearby trees and the sound of my own crying.

06

Just when I start worrying about how extremely uncomfortable this is probably making Father, I feel him take my hand and push something against my palm. As I take it from him, I can feel that it's something light and soft.

"It is... ah... a handkerchief to... ah..."

Despite my depressed mood, I can't resist a giggle at Father's awkwardness.

"I could tell."

Even my gloomy mood cannot prevent a smile from crossing my face for a moment, both at the unexpected sweetness and the endearing awkwardness of his gesture. I use his handkerchief to dry my tears, keeping it with me afterwards in case I tear up again later. As the stream of tears dries up, I let out a loud and tired sigh.

"Thank you."

"Think nothing of it."

"I'm sorry for you having to see me like this."

"Not at all. Best to let it out now, so you can be strong and supportive in front of Miss Ikezawa later."

"I... would like to do whatever I can to help Hanako, but I'm not really sure what I can do."

"I was under the impression that supporting people who are going through a difficult time is like a second nature to you, and that you do not need to go in with a specific plan in mind. All you would need to do would simply be yourself."

"Hanako has an appointment with her therapist tomorrow. Knowing her, she might end up skipping it. If she does, maybe I should go. Just to let the school know what happened. Maybe I can ask them to extend Hanako some leniency with the mock exams this week."

"That sounds like a good start."

I absentmindedly nod my head as Father continues.

"Perhaps we can buy her a new set of pants to replace the ones that were damaged. I am sure your mother would be happy to obtain some that resemble the ones she was wearing today."

"I would like to pay for them myself if that's okay. I know what size Hanako wears. I will contact Mother about it tomorrow."

"Very well."

"But... I fear that it will take more than a new pair of pants to resolve this."

"Perhaps it would be best not to expect a magic fix to exist and to simply do whatever little things you can for her - as you did for me a few months earlier."

"...Yes."

Having calmed down a bit, I neatly fold Father's handkerchief and put it away.

"Father... Thank you so much. I'd like you to know that I really appreciate this."

He merely chuckles modestly.

"That is an unusual amount of gratitude for a mere handkerchief."

I shake my head with a sad smile.

"Not just the handkerchief, but everything else today as well. I'm really happy you came along with us today."

"Do not worry about it."

He dismisses my compliment as usual, but my gratitude is completely sincere. I'm not even sure if we would have found Hanako in time if it hadn't been for Father keeping a level head, and now he's here keeping me company too. He's been in a somber and apathetic mood since Grandfather adopted Mister Kojima as his heir, and me asking him to come along today was mostly an effort on my part to get him out of the house. Yet when Hisao, Naomi and I were at a loss on what to do, he took charge and quickly put forth a plan of action. His voice even sounded more alive than before too. Perhaps an event like this was necessary to shake him out of the rut he was in. If that is so, then at least *something* positive happened today.

"I meant what I just said. I am very proud of you. I was surprised how well you handled the effort to find Hanako."

Father merely mumbles something under his breath that even I would have missed if it hadn't been for the fact that I taught myself over the last few months to pay close attention to him whenever he lowers his voice. I turn to him and give him an inquisitive smile.

"...Practice makes perfect?"

"Never mind."

"I don't remember getting lost myself very often. Mother, Grandmother or Akira would usually keep an eye on me at all times."

"That they did."

"Hmmm... Akira then?"

Father pauses for a moment and then sighs.

"This was mostly before you were born, but your sister had the unfortunate tendency to run off on her own whenever we went into town or on a trip, and it was often up to me to track her down. Before long, we would start making mental notes of toy stores, pet stores and video game stores we came across because those were often the places we suspected she would walk off to if we put ourselves in her shoes."

So Father applied the same mindset today while we were trying to track down Hanako. I grin at the thought of Akira sneaking off while our parents weren't looking, but Father didn't sound particularly amused just now.

"That must have been troublesome at times."

He lets out a dejected sigh.

"Your sister was always a bit of a rebel. We used to tell her that she was being a burden on others by acting the way she did, but I do not think our words ever truly stuck."

"Was it really that much of a problem?"

"There were other things too. Akira was a bit of a tomboy even when she was young and played with boys more often than with girls. Things got rough sometimes, and there were times when we heard about her giving some boy a black eye. She would insist things merely got out of hand a bit, but we as parents would be the ones who would get the blame, particularly your mother. We would spend a week or so apologizing to that boy's parents, and things would quiet down, only for something similar to happen again a month or two later."

I personally wonder if those occurrences were really just children playing and accidentally going a bit too far or if Akira was perhaps being picked on and stood up for herself.

"Akira can be a handful, but she has a softer side as well, Father. Even though there was a rather large age gap between us, she has always been very kind and attentive towards me, and she'd always play with me if I was bored or lonely, even if she had homework to finish. I don't think I could have wished for a more loving sister at the time, and I believe she will be a wonderful mother herself someday. She may not be the most refined person in the world, but she's responsible when it counts."

"...Perhaps."

"Definitely."

"The bond between you two and the good influence you had on Akira when the two of you were together did not escape our attention. We tried to encourage contact between the two of you as much as possible."

I'm suddenly reminded of how Akira used to complain about how quick our parents were in letting her look after me instead of doing it themselves. With a surprised expression, I turn in Father's direction.

"Are you saying that letting Akira look after me was for her benefit instead of mine or yours?"

"Scolding Akira had little effect, but you never failed to bring out her gentler side. We had been hoping that some of that would eventually rub off on her permanently, but perhaps that was not a realistic expectation after all."

I don't think so either. Akira's kind, up-beat and a wonderful person to be around. Those traits are just as much part of her as her laid-back and informal attitude. They simply make her who she is.

"Father, how do you... feel about Akira?"

"Hmmm?"

"I mean... You two may not be on the best of terms, but... she..."

"Hmmm."

She's still your daughter.

A long silence. Does he lack an opinion or is he simply reluctant to share it with me?

"I think... it is good that Akira stayed behind in Scotland."

I cringe at those unexpectedly blunt words. Is he happy to be rid of Akira?

"But Father..."

He softly scrapes his throat as an indication that there's more he'd like to say.

"Your mother once told me that she believed that Akira was really a Scot at heart. Despite our efforts to give her a traditional upbringing and education, there were some traits of hers - traits like a strong sense of individualism, a strong yearning for independence and a sense of straightforwardness - that are not good or bad qualities in and of themselves, but become good or bad depending on one's surroundings. I think that in her current environment, those traits probably serve her well, while they used to be a cause of severe worry for us when she was still living here. Perhaps - this was how things were meant to play out all along."

"Is this how you and Mother feel about it?"

"Yes. We have felt this way even before it became clear that your attempts at convincing her to also return to Japan were not going to be successful. Perhaps she will be happier there than she would be here. It would make sense to give her the opportunity to find out for herself."

I remember having spent a lot of effort trying to talk Akira into moving back to Japan as well after it became clear that our parents would be moving. Maybe more effort than I should have made. I remember being frustrated when Mother and Father failed to support my efforts. It appears that I might have been so fixated on reuniting our family again once and for all that I completely lost sight of how Akira must have felt, essentially causing me to follow in our parents' footsteps. I make a mental note to apologize to my sister the next time I speak to her even though I doubt she was ever upset with me about this.

"I think... you're right. To be honest, when you said it was good that Akira stayed behind, I was worried for a moment that you admitted to hating her."

"That girl has made us worry about her on many occasions and could probably use a healthy dose of parental respect, but... hating her would be... very difficult for me to do."

"What do you mean?"

"I am afraid that it is not something rational, so I cannot truly explain it. But..."

Another long silence.

"Akira is probably more like your mother than any other person I know. Could you truly hate someone who is similar in so many ways to the person you ended up marrying?"

It takes me a second to grasp the significance of Father's words. Over the last several months, I've slowly grown accustomed to Mother's energetic and up-beat behavior. Even though she's living in Japan again now, her way of acting hasn't changed although she usually adopts a much more reserved and formal posture when we go for a walk around the neighborhood. There have been several times when I considered the possibility that the mother I remembered from my childhood never really existed to begin with, but this is the first time one of my parents actually comes out and confirms it.

"Father... Was Mother ever... ashamed of who she was?"

Father lets out a soft chuckle at that. I guess we can rule out that possibility.

"Your mother realized it was important to set the good example, Lilly."

"The good example?"

Is it right to put up such a radical facade just to set the good example? I get the importance of always showing your best side in front of other people, but someone should be able to be herself in front of her family and closest friends, shouldn't she? I mean, I sometimes have trouble showing others the real me, but this is just...

"Lilly, do you get along with your mother?"

It took me some time to completely get used to Mother's casual attitude, but thinking back on it, I think she grew on me faster than I expected. And after hearing what Father just said, I also realize why. Mother and Akira really do act similar in many ways, and since Akira has been somewhat like a mother figure to me for several years, hearing my actual mother act this informal towards me doesn't feel quite as jarring as I would have thought at first. In fact, there's something strangely familiar and comfortable about it. Mother may not be acting as proper and refined now as I remember her, but she's still kind and loving in her own way. That aspect of her hasn't changed.

"I do, Father."

"Then perhaps it is best not to worry about the matter and focus on the more pressing issues."

"...Hanako."

He coughs curtly.

"And your own exams. Try not to forget about those."

"That too."

"Since you have mock exams this week and it is already ten o' clock, it may be a good idea to return to the car."

"That late already?"

"Yes, today has been a long day. And your mother will probably not let me sleep until I have told her all that has happened."

We walk back to the car, and Father drives us back to school. He's probably eager to get home himself, so I say my farewells at the school gate.

"Very well then. Try your best, and study as hard as you can these last few days. Your mother and I will probably call you before the mock exams start."

"Yes. I'm eager to hear how Mother's last few days in Scotland have been."

"Do not forget to keep your chin up, Lilly. Remember that a proper lady does not mope in public. *mumble* Nor does she scream at others in the middle of a crowded place. Do not embarrass me like that again."

I feel a bit flustered by his scolding, even though he doesn't sound extremely upset with me.

"I'll... ah... remember that, Father. I'm sorry."

"Please hold out your hand."

I do so, slightly puzzled. Moments later, I feel something light being dropped into it.

"For good luck this week."

Curiously, I examine what I just got with my finger.

"Oh."

"It is... ah... a restaurant bill."

I chuckle.

"Thank you, Father."

"Good night. And give Miss Ikezawa my regards."

"I will."

And with that, we part ways. It's probably best if I try and get some sleep as soon as I can, so I can get up early tomorrow. Promising myself to check on Hanako first thing in the morning, I drop Father's little paper crane into my bag, take out my cane and walk back to the dorms.

Please be okay, Hanako.

07

Chapter 44 (Hisao)

01

"H-Hanako..."

I'm lying on my right side, my hips thrusting away and my breathing getting more frantic by the second. In front of me, lying in a similar position, is my girlfriend, her body pressed firmly against mine.

It's been a week since we went to that open house day, and a lot has happened since then. Hanako's panic attack, our coordinated effort to locate her on an unfamiliar campus, the silent journey back home, the cramming for the mock exams the days afterwards and finally, last Wednesday and Thursday, the mock exams themselves. I found them tougher than I anticipated, though worry about Hanako may have played a role as well, and between Hanako, Lilly and myself, we went out of our way to avoid bringing the subject up during the days afterwards. Hanako's been silent and somewhat withdrawn this week, probably not a surprise after the traumatizing experience she went through. So this evening, I took her along to my room where I spent some time cuddling with her before we decided to make love.

I can last a pretty long time when we do it in this position, and things have gone nice and slow this evening, but I nevertheless have my limit, and I whisper my girlfriend's name to let her know that I'm rapidly approaching it. I'm barely aware of anything around me except for the feeling of her soft breast in my right hand, the feeling of her shoulders pressing against my chest, the feeling of her buttocks rubbing against my abdomen and finally that wonderfully tight sensation down below. Yet despite the wave of pleasure I'm currently riding partially clouding my mind, I can still tell that Hanako herself isn't ready yet.

Using all my willpower, I manage to slow my thrusting down a bit, hoping to give her an opportunity to catch up with me. Noticing the change of pace, she turns her head a bit and gives me an unsure look. I send a smile her way in return.

"We c-can t-take as long as you l-like, Hanako."

But she merely shakes her head, and before I realize what's happening, she has started rocking her hips herself and reaches down with her hand to stroke the place where we're joined before moving downward between my legs and softly cradling and caressing the two sensitive bits down there, sending a wave of intense pleasure up my spine and causing any hope I had of postponing my climax to fly out the window.

"H-Hanako... ugh!"

I let out a grunt as every muscle in my lower region seems to contract at once, and I nearly double over from the sensation. After several seconds of ecstasy, my body slowly starts settling down, and I open my eyes to find that my girlfriend's looking over her shoulder and straight at me. I wait until my heartbeat has steadied itself and then nod at Hanako as a sign that I'm alright - a habit we've adopted during our many lovemaking sessions over the last few months. She nods back, and a tiny smile appears on her face. It's probably the first time I've seen her smile since that disastrous trip to Kasshoku, although even now her smile has a sad quality to it. Seeing that is enough to make me fight off the drowsiness that started overtaking me and hug her tightly.

"No fair taking advantage of my weak spots so suddenly."

"Was it... g-good?"

"Yeah, it felt great. I could have slowed down and lasted longer though. Then you could have..."

"It's okay... r-really."

That wistful smile again. I want to ease that sadness that still seems to linger in her mind. Without a second thought, I start exploring her body with my hands.

"H-Hisao... shouldn't you... c-clean up first?"

"Later. Just relax and let me tend to you."

She seems unsure for a moment or two but then nods, closes her eyes and leans back into me. Hanako targeted my weak spots just now, but fortunately I've come to know hers as well. I press myself against her and start fondling her breasts with the hand of the arm I've wrapped around her. At the same time, my other hand slides between her legs and starts patting and rubbing her most intimate place. As my hands are caressing her, I move my left foot and gently rub the side of her feet with it. Finally, I lean in and start kissing the side of her neck and the spot just underneath her left ear.

I know from experience that Hanako enjoys each individual action immensely already, but it's the use of all of them at the same time that usually proves too much for her to bear for longer than a minute. I want to wipe that wistfulness off her face and replace it with bliss. I want to please her, comfort her and make her forget. Make her forget the stress and anxiety and somber mood she's experienced this week.

For a long time, neither of us says a word, and the only sound in the room is the wet sound caused by the movements of my left hand. It's difficult for me to determine how long I've been going at this since we're both facing away from my alarm clock, but I do start noticing that Hanako isn't reacting quite as strongly to my caresses as usual.

"Hanako, is this... the way you like it?"

"Y-Yes."

I'm getting the impression from the pace of her breathing and lack of body movement that what I'm currently doing isn't enough, so I increase the pressure a bit and am rewarded with a short gasp. Encouraged by her reaction, I continue, my movements a little bit more forceful than before. Her breathing does seem to be a little heavier than before, but it doesn't seem to be speeding up as much like it would usually do. I do get a little moan in response. My hand is getting a bit tired from this longer-than-average session, but I can't afford to stop until Hanako's satisfied.

"Hanako...?"

I whisper my girlfriend's name, intending to ask her if I'm doing this correctly or if she wants me to do it differently, but before I can finish the question, Hanako's breathing suddenly picks up and grows more shallow. It sounds like she's finally getting there. I eagerly continue my frantic rubbing, and now Hanako starts letting out soft moans.

"Ah.... ah..."

"Just let it all out, Hanako."

"Hmmm... ah... ahn..."

Hanako's voice is getting high-pitched.

"H-Hisao... ah... mmmm..."

I think she's almost there.

"C-coming!"

Hanako's body shakes uncontrollably, and then she lets out a shriek.

I keep stimulating her until she finally lies still and lets out a long sigh. With this behind us, I reach for my nightstand, take a tissue and gently wipe her and myself clean. We usually lie on top of a towel while doing the deed in order to avoid making too big a mess in bed, so the cleaning doesn't take very long. I put the used tissue back on the nightstand, lie down next to Hanako and wrap my blanket around the two of us.

I take Hanako in my arms and hold her closely. Actual pillow talk is rare with us. Hanako isn't really more of a talker after the act than she is in any other situation, but we usually make do with the exchange of non-verbal signs of affection before we drift off to sleep.

"..."

02

Something feels different this time though, but I'm having trouble putting my finger on it. It started as a strange feeling in my gut while I was cleaning myself. A feeling that something is off.

Hanako is lying really still. I don't think she's asleep yet although her breathing has already returned to a steady pattern.

Her breathing...

I think that's what felt off just now. It usually takes her way longer to catch her breath after...

"Hanako..."

A little voice in the back of my head asks me if I'm really willing to start digging around in this particular mud pit, but I dismiss it. I don't think I'll get much sleep if I stick my head in the sand now.

"Y-Yes?"

"Ummm...I'm not sure how to ask this, but... just now... was that... you didn't just... did you...?"

A silence. An extremely long and awkward silence. I honestly don't think I have the nerve to repeat or rephrase the question, but just when I'm about to brush the whole matter aside, Hanako answers in a barely audible voice.

"S-Sorry..."

Crap!

That one little word hits me like a sucker punch to the nuts, and I suddenly feel extremely embarrassed, almost as if someone, somewhere, is laughing very hard at me right now.

"It's... okay, Hanako. Just... please don't ever do that again."

"Sorry."

"If I'm not doing something right, there's no problem in letting me know."

"S-Sorry."

"Hanako?"

03

"I'm s-so s-s-sorry."

My wounded pride is quickly forgotten as Hanako starts shaking again, but this time it's because she's broken down crying.

"Hey, no need to cry. I'm not angry."

I kiss her cheek, leaving the salty taste of her tears in my mouth, and run my hand through her hair.

"Hanako... if you... want to get something off your chest, you know you can share it with me, right? It might make you feel a little better."

It might make me feel a little better too. I'm starting to get the impression that there's more to this than just Hanako feeling ashamed of what just happened, and I don't feel comfortable going to sleep without having an idea of what it is.

Eventually, I hear Hanako taking a deep breath.

"H-Hisao, you d-didn't do anything wrong. I r-really should h-have enjoyed it... like I usually do. But I... just... couldn't. I couldn't... get into it. Eventually... it started to... feel a little uncomfortable..."

So she simply wanted it to stop without hurting my feelings. I really should have picked up on the fact that it was getting unpleasant for her. I guess I still have a lot to learn as well.

"Sorry, I should have been able to pick up on that. Maybe we should... put off this kind of thing until you feel better again."

"Ummm... Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"I could... still make you f-feel good... in any way you l-like."

Part of me would absolutely welcome that, but another part feels guilty about the idea of me getting off without Hanako. Ever since the first time we started pleasuring each other, we've done it on a strict give-and-take basis, and even when we started having intercourse, we always tried to make certain that neither of us was missing out in any way. The idea of this part of our relationship turning into a one-way deal for who-knows how long feels extremely off-putting to me.

"I appreciate that Hanako, but I don't mind waiting until you feel a little better again."

She responds with a little sigh, but doesn't say anything.

"You just said you couldn't get into it. I suppose that means you've got a lot on your mind right now, doesn't it?"

I feel her giving a little nod.

"The mock exams?"

A little sigh.

"Or what happened at Kasshoku University?"

"H-Hisao..."

"Yes, Hanako?"

"Ummmm..."

For several minutes she doesn't say anything.

"Hisao... what d-do you think of... the last four months here?"

I smile.

"Aside from that episode that landed me in the hospital for a week, I'd say it was the best time of my high school days. Middle school days too. I feel I've come a long way from the way I was when I first came to live here."

"I... used to t-think the same thing about m-myself. But... I... r-realized this week that I... m-might have b-been wrong."

"What do you mean, Hanako?"

"I w-wasn't feeling uneasy j-just when Naomi and I entered... t-that place..."

I suppose she's talking about the lecture hall.

"I was already a n-nervous wreck from the m-moment we s-split up that d-day. I h-had to eat lunch outside, j-just to be able to g-go on. And w-while we were... in t-there... I was c-counting down the minutes."

"Everyone here at Yamaku can attest that you've made a lot of progress lately, but it would have been a stretch if you hadn't been nervous upon checking out a new school."

"Everyone h-here at Yamaku..."

"That's right."

"When I... f-finally started f-functioning here a little, I thought... it meant something, but... when w-we visited K-Kasshoku, I s-started regressing... almost immediately. And I realized..."

She lets out a soft sniffle.

"I only l-learned to f-function and adapt h-here... at t-this specific school. I n-never really g-got better."

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

"N-No matter how well I d-do here... after graduation I'll once again... b-be the same *sniff* p-person I used to be."

"Hanako..."

"Every t-time I t-try to think of my life after graduation... after leaving here... I feel t-terrified. I c-can't f-function out there, Hisao. And n-now I f-feel like someone t-told me I only h-have a few m-months left to live. It f-feels like my time is running out."

"But..."

"I know I'm s-supposed to m-move on. I know I'm s-supposed to g-get over myself and study and p-pass my exams and g-go to university w-with you and Lilly and Naomi. But... every t-time I t-think of how little time we have left here... I start panicking."

I feel the soft sensation of tears dripping on my chest as Hanako continues.

"Nothing has changed. *sob* Nothing at all. I think I... truly... am... b-broken beyond... repair."

"Oh, Hanako..."

04

"Hicchan? Hey, Hicchan!"

"Huh? What?"

My thoughts are interrupted by a series of taps on the shoulder from my pink-haired neighbor in class who must have seen me yawning.

"You're looking really tired. You didn't sleep well last night?"

"Not really."

"That's probably true for most of us, Hicchan. I had trouble sleeping last night too."

For probably the first time since she entered class, I turn my head and look at Misha. She has certainly seen better days from the looks of it. Her wacky pink curls look kind of shoddily done this morning, and her eyes look tired as well.

Today is the day we'll be getting the results of the mock exams from last week, and we'll find out who gets to do the rest of their studying at the pace of their liking and who will get shoved into the supplementary program. I get that Misha's worried, since her grades haven't exactly been stellar. The mock exam results aren't the foremost thing on my mind though. What's really bugging me is the fact that Hanako hasn't shown up to class yet. I've been staring at the doorway for as long as I've been here, but I'm getting more and more certain that she's going to skip class again today.

Between the summer break and that trip to Kasshoku, Hanako's attendance record was almost perfect. Too bad it didn't last. I wasn't really surprised when she didn't show up in class the day after that open house day. But she didn't show up the day after either. Fortunately she was there on Wednesday and Thursday to take part in the mock exams, only to vanish on Friday again. I wonder if she's skipping class again today to avoid the mock exam results.

Mutou comes in, we bow, and I can almost hear a collective sigh echoing through the classroom as he sits down and takes out a stack of papers that he slaps on his desk in a for him unusually dramatic fashion.

This is it then. I'm not sure how I did, but I don't think I did horribly. I probably would have done better if Hanako hadn't been on my mind so much. Even now, as Mutou starts the expected lecture about what to expect if your results are insufficient, I find my thoughts drifting back to Hanako.

She had an emotional breakdown last night while we were in bed together, and nothing I said seemed to get through to her. In the end, there was little I could do except hold her as she cried herself to sleep. I felt really helpless that moment, and if that wasn't bad enough, Hanako's sleep seemed to be rather restless as well. I don't think her dreams were very pleasant. All in all, neither of us really had a good night's sleep. I still managed to drag myself out of bed this morning to engage in my daily run, wanting to get in as much exercise as possible before I get so busy with cramming for the actual exams that I'll have to start skipping it. When I got back from the track, I noticed Hanako was no longer in my room and expected to see her in class. It wasn't until I got to class and noticed she wasn't there that I started wondering whether it might have been a better idea to ditch practice and keep an eye on her.

My worries about Hanako are briefly moved to the backburner when Mutou walks past my desk and puts a small pile of answer sheets on top of it. Apprehensively, I thumb to the last sheet where a series of numbers penned in red lay out the verdict.

Sixty five.

I did worse than I thought. Even science and math are a bit below my usual level.

I might still get away with supplementary courses in only one or two subjects. Thank heavens for small favors. I'm going to need to get my house in order though. If I don't do better on the actual exams, I'm certain to get into trouble.

"Waha~ oh man..."

I turn to Misha, whose laugh seemed a lot more like a nervous tic than a sign of amusement.

"Bad news?"

She pouts.

"I'm probably going to have a few busy weeks ahead of me. How did you do, Hicchan?"

"Not nearly as well as I hoped. It's not outright bad, but I'll have to do better than this on the actual exams. How did Shizune do?"

"She's not one to celebrate unless she achieves a perfect score, but I don't think she'll need to worry. Aren't you curious about how Hanako did, Hicchan?"

I shoot a quick glance in the direction of Hanako's seat and spot Naomi, who's examining her own answer sheet with an uneasy expression. She catches me and we exchange a quiet, but knowing look.

"Yeah, and I'm probably not the only one."

My gaze shifts back to Mutou, who has completed his round through the class and is now putting one stack of answer sheets back in his briefcase. I strongly suspect that I know whom it belongs to. I wonder if Mutou would allow me to give it to Hanako.

"Nakai, class 3-3. Can I speak to Mister Mutou, please?"

I make a polite bow and then try to look past the teacher who answered the door.

"Mutou's here alright, but it looks like he's still busy."

The teacher moves aside, and as I peer into the staff room, I spot my homeroom teacher talking to one of his colleagues; a short old lady wearing a black skirt and a violet shawl. Hanako's therapist. I'm betting my life that I know what, or who, their discussion is currently about. Just when I'm about to leave and come back later, Mutou spots me from the corner of his eye and - after a brief nod from his discussion partner - walks up to the doorway with Miss Takawa in tow.

"Good afternoon, Nakai. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Good afternoon, sir. Seeing that Hanako wasn't in class today, would it be a problem if I took along her answer sheets? I plan to check up on her later today, and I'll be sure to give them to her."

"I appreciate the gesture, Nakai, but I would prefer to give her back the results myself. If you want to help out, perhaps you can convince her to come and see me about them tomorrow."

Miss Takawa gives me a grandmotherly smile.

"If she prefers, she can also come to me to hear about and discuss the results."

Discuss the results? If Hanako merely performed below average, would she get an invitation from her therapist to 'discuss the results'?

"That doesn't sound good."

The old lady frowns for a moment, probably realizing I'm fishing for more details, but then shrugs her shoulders to dismiss the matter and gives me an innocent smile.

"Let's not dwell on that. By the way, Mister Nakai, how did you fare in your tests last week?"

I immediately feel a sharp glare from Mutou drilling into my skull. I'm not sure if the old therapist knows about today's sub-par grade on my part, but if she does then this is one nasty way to redirect the conversation.

"Uh... I probably could have done a little better."

Judging from his narrowing eyes, Mutou isn't particularly happy with my modest assessment of today's results.

"Could have done a little better, Nakai? That's putting it very lightly. I was hoping you at least had the courtesy to be as disappointed in the results as I was."

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you, sir."

"You *will* need to step up your game, Nakai."

"I understand, sir. I'll be sure to do better on the actual exams."

"I hope so. How will I motivate the rest of the science club if its president and inspirational figure cannot even get into his chosen university?"

I'm getting the impression that he's taking this way too personally.

"If I'm allowed to say something in my defense; I feel that I studied enough over the last several weeks to get a solid grasp on things. It's just that..."

I think for a moment. I'm not sure if Mutou knows what happened to Hanako. He must have noticed that *something* was up. Everybody else in class did. After all, Hanako skipped class for the first time in months last week.

"...something came up that made it more difficult to keep my mind on the exams."

Miss Takawa nods gravely.

"The school knows about the event with Miss Ikezawa. Miss Satou was so kind as to visit me last Monday and let me in on what happened."

"Then surely you understand how this could have had an impact."

Mutou rubs his chin.

"Do you think this is going to impact your performance at the actual exam in January, Nakai?"

That's a little less than two months away. I'm *really* hoping that Hanako will have bounced back by then. But I know that Mutou isn't waiting for a 'perhaps' from me.

"No sir, I'll make sure that it won't."

"I hope you can live up to that promise. Based on your previous grades, the school's willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and will not expect you to take the supplementary lessons you'd usually be expected to take."

That's an unexpected surprise, but also a real relief. I really prefer being able to study at my own pace to being forced into one of those stressful cramming classes.

"Thanks. I really appreciate that. Does that mean Hanako will get a break too?"

Mutou doesn't immediately answer and looks at Miss Takawa instead. The old therapist looks deep in thought for a moment and then slowly shakes her head.

"I think it would be best for Miss Ikezawa to attend the supplementary lessons that are on offer in the upcoming weeks."

What the heck? Why arrange an exemption for just one of us?

"Are you really going to punish her for something that's not her fault?"

"We're not blaming anybody here, Mister Nakai."

Mutou shakes his head with a hint of disapproval at my remark.

"And we prefer to see supplementary lessons as opportunities rather than punishment."

"Hanako?"

Lilly's voice greets me from the other side as I knock on her bedroom door.

"Lilly, it's me."

The door opens and Lilly, already in her pajamas, carefully walks out.

"Hisao. Nice of you to stop by."

"So Hanako isn't in there with you? I came to see her, but found her door locked. I was hoping she'd be with you."

Lilly sadly shakes her head.

"I suspect she's in her own room. I heard a few sounds on the other side of the wall a little while back."

"I'm going to cross my fingers that she'll feel like seeing us then. You'll come along, won't you?"

"I will."

We walk up to the door to Hanako's dorm room and I give a few sharp knocks on the door while softly calling out Hanako's name. For a little while there seems to be no response, but then I suddenly see Lilly tilt her head, and moments later the door opens just enough for Hanako to peek through the gap and for me to look back at her. An awkward silence, and then the door is opened further, allowing us to go inside.

05

I'm not really sure what Hanako has been doing before we knocked on her door. There's no book on her nightstand nor are there any notes or study books on her desk. She's already wearing her nightgown, and she looks smaller than ever in it. It must be her slumped shoulders. She looks tired, even though it's not very late yet. I take a seat on her desk chair and Lilly sits down next to her on the bed. Hanako's currently staring at me as if she's asking why we're here. It's probably best to go ahead and not allow the heavy atmosphere to get even worse.

"Um... We wanted to check on you because you weren't in class today. Just to see if you're not ill or something."

"T-Thanks, but... I'm o-kay."

"I asked Mutou if I could pass your answer sheets onto you, but he wouldn't allow that. I was told they wanted you to approach him or Miss Takawa yourself for the results of the mock exams."

Lilly looks surprised at my words.

"Miss Takawa?"

"Yeah, I spoke with Mutou in the staff room, and she was nearby and joined the discussion. She said Hanako could approach either of them to discuss her exam results."

Lilly looks a bit troubled at my words. She's probably thinking the same thing I was. If Hanako obtained good grades, I probably would have gotten that answer sheet, and there wouldn't be any need for her to 'discuss the results' with a staff member. Hanako, on the other hand, merely nods blankly.

"I'll... g-go and talk to one of them."

"Okay."

Hanako fidgets with the sleeves of her nightgown a bit and then looks up at me.

"H-How did you do?"

I was hoping she wasn't going to ask that question, but in hindsight that was an unrealistic expectation to begin with. I suppose there's really no way around it. I take a deep breath and try to keep my tone as neutral as possible.

"I probably could have done better. I ended up scoring a sixty five."

"S-S-Sixty five?"

Hanako's eyes grow the size of small saucers as she hears my grade. Then she shoots an unsure look at Lilly.

"L-Lilly?"

Lilly looks really helpless before softly answering.

"Sixty one. I'm not looking forward to my parents' phone call tonight. I just hope they can understand..."

She suddenly falls silent for a moment and then smiles sadly.

"...that I still have quite a bit of studying left to do."

While her own grades were the subject of discussion, Hanako's face merely had a blank expression, but that changed when Lilly's and my grades were brought up. Now her face shows a devastated mixture of guilt and panic.

"Are y-you f-forced to f-follow s-supplementary lessons now?"

"No, I'm not. Mutou said they decided to give me exemption from them."

Lilly looks surprised to hear this.

"Miss Miyagi told me the same thing today."

She smiles awkwardly.

"I suppose we're... in luck."

Hanako looks a little uncertain, but then slowly nods her head. I scratch my head as I remember something.

"Unfortunately, Mutou didn't say anything about exempting you, Hanako. I'm sorry."

"That's... okay."

Lilly turns to Hanako with a worried look on her face.

"Hanako, what are you going to do?"

"I'll t-talk to Mutou tomorrow and... do the s-supplementary lessons. So... p-please don't worry about me. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Yeah, okay. Just... don't neglect yourself, Hanako."

"I w-won't."

We make a bit of small-talk, but it seems more for show than anything else. Eventually, a yawn from Hanako informs us that it's time to leave, and after a quick 'keep your chin up', we return to the hallway outside. But just before Hanako closes the door behind us, she gives us one more crushed look.

"H-Hisao... Lilly..."

"Yes, Hanako?"

"I'm... s-so... extremely... s-sorry..."

Then the door closes. I turn to Lilly, who has an agonized expression on her face.

"I guess that confirms that she spotted the elephant in the room all along, despite our efforts to sweep the issue under the rug."

In retrospect we really did go out of our way to avoid mentioning the obvious. Maybe a little bit too much. Of course Hanako was skipping class today to avoid the mock exams' results, whatever they are for her. She didn't even seem shocked by the suggestion that she might have done badly. She probably knew all along. And of course all three of us did worse than expected on the tests last week due to how rattled we still were by the lecture hall incident. We know it, Lilly's parents know it, and even the school acknowledged it today. Why else would Lilly and I have been let off the hook like this?

Lilly sadly nods at my words.

"That seems to be the case."

I hope Hanako didn't feel like we were insulting her intelligence by so blatantly avoiding mention of the role the incident of last week and its effect on our performance.

"Do you think we should have brought up the role that the Kasshoku incident played in all of this or would that merely have rubbed salt in her wounds?"

Lilly lets out a depressed sigh.

"She seems to believe that all of this is her fault. But... It's not, Hisao."

She seems almost desperate to convince me. It's really painful to see Hanako and Lilly both agonizing over this. As Lilly opens the door of her own room and prepares to go inside, I briefly put a hand on her shoulder.

"Lilly... Just remember: it's not really your fault either..."

06

Chapter 45 (Lilly)

01

"Hanako?"

As I reach the roof of the school I hear some shuffling sounds nearby, suggesting that someone's up here. I softly call out, hoping it's my best friend. The cramming classes are having lunch break right now, and since Hanako wasn't in the tea room, I came up here to determine if she decided to retreat here instead.

Since there are only a handful of weeks left before the exams, cramming season is in full swing. Those who did well on the mock exams are free to determine where they want to study, be it their dorm room, the library or some of the classrooms reserved for that purpose. I usually prefer the peace and quiet of my dorm room, so the only time I'm in the school building these days is early in the morning or late in the afternoon in order to get exercises or exam questions from previous years from the teachers. But this morning I made some tasty curry rice for lunch for myself, and since it turned out to be too much to eat on my own, I decided to see if I could find Hanako and offer to share the rest of my lunch with her. It'd be a good opportunity for us to talk or - if she didn't feel like talking - at least spend some time together. The opportunities for us to spend time with one another have started to become exceedingly rare these days.

"Hey Lilly!"

It's not Hanako who answers me, but the voice is nevertheless one I recognize. Still, I find myself wondering who's calling out to me. Shizune and I aren't really hostile towards each other anymore these days, but we're still not exactly close friends either. I don't think Shizune would greet me in such a casual manner though.

"Hello Misha. Is it just you up here?"

"Yup. Just me."

Misha's probably taking supplementary lessons as well. Her grades have been average for about as long as I've known her, and she probably didn't do much better on the mock exams.

"Are you taking a break from supplementary courses?"

"Pfff, yeah! They're really intense. My brain gets overheated, so fresh air is needed to cool it off. Wahaha~!"

It's fairly nice up here, although I'd probably get cold if I stuck around for too long.

"It might help to remind yourself that the upcoming exams are a worthy cause."

"Except... I won't be going to any university here, so I can't even say that to myself."

"Hmmm? You're not? Then why take the national test?"

"I want to try and transfer to a school in America, but Yamaku won't give me a recommendation unless I improve my grades. So this is kind of my last chance. I have to take the test, and the teachers here are going to compare my answer sheet with the national test's answers when they're published. If I do well enough, they'll give me a recommendation anyway."

"I think it's great that you have such adventurous plans for the future. I feel that such a dream is definitely worth studying hard for."

"You think so?"

I nod my head.

"I do. I hope you succeed."

Under other circumstances, I would have offered to help Misha improve her English - a vital skill if you want to transfer abroad, but right now I need to get my own grades in order first.

"Aw, thanks. I hope you guys do well too ~!"

Now that I think about it, Misha's probably been attending the extra courses together with Hanako and might have seen where she went.

"Misha, may I ask if you have seen Hanako today?"

"Yeah, we had English just now, and she was there too."

"Do you have any idea where she is now? I've been in our tea room already, but she wasn't there. And since there are so many people using the library to study, I don't think she's there either."

"I think I saw her walk towards the exit after class ended. I'm not sure where she went."

I sigh in disappointment.

"That's too bad. I wanted to share some of my leftover curry rice with her. But if Hanako's not in the building right now, there's little chance of me finding her before the end of lunch break."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Are you interested in having some instead?"

"Huh? Really?"

Why not? I'm already stuffed myself, and it's a waste to throw it away.

"Yes."

I hold the container with the food in front of me until I feel Misha taking it off my hands.

"Wow, this smells really good. Thanks, Licchan~!"

I grin a bit as I hear Misha use the nickname she used to address me with in the early days of the student council. That was obviously before Shizune and I had our falling out. I don't think Misha'd be this forward with me if Shizune had been anywhere nearby.

"It's been quite a while since I've heard that nickname. Our early student council days seem so far away now that the exams are nearly upon us, don't they?"

"Makes you feel nostalgic, doesn't it. Don't you sometimes wish you could turn back time?"

I would. I'd love to return to the days before Hanako had her breakdown. How carefree those days now feel. What I wouldn't give to go back to that afternoon and talk myself out of making that horribly ill-timed phone call.

"It would be wonderful to be able to turn back time and correct mistakes one has made in the past."

"Mistakes?"

Misha sounds puzzled and almost a little bit suspicious.

"Something related to Hanako, Licchan?"

That's a surprise. As far as I know, only Hisao, Naomi, Hanako and myself are aware of what happened at Kasshoku University that day. I don't think Naomi would have told anybody but her best friend about it, seeing that she was really rattled as well.

"I'm afraid so. But... Did you hear anything from anyone, Misha?"

"Just some rumors. But everyone can see that something bad happened to Hanako. Even if you don't count her exam results, it's like she's turning back to the way she was... before. Like she's started avoiding people again, and she's not working or talking with others in class. It's almost like she never met Hicchan."

"Oh dear..."

It was obvious from the start that Hanako's confidence and behavior started regressing after that incident, but the notion that pretty much the entire school has noticed this, too, is an unexpected dose of salt in my wounds.

"And you and Hicchan seemed to be kind of down too. Like you were involved in whatever's bothering Hanako. And then the mock exams."

"..."

That's a sharper deduction than I thought Misha to be capable of. She's usually a little bit oblivious to these kind of subtleties.

"Licchan, you didn't sleep with Hicchan, did you? You wouldn't do such a thing, right?"

WHAT ON EARTH? I take back what I just thought.

"I beg you pardon?"

"Well, people were wondering since Hanako started becoming more outgoing after she became Hicchan's girlfriend, maybe she and Hicchan broke up, and that's why she's been so down lately. Since the three of you are together so often and you just said that you made a mistake, I thought..."

I can't deny there's some logic in that theory, but it still feels wrong on so many levels that I nearly trip over myself in my attempts to deny it.

"That isn't even remotely what happened. I'd never do such a thing. Hisao is like a brother to me, and I'd never hurt Hanako by making advances on her boyfriend. Hanako and Hisao are still together, and they're doing fine."

To be honest, 'doing fine' is probably too positive a spin on things. Hanako's been steadily growing more reclusive over the last few weeks, and I don't think she and Hisao stay over at each other's place anymore, nor do they see each other much. I keep telling myself that we're all simply too busy studying to spend much time with one another, but I'm nevertheless starting to get a little worried at how isolated Hanako is becoming.

"That's a relief. I'd have been disappointed if you did anything that low."

"Something happened when we visited an open house day that caused Hanako to become the center of attention, which was very... frightening for her. I'd rather not go into much more detail, but I hope that's enough to satisfy your curiosity, Misha."

"Oh, sure Licchan. So is that why Hanako did so badly in the mock exams?"

"Misha, how did you learn about Hanako's exam results?"

"Oh, uh... There was a list with the exam results among the paperwork in the student council room. Hanako's mark kinda stood out."

"Was it really that bad?"

"She scored... ah... a twenty six on average on the exams."

That's even worse than I thought. I'm shocked into silence for several seconds.

"Oh my god..."

"Kinda of makes you wonder if she had a blackout during the tests."

Or a panic attack. Or several. That might have been what happened.

"Perhaps."

"If that's what happened then she might still do well on her exams as long as she can prevent that kind of thing from happening again, right? Right?"

"I hope so, Misha. I really hope so."

The ringing of the school bell makes Misha get up, and it also reminds me that I'd better get back to my studies as well. I say goodbye to my unexpected conversation partner and make my way back to my dorm room.

I manage to get two hours of cramming in until my concentration is broken by the ringing of my cell phone.

"Good afternoon. Lilly Satou speaking."

"Hi Lilly."

"Hello Hisao. How is your studying coming along?"

"Okay, I guess. I've been studying non-stop since eleven. I'm probably about ready to take a break."

In other circumstances, I would have asked him to come over so we could have a drink together, but it wouldn't feel right to do so without Hanako.

"Perhaps a little walk will do you good. It's a good idea to keep some daily physical activity now that you've temporarily suspended your morning runs."

"Maybe, but today I've got other plans already."

"What is it that you have planned then?"

"I'm paying a visit to Miss Takawa in 20 minutes."

"You've made an appointment with her?"

"Yeah. I approached her this morning, and she said she'd be able to make some time this afternoon. Would you like to come too?"

Why would Hisao want to see Miss Takawa? Is there something specific he wants to talk to her about?

"Ah... If it's not a problem..."

"No, I think I'd actually like you to come along."

"Hisao, is this about anything in particular?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. Shall we meet in front of the nurses' building in 15 minutes?"

"I'll be there."

02

"Please enjoy."

"Thank you."

I put the bowl of tea I just received to my lips and take a careful sip. It's remarkably tasty and has a very unique flavor. I'm almost tempted to ask if Miss Takawa brews her tea herself.

I've been in this office once before, the day after our Kasshoku trip, to brief Miss Takawa about the events of the day before, hoping she'd be able to do something for Hanako. She thanked me graciously for letting her in on what happened to Hanako, but so far I haven't noticed any moves on the school's part to give her a helping hand. In fact, it seems the opposite has happened. While Hisao and I were given exemption from the supplementary lessons most people with our exam results would have been expected to follow, the school has put Hanako in every single supplementary class they had available, and as a result she's away from the dorms from dawn until dusk. It's almost as if they took the lessons Hisao and I were exempted from and put them on Hanako's shoulders. The thought alone is enough to upset me.

"Now then..."

I hear Miss Takawa put her bowl down and pick up the sound of Hisao impatiently shuffling in place as if he's been forced to stay silent for too long already.

"How can I be of assistance to the two of you?"

I turn towards Hisao slightly in order to let him know he can go ahead. I'm a bit curious about what he has to say myself.

"Miss Takawa, I realize that Hanako's your client and you're bound by client confidentiality, but what exactly is it that you can and cannot tell us about Hanako?"

"To be honest, just about anything Miss Ikezawa confides in me during our sessions is considered confidential, and divulging any of that would break our bond of trust. I can be a little bit more open regarding my own impressions and opinions."

"What about treatment?"

"I'm not overly fond of discussing treatment of my clients with people who aren't part of the school's medical staff."

"Oh..."

"I realize that the two of you are here out of concern for Miss Ikezawa, so I'll try to be as accommodating as I can afford to be. Is that okay, Mister Nakai?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"I ran into Hanako two days ago while at the school's apothecary in order to get a new batch of some of my medication. She was startled when she walked in and saw me there, and instead of talking to me, she just nodded nervously and then quickly walked off, almost as if she was fleeing."

I frown.

"Fleeing? Maybe she went there to...ah..."

Get her birth control pills. I used to get them for her, but the last two months before that trip to Kasshoku, Hanako actually managed to work up the courage to get her own. Well, together with me at least. I'm relieved that Hisao manages to grasp my meaning without me having to finish my sentence, but the soft sigh he lets out to dismiss my suggestion stings more than I expected.

"I don't think so. Besides, I doubt she'd try to avoid me over that. Also, uh..."

"Please proceed, Mister Nakai."

03

"Yesterday, I briefly spoke with Hanako. She returned some of my notes that I allowed her to copy. When she took them out of her bag, I noticed a small bottle of pills in there. It was only a split-second, but for me that was enough. I know a pill bottle when I see one. I doubt they were sleeping pills either. She'd keep those in her nightstand."

"Hisao, are you saying that Hanako's on medication?"

"When I put two and two together, it's kinda hard to come to any other conclusion. I was hoping to get confirmation here, as well as what this says about Hanako's current condition."

"Mister Nakai, as a woman I feel compelled to point out that it is rather ungentlemanly to rummage through a lady's handbag, even with your eyes. Don't you agree, Miss Satou?"

I hear Hisao let out a soft grunt of frustration as Miss Takawa playfully deflects his question. I force a smile as I reply.

"I... agree on that, Miss Takawa. But since we now know about it, perhaps you can give us some reassurance instead of leaving us to draw our own conclusions which might be worse than her actual situation."

"Hmmm..."

A long silence.

"Very well then. What I prescribed Miss Ikezawa is some medication to help her sleep better at night and some light antidepressants to stabilize her mood. Both are light dosages and we're only supplying her with very small batches at a time, so the chance of her growing dependent on them is extremely slim. We're keeping a close eye on things."

"So, Hanako's... officially suffering from depression?"

"Things are what they are, with or without some stamp from a mental health official. If what I'm saying is anything but a confirmation of what you must have known already, I may have overestimated your friendship with her."

I shake my head.

"It isn't. But it still hurts to hear you confirm it."

"Now that you know, perhaps I could ask you to... pay attention to Miss Ikezawa whenever you interact with her and let me know if you notice anything that could be a side-effect of the medication."

"We will. But Miss Takawa..."

"Yes, Mister Nakai?"

"I think I speak for Lilly as well when I say that we'd really like to do more for Hanako than just watch out for potential side effects of her medication. We want to help her through this in any way we can, but it's getting harder and harder to get through to her. During Hanako's last crisis you had some very useful advice. We were hoping you could help out this time as well."

I nod deviously as a sign of agreement with Hisao's words.

"Whatever it takes."

"I'm glad to hear that from the two of you. In addition to simply being there for her during the sparse moments she may desire company, there is one specific thing you two can do that would greatly help."

"And what is that?"

"Study hard and pass your exams."

The sigh in stereo that results from both of us causes the old lady to chuckle.

"It sounds like that wasn't quite what you were expecting to hear."

"It's not that we don't understand that our own exams are important too, but..."

The old woman sighs.

"You two managed to solve your falling out with Miss Ikezawa the last time by saying the right things at the right time, and I suppose you were expecting me to point out a similar approach that could make all the pieces fall into place and solve this crisis that Miss Ikezawa is going through. But the last time it was a crisis directly related to your relationship with her. This situation is about..."

She pauses shortly.

"...something else. There are simply no 'right words' to quickly solve this situation. Not this time. I'm sorry if I dashed your hopes just now."

"About a week after that open house day, Hanako told me that all she managed to adapt to was life at this particular school and that she still wouldn't be able to function beyond the safe confines of

Yamaku. She felt that when she leaves here after graduation, she'll still be the same person who came here nearly three years ago."

"I don't share that opinion and I'm certain that you don't either."

"I don't."

"Me neither."

"There's probably another factor that plays a role here. This is just a theory of mine, but try to look at things from her point of view. This school is where she has lived for the last three years. Until recently she barely ever left the premises. Most of the pleasant memories she's had this decade are all connected to this school in one way or another. All the people who are part of her life right now are connected to this school in one way or another as well. When you take away the connecting factor that all things have in common, wouldn't you feel anxious at the thought of leaving here, wondering just how much of your life will remain intact once you graduate? I imagine that that realization must have dawned on Miss Ikezawa during the open house day while she was wandering about the campus of a strange school that, assuming she passes her exams, will become her new world very soon."

I never really thought of that before, but it does make sense. Yamaku has literally been Hanako's world for the last three years, and after graduation she'll be forced to leave its safety. I wonder if, had Mother and Father not returned to Japan, I would have felt something similar right about now.

"I can understand why she'd feel uneasy about that. But... Lilly and I are still here. We're studying so hard because if we all pass our entrance exams, we can still attend the same university. We can still hang out with her."

"Yes. You and Miss Satou could be... sources of stability... in Miss Ikezawa's life. But you can only fulfill that role if your own situation is stable. And there is another motivation to study hard as well."

Sources of stability?

"What motivation?"

Sources of stability...

"May I ask whether Miss Ikezawa knows about your own mock exam results?"

"She does. We looked her up in her room the day we got them back and mentioned our grades to her."

"And how did she react to them?"

"Kind of horrified. And then guilty. When we left the room she actually apologized to us."

"I was afraid of that. You may be worried about Miss Ikezawa, but it's clear that she's also worried about you. I can see her blaming herself for what happened at Kasshoku, and she is very likely to blame herself for anything that happened as a result of the fallout of that incident. Which included your recent grades, unfortunately."

Even though it isn't her fault. She wasn't the one who made that phone call. That was me.

"I suppose we got lucky we both got exemption from the supplementary courses or Hanako probably would have blamed herself for that as well."

The old therapist doesn't immediately respond, almost as if waiting for something, and suddenly I have a flash of insight that causes me to let out a small gasp.

"Miss Takawa. Did you have a hand in arranging the exemption Hisao and I received?"

"Hmm, hmmm. Clever deduction, Miss Satou. I was indeed the one who put in a request with your homeroom teachers to let the two of you off the hook this time."

"So this was done for Hanako's benefit?"

"Indeed. We cannot reverse Miss Ikezawa's current situation, but we can make it easier on her by making sure she isn't feeling guilty about the two of you being forced to attend cramming sessions in class. Like the medication, it's a measure on the part of the school to make the upcoming time easier for her to get through. Of course, this puts some additional responsibility on your shoulders to perform well, even without those extra lessons, so be sure to honor this gesture of goodwill."

"Thank you."

Hisao clears his throat.

"It's appreciated alright, but why give us exemption and not Hanako? You're talking about the school doing its part to help Hanako through this, but she's nevertheless being punished for doing badly at the mock exams, even though she studied really hard beforehand."

"I agree with Hisao. It seems like the school is overloading Hanako with supplementary lessons even though I suspect she's already familiar with most of what's being taught there. Those low grades weren't her fault. It wouldn't surprise me if she had a blackout or panic attack during the mock exams that caused her to fail them."

"I agree with your reasoning about the probable cause of Miss Ikezawa's low grades, but please don't regard Miss Ikezawa's participation in the extra classes as a punishment of some sort. The school is merely doing what we deem best for her."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"The alternative to what we did would have been to exempt her, too, and allow her to study on her own. But the worst thing you can do to someone suffering from depression is giving them the opportunity to stay in their room all day long."

My thoughts return briefly to Mother and how she complained to me before about how Father would just stay in bed nearly all day long and didn't seem to have motivation to do anything.

"That makes... sense, I suppose. But still..."

"It is important for her to maintain a daily routine for as long as possible as this has a beneficial effect on people suffering from depression. In addition to that, this approach allows us to guarantee that there will be a teacher keeping an eye on her throughout the day who can also verify how well she's doing with the various subjects. I realize that forcing all these lessons on her may seem a harsh thing to do, but I believe that this is the best way to give her a chance of succeeding at next month's test. And

as an added benefit, the two of you will be able to concentrate on your own studies without needing to worry about her for most of the day. The last thing we need is some kind of worry feedback loop between you and Miss Ikezawa that puts your own exam performance at risk."

"You seem really worried about how we do on our exams."

"I wouldn't have asked your homeroom teachers for an exemption if I didn't have faith in your ability to pass the exams. The reason I'm emphasizing the importance of passing your exams is the fact that this situation has upped the stakes significantly."

"The stakes?"

"If you two fail the upcoming National Center Test, either due to a lack of proper preparation or due to the situation with Miss Ikezawa acting as a distraction, Miss Ikezawa will inevitably hold herself responsible for it, and it will be next to impossible to get the idea out of her head that *she* caused her two best friends to fail and lose a whole year. It will almost certainly strain her relationship with you. Do you two understand what's at stake now?"

A very long silence as the two of us digest what Miss Takawa just told us. I have a pretty good idea of how awful Hanako would feel if Hisao or I were to flunk now. It's the same kind of guilt that's been tugging at me ever since that trip to Kasshoku. Finally, Hisao softly speaks up.

"I understand."

"So do I. We'll do our best to pass the exams. You have our word."

"Thank you. I hate to put pressure on you like this, but please do whatever you can to keep this particular burden off Miss Ikezawa's shoulders."

"We will."

"I give you my word here and now that I will do whatever I can to stabilize and improve Miss Ikezawa's mood. This situation does not have any easy solutions and it's not impossible that her mood will degrade as graduation day gets closer, but I will do my best to make certain that doesn't happen. We take care of Miss Ikezawa and you take care of yourselves. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Miss Takawa."

"The pleasure was all mine. I'm happy we had this conversation. Perhaps we can have a more uplifting talk at some point in the future."

We say our goodbyes and leave Miss Takawa's office and the nurses' building. As we reach the dorm, Hisao sighs.

"I went to see Miss Takawa hoping for her to say that things weren't quite as bad as I thought, but to be honest I feel worse now than when we went in there."

"I'm afraid that goes for me as well. But there's no use complaining about it. We now have an additional reason to give our all at the exams. Let's both do our best."

"Yeah. Maybe we could still do a few extra things as well. Like making her dinner so she won't need to cook after she comes back from a long day of supplementary classes."

"I've already been doing that for the past few weeks. I felt it was the least thing I could do for her."

"Maybe we could... you know... treat her to a little outing this weekend. Just for a few hours. Just to cheer her up a bit."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea. We don't have that many days left until the national exam and Christmas and New Year are coming up soon as well. I don't think Hanako will be put at ease if she sees us taking some time off. It might actually make her worry more."

"You're probably right."

Suddenly, an idea pops into my mind.

"Hisao, do you have any plans for the upcoming Christmas?"

"Well, I'm going home on the 24th and stay at my family's place while still trying to get in as much studying as I can while I'm there. I'm planning to take Hanako along too. My parents said that it was okay. I'm not sure what it feels like for an orphan to attend someone else's family activity, but I think just leaving her in her dorm room will be even worse."

"I'll be going home for a few days as well. Akira said she won't be able to make it home for Christmas this year, so it'll be up to me to compensate for her absence. I was thinking that it might be a fun idea for you and Hanako to come over the day after Christmas Eve. We'll have to study of course, but we can also probably spend an hour or two just hanging out and relaxing. It's not exactly an outing, but it will still allow the three of us to spend some time together outside the school. I'm sure my parents won't mind. They'll be pleased to see the two of you again."

"Hey, I'd love to."

"Then let's follow through with it. I'll talk to my parents. You should invite Hanako."

"Deal."

"Let's get back to our books, Hisao. And let's study as hard as we can. We *have* to pass the exams."

"I'll make it through, Lilly. I promise."

"I promise as well."

After swearing our little oath we part ways. I hurry back to my room and return to my books, throwing myself into the subject with a new-found fervor. With luck, I'll be able to get in at least two more hours before it's time to make dinner.

05

Chapter 46 (Hisao)

01

"I think that's Lilly and her father over there."

Hanako doesn't respond. It's really crowded at the train station right now, and she's trying to block out the rest of the world by hiding behind her long scarf and the collar of her thick coat. Even though Christmas is not an official holiday here, there were still plenty of people who visited their family yesterday.

"Lilly!"

I call out in the direction where I saw Lilly's distinct blonde hair. Moments later, I see someone wave at us. With Hanako clinging to my arm, I slowly make my way towards our friend. As we reach Lilly and her father, they both greet us with a polite bow.

"Miss Ikezawa. Mister Nakai. It is good to see you two again."

"Merry Christmas Lilly. And you too, Mister Satou."

"M-M-Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to the two of you as well. I'm really happy you're visiting today."

"Let us not waste time standing around here. The car is parked not too far from here."

"Great. It's kind of chilly today, so let's go."

We follow Lilly and her father to the car, and a minute later, we're leaving the train station behind us.

"If the two of you desire to do some studying right now, I will not distract you with idle conversation."

"How far is it from here?"

"About 15 minutes."

"Hmmm, might not be worth risking motion sickness over."

"How about you, Miss Ikezawa?"

"Umm...."

Hanako is a bit startled by Mister Satou suddenly addressing her, but then meekly shakes her head.

"Just be sure to do your best to catch up when we get to the house."

"Ah... Yes, sir."

"If you wish as much peace and quiet as possible, you can use the guest rooms to study without anyone else around. If you want to take the occasional break, my wife will be honored to bring you some tea and snacks once an hour or so. We will make sure not to disturb you until it is time for dinner."

I exchange a quick look with Hanako. My own parents were already pretty 'encouraging' in getting us to devote as much time as possible on our studies, but Mister Satou seems even more driven.

"We... ah... appreciate the effort, sir."

Lilly's father flashes us a wry smile.

"I do feel a bit bad about having honored guests over and then pressuring them to spend about their entire stay engaged in an activity they are probably tired of by now, but I speak from personal experience when I say that some of the most important days of your lives are less than four weeks away from you."

"Personal experience?"

I guess so. Even though the company he worked at was a family company, it's doubtful he would have made it that far without having attended some prestigious university.

"The days I spent studying for my own high school exams were some of the most stressful days of my life, and they were not very enjoyable, but the results were worth the stress and lack of sleep. Sometimes you have to endure some short-term hardships in order to make a positive difference in the long run."

"Enduring, huh?"

"Yes. We Japanese have a proud tradition of being able to endure hardships with dignity and perseverance. It has made us some of the most resilient people in the world. If you wonder whether all of the stress is worth it, think of the many people in this world who lack access to the educational opportunities you are being given. You will find that many hardships are relative."

"That's a good point."

"Also..."

"Mister Nakai? I apologize for intruding, but I have brought you some herbal tea. Please enjoy."

I turn around to look at the entrance of the guest room where I've been studying for the last two hours and look at the kimono-clad figure who just walked in carrying a tray. I've seen Lilly's mother walking around in a business suit and in her sporty casual clothes, but seeing her in traditional Japanese clothes is another thing altogether. Her sky-blue kimono contrasts very nicely with her blonde hair, and the way the fabric is flowing around her as she moves makes her appear very graceful. Her figure...

"You know, if you keep staring like that I'll have no choice but to tell your girlfriend."

I instinctively flinch as I'm abruptly reminded that despite the change in clothes, the woman before me is still the same Karla Satou we met in that pub in Inverness.

"I wasn't..."

"It's a joke, lad. I hope you're not angry."

I simply roll my eyes at that. It wasn't so much Karla's remark that made me react, but simply the jarring effect of someone giving off such an elegant air at first before throwing out a blunt remark without warning.

"It's okay. I was wondering... Do you often wear traditional getups like these? And do you often greet your husband at the door the way you did when we arrived here? It kind of surprised me."

"Not really. They're beautiful and elegant, but not exactly practical. I also don't welcome my husband home every time he walks through the front door. These kinds of things are like one's favorite food. It only remains tasty if you don't eat it every day."

She hands me a bowl of very hot tea, which I put on the desk I'm seated at so it can cool down a bit. She then smiles sheepishly.

"I suppose I'd better get going. I wouldn't want to distract you."

"I'm actually thinking of taking a little break. You don't have to leave on my account."

She smiles.

"Well, if you don't mind a little company..."

She walks over to the bed, and I can't hold back a grin when I see her fumble with her kimono a bit before sitting down. She looks a bit annoyed at being caught out.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I'm a little bit out of practice. It *has* been six years since I've worn one of these. My technique used to be much better. But my husband hasn't complained, which is the important thing. And since settling here I've been focussing more on dusting off my Japanese than my kimono-wearing skills."

I can attest to that. When we first met her, Lilly's mother spoke with a pretty heavy accent. Her accent is still faintly noticeable, but I could easily mistake it for some unfamiliar local accent if I didn't know her origins. I don't think my English will ever be that fluent.

"This is a gesture towards your husband then?"

She nods.

"My husband may have married a woman from Scotland, may have led a foreign branch of the company for years and may have even picked up a few western trains of thought here and there through his exposure to foreign cultures, but there's a part of him that will always remain traditionally Japanese, and he's always been very proud of his country and his culture."

"That probably explained the speech we got on our way here about it being pretty much our civic duty to push ourselves as much as possible during these remaining four weeks in order to set the good example to the students and generations that come after us."

Karla lets out a bright laugh.

"Sounds like you really got him going. He probably reminded you that he went through the same thing himself when he was younger, didn't he?"

"Several times. What university did he attend? Did he make it in on his first try?"

Karla smiles proudly.

"The big T itself... Tokyo University. On his first try too. Being at the top of his class throughout high school paid off. "

"Whoa! He didn't mention *that*."

"Can't say I'm surprised. He doesn't like boasting. He says it's unjapanese."

"I don't think we can compare to that. Man, that *is* impressive."

"He always managed to push himself further than anyone else. That's why he succeeded. Anyway, try not to hold the tangent against him. He means well. Although..."

Her face suddenly becomes frighteningly serious.

"...it must be kind of ironic to be given a speech about enduring and pushing yourself by someone who endured and pushed himself all the way to Raigmore's Intensive Care ward."

I nearly choke on the sip of tea I just took. Karla didn't even try being subtle on that one.

"You disagree with your husband's views?"

She slowly shakes her head.

"I'm a little mixed on it. I agree with what he said in the car. The three of you really should give everything you've got to those upcoming exams, even if it's giving you a headache. The opportunity you're getting would indeed be a privilege in the eyes of many. Anyway, there's a lot about the Japanese work ethic and perseverance that I admire. I respect how dedicated your people are to their jobs and how highly they regard their customers. I also admire the Japanese perseverance in the face of hardships. If a neighborhood out here is ravaged by an earthquake, people simply keep going without complaining, or turning on each other, or looting other people's places. In a lot of other places on in the world, chaos would probably erupt quickly. But... Sometimes I feel those principles are taken too far."

"Like when?"

"Sometimes situations demand action rather than silent endurance. Sometimes children being bullied by their peers, girls being bothered on crowded trains or people in unhappy marriages endure their situation because they feel that that's what's being expected of them and that complaining or standing up for themselves would make people around them think less of them while I personally feel that those kinds of situations could be solved if the problems were highlighted instead of ignored. My husband's situation was a similar case. He felt the warning signs, but he just didn't speak up. Because he was taught from an early age that enduring without complaining was the proper thing to do, and he probably thought that there was no 'honorable' way out of his predicament."

She looks straight at me like a police inspector interrogating a suspect.

"What about you, Hisao?"

I'm not certain if I like the direction this discussion is headed in.

"Me?"

"According to Lilly, you do little more than studying all day long these days. Are you still getting sufficient sleep each night? How about your daily exercise?"

I ditched my daily exercise weeks ago and I haven't had eight hours of sleep in days. But what choice do I have? It's easy for her to say I should take better care of myself, but I don't want to risk falling a few centimeters short of a passing grade over a few extra hours of sleep that I could have managed without.

"I'm still doing okay so far. I realize that your husband also thought he could tough things out for a little longer too and endangered himself in the process, but I'm still making sure to take all my daily medication. I think they'll keep me going until things calm down a little bit."

She slowly nods her head.

"Well, I hope you're right. Be sure to see a nurse if something feels off."

"I will."

She grins.

"Attaboy."

"By the way, how has your husband been doing? Has he had any more trouble?"

She brightens up a little bit.

"He's doing much better right now, though I'm sure he'll be happy to tell you the details himself. At the beginning it was really tough for him though. At first every single tingle in his stomach or chest made him wonder if another attack was coming up. Makes you really paranoid. Lilly said that it was not uncommon for people recovering from a heart attack to feel that way."

I smirk a bit at that. Karla notices my expression and chuckles.

"Makes me wonder about her sources."

I shrug my shoulders.

"After we got back from Scotland, Hanako suddenly started getting unusually curious about... things. Or maybe she was always curious, but until then she was simply too shy to ask. Sometimes she'd even ask me a question out of the blue."

"And you decided to play along with the game that Lilly and Hanako were playing there?"

"Well, it seemed to make Hanako happy. Besides, I never got the impression that she was doing it purely for the sake of passing it on to Lilly during their daily phone calls. She always looked extremely sincere while listening to whatever I had to say about... the subject. I think she genuinely wanted to know how I felt about things. And she's always been a very good listener."

It probably helped me too. I've always been very reluctant to talk about my condition. And more than a little uncomfortable too. But the knowledge that there was someone out there, someone related to one of my best friends no less, who might be drawing strength from my thoughts and impressions was a very effective push. And it also helped that Hanako never tried to force things. Whenever I started

feeling uncomfortable, she'd never fail to soothe my nerves. She'd take my hand in hers, or snuggle up to me, or give me a soft kiss accompanied by that warm smile of hers, or let me rest my head in her lap while she ran her fingers through my hair. True to her usual ways, she'd hardly ever speak while doing all of that, but I always felt stronger and more at ease afterwards. She was such a sweetheart during those moments. The two of us probably got a lot closer during that time.

"I think it helped a lot. Lilly often used your example to remind my husband that it was possible to go through something like that and pick yourself up afterwards. So, thanks for that. I think we as a family owe you one."

It feels kind of weird to hear that my life has been used to offer comfort to a recovering heart patient. They should have seen me the way I was before Hanako and Lilly entered my life.

"I mostly bounced back thanks to Hanako and your daughter. I'm happy I could do something back for Lilly."

I sigh.

"If only it was that easy to help Hanako get back on her feet."

Karla opens her mouth to say something, but then seems to think the better of it. After a few quiet seconds, she gets up.

"I'm sure she'll be fine in the end."

"Well..."

"I'd better get going now. Gotta start preparing dinner. You try to do a bit more studying, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

02

"Come in."

I turn around as I answer the knock on the door and it slowly opens, revealing Lilly standing in the doorway.

"Hisao, have you been able to get a lot of studying done?"

"I think so. I'm about ready for a break."

Lilly smiles.

"Mother has just informed us that dinner is ready. We were hoping you could join us downstairs."

"I'd love to. I think I've managed to work up quite the appetite over the last few hours."

I put a bookmark in my science book to mark the spot where I'll be picking things up after dinner and leave the guest room. Beyond the doorway, Lilly and Hanako are waiting for me. I look at Hanako, who's fidgeting with one of the sleeves of the thick (and slightly too large) sweater she's wearing.

"Hey Hanako. How's your studying coming along?"

"N-Not t-too bad."

"It's good to hear that we've all done a good amount of studying. Come, let's not keep Father and Mother waiting for too long."

We follow Lilly down the stairs and into the dining area where her parents are waiting for us at a carefully laid table. Mister Satou, who's sitting at the head of the table, gives us a friendly nod and motions Hanako and me to sit down on his left. Lilly is delegated to the seat next to her mother on his right. I wonder if they picked this arrangement because it makes certain that everyone at the table is facing Hanako's left side, hopefully putting her at ease a little bit.

After we sit down, Karla takes two bowls, fills each with hot miso soup and puts them in front of us before serving her husband and her daughter.

"The soup smells delicious, Mrs Satou."

"Thanks Hisao. This meal is probably one of the more unorthodox ones I've made in recent memory, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that you'll find it tasty."

"Unorthodox? The soup smells good, but I don't smell anything unorthodox about it."

Karla grins.

"There's nothing unusual about a meal with miso soup, noodles and cooked rice, but I've also prepared a western-style turkey for the main course and a Scottish dundee cake for dessert."

"That's a... pretty unusual combination."

"Think of it as a multi-cultural meal. I came up with the idea while I was visiting a few of my friends in Inverness, and we talked about what each of us was planning for Christmas."

"Do you often visit your country of birth these days?"

"About every 5 to 6 weeks or so. Though I usually don't stay longer than a couple of days. Just long enough to drop by the head office for a few days and hang out with my Scottish friends."

"Are you still employed at the company?"

"Not officially. But I drop by there whenever I'm in the area so I can keep an eye on how things are going, remain informed about the going-ons there, keep my ear close to the grapevine and see if there are any conflicts or misunderstandings between the staff and the new management that I can help smooth over."

Lilly's father nods.

"There is also value in getting updates on the company's condition from sources other than the official channels, especially since the board of directors is so far removed from head office's geographical location."

"How are you finding your new position on the board, sir?"

Lilly's father lets out a soft 'hmmm'.

"I am honored to be a member there, but to be honest, meetings are so infrequent that I would end up with a lot of spare time if that were to be the only job I got involved in. Fortunately, that will not remain the case for much longer."

"Have you found a new job then?"

A subtle smile appears on Mister Satou's face for a moment.

"I will remain a member of the Satou board of directors, but early next year I will also join the ranks of another company."

Karla grins.

"The old boy network came to the rescue."

Lilly's father gives his wife a short admonishing stare, but then continues.

"My successor at head office knew someone from his university days who works at the upper management of another company and he was willing to put in a good word for me."

"What kind of company?"

"They are a major book publisher in Japan. The department I will be given a managing role in is responsible for analyzing the foreign market, determining which books would be viable to localize in other languages, coordinating the translators doing the localizations and then helping out with the marketing abroad."

Karla winks at us.

"In other words: the ideal place for an avid reader who is well-traveled. I'm sure he'll do very well."

"That sounds like a very enjoyable job."

"Yes. C-Congratulations."

"Thank you. I have always been more interested in books than in medical equipment, so it sounds like an enjoyable occupation although it is, of course, a bit of a demotion when you consider my previous position."

"Dear, your current position is member..."

"Ahem...junior member..."

"...junior member of the board of directors of an international corporation, which is a step up from CEO who got appointed by that board to manage things at head office. This new job is simply something you're doing on the side."

"That is not a bad way of looking at it, although I will not be able to afford allowing my future colleagues to see me like that. If they feel I am merely doing my job 'on the side', as you phrased it, they will not respect my input. I *will* have to pull my weight."

Lilly looks a little uneasy at her father's words.

"I just hope you'll remain mindful of your health, Father."

"I have no intention of getting hospitalized again, Lilly. I will make certain to remain under the watch of a physician who will be given permission to share his findings with your mother if he feels it necessary. I will also not be working full-time - yet - though the fact that I still have to attend board meetings of our company's board every now and then is the officially stated reason for that."

Karla gives a satisfied nod.

"That does put my mind at ease."

"Good. Then let us continue with this exquisite meal."

"Anybody up for another slice of dundee cake?"

No response. I was already pretty full before we got to dessert, and if I eat any more, I'll be guaranteed to contract a stomach ache. I might not be the only one feeling that way.

"I have the impression that our upcoming graduates are about ready to get back to their books."

I suppose that's our cue.

"Thank you for the meal."

"Yes. T-thanks."

"We will be sure to study as hard as we can until it's time to leave."

"That is good to hear. Perhaps, Lilly, I can supply you with some additional motivation."

"Hmmm?"

Mister Satou straightens himself out and pauses for a moment for dramatic effect.

"I have been thinking about the request you made some time ago. About... living accommodations."

"Oh..."

Lilly lets out a small gasp. It's obvious that she didn't expect this subject to suddenly pop up.

"While a part of me is still skeptical, I have to decided to procur an apartment for you to use and give you the opportunity to live on your own, provided that you pass your exams."

"Father..."

Lilly looks flabbergasted for several seconds before recovering and flashing her father a smile bright enough to light up the room.

"I... I promise that I will not disappoint you."

"However..."

He raises a finger for emphasis, only to quickly lower it again upon remembering that his daughter can't see the gesture.

"...I would like you to make good on the compromise you offered."

"Compromise?"

"Of taking a roommate. An extra pair of eyes. I insist on that."

Lilly doesn't immediately reply and instead merely turns to Hanako. As do I. And Mister Satou. And his wife. As more and more gazes center on her, Hanako's expression goes from surprised to uncomfortable, and she pulls up the collar of her sweater a bit as if to hide from the staring eyes. After several awkward seconds, she finally manages to whisper a reply.

"M-Me?"

Lilly nods decisively.

"You and noone else, Hanako. You'd be the perfect roommate for me. That is... if you'll have me."

"Y-Yes, b-but..."

"There will be no need to worry about the financial side of things. This family can easily afford the rent of an apartment. All I ask is that you keep an eye on our daughter and assist her with things that require eyesight."

Hanako fidgets nervously, but then finally nods her head.

"It is decided then. Thank you, Miss Ikezawa."

Mister Satou politely bows at Hanako, and Lilly gives her best friend a happy smile.

"Thank you, Hanako. This makes me really, really happy."

"L-Lilly..."

Hanako still looks a little lost, but still manages a smile in response to Lilly's. As the three of us make our way back to the guest rooms, I put my hand on Hanako's shoulder and give it a reassuring little squeeze. When I sit down behind my books and turn to the page where I left off, I feel a sudden sense of relief.

Hanako's been very worried that after her graduation, she'll be thrust into a world where she wouldn't be able to function.

After we started dating, however, she didn't seem to have a problem anymore visiting town or even the city. She'd be uncomfortable and on her guard sometimes, but not to the point where it paralyzed her. But maybe that was because if things went wrong, she knew she'd have a safe place to return to.

Maybe this opportunity to move in with Lilly and have her own little place of safety is just what she needs. A little island of stability in a sea of uncertainty.

Maybe things will be alright after all.

"I hope I'm not interrupting."

I turn around to see Lilly's mother standing in the doorway again, but unlike last time she doesn't have a tray with drinks on it.

"It's okay. Is it already time to head back to Yamaku?"

"Not yet, but my husband and I were hoping the three of you were willing to have a little drink with us downstairs before we drop you off at the train station. You've spent most of the time here studying, so I think today was pretty productive, and you guys can probably do some more cramming on the train if you like."

I'm not sure if I'm up for that, but I do welcome a break at this point.

"I'll be right down. Just let me pack my stuff first."

"Great. We'll be in the living room."

I watch Lilly's mother walk out and then start stuffing my books into my backpack. One hour of additional studying in this room might actually be more productive for me than two hours of studying on the train, but I've made enough progress today to be able to afford taking it easy during our journey back to school.

03

I leave the guest room and make my way to the living room downstairs. As I enter, I find that everyone else is already there. The Satous are sitting on the couch on one end of a low table containing five bowls filled with tea. Hanako is kneeling near the corner, where a large Christmas tree has been set up. As out of place as the tree looks in the traditionally styled living room, I can't deny that it's a beautiful sight. Countless lights and ornaments are hanging from its branches, and as I approach Hanako, I notice that she's admiring several finely crafted figurines that are set up near the foot of the tree. I let her be for a moment and then softly touch her shoulder to get her attention.

"Hey there. Are you going to join us?"

She gives me a meek nod and follows me to the couch facing the one Lilly and her family are sitting on. After Karla hands each of us a bowl of tea, Lilly's father raises his bowl slightly and clears his throat.

"Let us drink to your upcoming exams. May all your studying pay off, and may all three of you pass with flying colors."

Lilly's mother shoots us a grin.

"We can hold a big party here to celebrate afterwards in order to make up for the fact that the three of you had to spend such a large part of today buried in your books."

Lilly smiles at her mother's suggestion.

"Cheers, then."

We drink our tea and hang back, the silence made more comfortable by the cozy atmosphere in the room. Eventually, Lilly's father exchanges a look with his wife who nods briefly and walks out of the room, coming back moments later with something in her hands that I can't quite make out. She gives me a friendly look.

"Hisao, there's something we would like you to have. We've been meaning to give it to you for a little while, but haven't gotten around to it until now. I figured... why not make it a Christmas present?"

"That bag you're carrying is for me?"

"It is. Sorry for not wrapping it up, but I felt that would be a bit morbid."

I can tell what's in the green bag she hands me even before I open it. The symbol of a heart with a small lightning bolt on top of it is pretty universal. I undo the zipper near the top and pull out a device about the size of a small toaster, except much flatter, connected to two electrodes. It's an AED unit with a small logo of Satou Medical Technology near the corner. I suddenly realize it looks exactly like the AED devices I've seen around the school. It wouldn't surprise me if Yamaku was actually a customer of the Satou family company.

"Ah... Thanks. That's a pretty generous gift."

"We have one of these around the house for my husband's sake too. You might not need one of your own at Yamaku, but we felt it might be a reassurance to have one on hand when you move back in with your parents after graduation. If not for your reassurance, then maybe for theirs."

"Or you might be able to take it to school with you."

"I don't know about that, Lilly. It's probably just a little bit too large to comfortably fit in my backpack with the rest of my books."

I get up from the couch and bow gratefully to Lilly's parents.

"Still, I really appreciate this. These devices are extremely expensive, aren't they?"

Karla rolls her eyes as if I just said something extremely stupid.

"Well, believe it or not, but I got a discount because I happen to know the manager."

"Please apply the electrode pads to the body of the patient."

A pre-recorded voice suddenly sounds from somewhere behind me, and when I turn around I see that Hanako has turned the device on while examining it.

"Hey, that thing has voiced instructions."

Lilly's mother nods at my observation.

"Most AEDs these days have. Not many people are going to read instruction manuals in the heat of the moment. It's really useful for people like Lilly too. I've given her a little crash course myself not long ago."

Hanako has taken one of the pads and puts it just below her right shoulder.

"Hey, take care not to accidentally shock yourself."

I hear Karla sigh.

"I hope that was a joke, Hisao. AEDs don't randomly apply shocks without determining whether one is needed in the first place. If you didn't know this, then I think a little instruction from yours truly is in order here."

"Please do not make him memorize any knowledge that he does not need for his exams, Karla. He has already absorbed enough information for one day as it is. He will still need to hang on to all of that."

"Sure, sure."

Our attention is once again drawn by Hanako as she finishes applying the pads and now mimics pushing the shock button. As she removes the pads again, Karla gives her an appreciative nod.

"That's all there is to it. Looks to me like you've handled this kind of device before."

Hanako nods her head.

"In f-first aid class. I think t-the model w-was exactly the same too."

Lilly's mother sheepishly smiles.

"Ah, the blessed first aid class."

"Ah yes, about that..."

I see Lilly's father exchanging another look with his wife before slowly getting up. Karla subtly motions me to sit down, sits down herself, and then shifts her gaze on Hanako. I notice that Lilly has also changed posture and is now sitting straight up as if waiting for something. Mister Satou is looking straight at Hanako and even though she shifts uncomfortably under his gaze, he doesn't avert his eyes.

"Hanako?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Yesterday, my wife and I celebrated Christmas together with Lilly for the first time in six years. In a few days, we will celebrate New Year together, and Akira has promised to join us for that occasion as well. It feels like the rifts in this family are slowly healing."

His gaze shortly falls on the AED device at Hanako's feet as if it reminds him of his own hospitalization this summer.

"I do not believe in spending a lot of time dwelling on what *could* have been, but I am nevertheless very aware of the fact that things could have gone a lot worse for me - and for our family. The fact that they did not is, for a significant part, due to your efforts."

Hanako's cheeks turn red under Mister Satou's words of praise, and she meekly shakes her head.

"I... d-didn't really d-do much."

"Your modesty does you credit, but I think our family does not merely owe you for what you did for me that night, but also for the tireless support you gave my daughter during the aftermath."

Lilly smiles warmly.

"Your support and encouragement have made a great difference for me, Hanako. You were the one who reminded me how important a family is and that it's worth fighting for."

Hanako fidgets awkwardly under the praise being heaped on her. She never did handle compliments very well.

"Hanako?"

Mister Satou's expression suddenly turns serious.

"When you visited me in the hospital, I asked you if there was anything I could do back for you. I always pay back what I owe to others. And nobody can deny that I owe you a great deal. Back then, you said you could not think of anything. How about now? Please think carefully and do not immediately dismiss my words."

Hanako thinks for a moment, but then shakes her head.

"I... d-don't n-need anything. I'm j-just glad that Lilly's h-happy. If m-my f-friends are happy, I'm h-happy too."

Lilly's father nods his head.

"I expected you to say that. So we came up with something ourselves. As a way to show our gratitude and appreciation. It is probably a little... unorthodox, but it nevertheless seemed fitting."

He walks over to a dresser near the Christmas tree, opens a drawer and takes something out of it. Something that looks like an envelope. Hanako looks puzzled as Lilly's father walks back and continues.

"We will, of course, not force you to take it. That decision shall be left with you."

"Hanako..."

He holds the envelope in both hands and extends it towards Hanako, as if he's offering some VIP his business card.

"...thank you."

Visibly unsure of herself, Hanako looks at the envelope that is being extended to her. She doesn't immediately respond, shooting me a helpless look as if asking me what to do now. I give her an encouraging smile.

"Go ahead."

As she nervously gets up from the couch and takes the envelope from Lilly's father, I notice Lilly and her mother are looking a bit tense. I wonder what's inside. Money? No, the kind of sum I'd expect Lilly's father to give as a reward would not fit inside an envelope like that. He'd use a suitcase to deliver it. Or a sports bag. Or the trunk of an expensive car. Company shares then? Hanako returns to the couch and looks at the envelope in her hand with an unsure look.

After what feels like hours, she finally opens it and takes something out of it. It looks like a letter. I can see Hanako's eyes quickly sweeping the paper. Then, as she's about half-way through, her mouth suddenly falls open, and I can hear her gasping for breath. Her eyes grow to the size of saucers.

I remember when we weren't dating yet and I decided to show her the scar on my chest. I told her I was going to take my shirt off, and she had an expression just like she has now. Well, almost like she has now. This time her eyes seem even bigger.

"Ah..."

My curiosity getting the better of me, I get a little closer to Hanako, and peek over her shoulder.

It doesn't turn out to be a letter after all, but an official form of some kind. Near the top is a logo and near the bottom are some dotted lines. One dotted line contains a meticulously crafted signature, obviously belonging to Lilly's father. Another one is empty. I start reading the text on the form and when I realize what Hanako's holding in her hands, I can't suppress a gasp of my own.

"Whoa..."

I first look at Mister Satou who looks back at me with a sincere expression on his face. Then I look at Hanako who is still in exactly the same position as she was when I took a peek, as if time froze around her.

Finally, I manage to collect my thoughts long enough to break the pressing silence in the room.

"Hanako, these are adoption papers..."

04

Chapter 47 (Akira)

01

"This seems to be the place..."

I check the address in my business organizer one last time and then steer my rental car up the driveway. After parking the car, I take a long look at the house in front of me. It's nowhere near the size of the mansion-like place they had in Inverness, though still larger than the average Japanese home. The neighborhood I just drove through doesn't have that same conservative upper-class feel our childhood neighborhood had either. I wonder what made Mom and Dad pick this place.

I sigh and then reluctantly push the buzzer. I wasn't really planning to drop by here today or... well... any day soon, but due to certain circumstances I ended up changing my mind. It'll probably be okay

though. I brought along a couple of manga to keep busy. And I really do want to see Lilly while I'm here. Lilly and...

"Akira! Good to have you here."

Unsurprisingly, it's Mom who opens the door and greets me.

"Yo."

She steps aside, and I walk past her into the entryway area where I start removing my shoes and prepare to put on some slippers. While I'm doing so, I take another look at Mom. She's wearing a sky-blue kimono that doesn't look familiar to me, meaning she probably bought it after she and Dad moved back to Japan. It feels weird seeing her wear one again after having gotten somewhat used to seeing her in her business attire on the workfloor. Which in turn felt strange when I first got to Scotland, because before Mom and Dad left Japan Mom used to wear kimonos quite often.

As I finish putting on my slippers Mom makes a graceful bow.

"Welcome home, Miss Satou. Please enjoy yourself."

"Home, huh?"

"Since you've never been here before, remind me to show you around later. Ah, and happy New Year, of course."

"Yeah, the same."

I follow Mom through the hallway into the living room. A pretty cozy living room from the looks of it. A low table, two large couches, some dressers near the wall and a huge Christmas tree near the corner. One of the cabinets probably contains a stereo, for I can hear soft classical music coming from somewhere. Seated on the couch, dressed in a dark kimono himself and cradling a book in his lap (no surprise there) is Dad. As I approach, he calmly puts his book down, gets up and makes a formal bow.

"Glad you could join us, Akira. Happy New Year."

I make a polite bow myself.

"You too."

Mom gives me a light pat on the shoulder.

"So, what can I get you?"

"I suppose you don't have beer?"

"You supposed wrong. Have a seat and I'll go and get you one."

"...thanks."

Mom walks out of the room, and I'm about to sit down when I hear a shuffling sound behind me, followed by a familiar voice.

"Father, I just heard the doorbell. Was that...?"

I instantly break out into a smile which grows even bigger when I see my sister carefully navigating into the room.

"Hey there, Lils!"

I walk up to Lilly and grab her in a not-so-gentle bear hug, chuckling to myself when she lets out an involuntary whimper.

Yup, still a wimp.

After recovering from the surprise, Lilly happily hugs me back. We stay like that for a second, and then I break off the embrace and give my sister a long look-over.

"Well, don't you look gorgeous?"

My words aren't empty flattery. Lilly truly looks beautiful in her dazzling white kimono. Mom must have bought it for her after they moved back here. Lilly smiles.

"Hello Akira. I'm so glad you could make it here. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you as well. It's really good to see you again too. How's the studying coming along?"

"We've set a goal to get at least six hours of studying in today, despite it being New Year. For now, we're still on schedule. Hopefully it'll allow us to catch up later."

'We', huh?

I look past Lilly and spot another kimono-clad figure partially hiding behind the doorway. I walk up to her and give her a hug that's slightly more gentle than the one I just shared with Lilly. There's a soft gasp, but then, moments later, the embrace is awkwardly returned.

"Hi Hanako. Nice to see you as well. Happy New Year."

"H-Happy N-New Year, Akira."

I give Hanako a look-over that's quick enough to avoid making her uncomfortable.

"I'll be damned if you aren't the cutest sight I've seen in months."

"Uhhh..."

Hanako fidgets uncomfortably, but I meant what I just said. Cute is probably the most accurate way to describe Hanako. The pink kimono she's wearing is a nice contrast with Lilly's, and her hair is done up in such a way that it still manages to hide most of the scarring on her neck. That all-too-familiar lock covering the right side of her face is still there, but it doesn't look too jarring. The kimono itself is probably just a little bit on the large side, though that might have been intentional, seeing that a good part of Hanako's wardrobe is slightly too large so she can hide her scars better. On the other hand, when I hugged her I couldn't shake the impression that she's gotten slightly skinnier. I do hope she's still eating enough these days.

"Did you do up your hair yourself?"

She shyly nods. I'm kind of impressed. That couldn't have been easy, though the alternative, letting someone else close enough to clearly see her scarring, was probably a much worse prospect for Hanako. All in all she still did a good job, aside from one spot near the back where it seems just a little bit uneven.

"Color me impressed."

My thoughts return to several weeks ago, when Dad made a surprise phone call and abruptly dropped a bombshell. He and Mom had decided to adopt Hanako into our family, and he wanted to know if I had any objections to the idea of having another sister. The way Dad phrased it gave me the impression that the decision had already been made, though at least he gave me an opportunity to voice my opinion, which is more than he himself got when Koji Kojima was adopted by Granddad. I told Dad back then that I had no issues with Hanako being my sister, and I still stand behind those words, even though my feelings about this situation are more complex than just that.

Lilly told me that Hanako would be visiting this place the day after Christmas together with Hisao and that our parents were planning to use that occasion to make her the offer. I made Lilly swear a solemn oath to phone me and tell me how things went as soon as she was able to, even if that meant calling me in the middle of the night. From what I heard, the proposal came so out of nowhere for Hanako that she was shocked into a silence that lasted for several minutes. Lilly eventually broke said silence by telling Hanako that it was probably a good idea to take as much time as she thought she needed to think about it. With the pressure somewhat relieved, the subject was dropped and the conversation went back to the upcoming exams until it was time to go, and Dad dropped Lilly, Hanako and Hisao off at the nearby train station.

That was a little less than a week ago.

I'm pretty confident that if Hanako had signed those adoption papers at any point between then and now, Lilly would have phoned me about it immediately, so it seems like this whole thing is still very much up in the air.

Two days ago, Lilly managed to talk Hanako into accompanying her and spending New Year's Eve and New Year's Day at this place instead of going along with Hisao. No doubt there was the unspoken intention of trying to get her to warm up to Mom and Dad.

But I wonder how Hanako really feels about all of this.

"Akira?"

"Huh?"

My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by Mom entering the living with a glass of beer in her hand.

"A penny for your thoughts."

"Eh, it's nothing."

I take the glass of beer and sit down on the couch across from Mom and Dad. I look at Lilly and Hanako from over my shoulder, but notice that neither of them has moved from their spot.

"No desire to catch up with me, girls?"

Dad readjusts the pair of glasses resting on the tip of his nose.

"Your timing was a bit unfortunate. They had a short break 15 minutes ago and just resumed studying when you arrived here. Taking another break this soon would be irresponsible."

Boy, the old man is really staying on top of them with this. Lilly smiles awkwardly.

"We have two more hours of cramming planned. There will probably be plenty of opportunity to catch up later. I'm looking forward to it."

"Well, okay then. Give it your best shot, you two."

Lilly and Hanako nod and then walk out of the room, leaving me alone with Mom and Dad.

Great.

"So, Akira, how are things in Inverness these days?"

"Okay, I guess. Not really all that different from the way they were when you were there three weeks ago."

Mom rolls her eyes at my response.

"And how are things with your boyfriend? Has he already made a decision whether to stay in Scotland or not?"

Just over two months ago, I apologized to Yuichi, and we decided to give things another try. With Koji's help, I managed to arrange a temporary transfer for him, so he could check things out, rather than immediately moving permanently.

We decided against him moving in with me. Not only is my apartment a bit too small for two people to live there comfortably, but we both felt that it was best to let our relationship recover a bit from the previous breakup rather than immediately spend 24/7 around each other. He's living in an apartment a few kilometers away from my own.

"Well, he's still working on getting settled. The new work culture took him longer to adapt to than he thought, but he responded pretty well to my attempts to get him... you know... a bit integrated."

"What kind of attempts?"

After moving to Inverness, I went out of my way to engage in activities that involved a lot of other people so I wouldn't end up like Dad, doing nothing with my life except working or sitting at home. Since I knew that getting to know people in the workplace was probably not going to cut it anymore, I joined a fitness club and started taking part in pub quizzes during the weekend. When Yuichi joined me in Inverness, I dragged him along whenever I could, but we're both at a point now where we know a few people we can hang out with in our free time if we want to. If he'd decide to stay there permanently, he probably wouldn't be lonely.

"Just general stuff."

Mom and Dad raise an eyebrow at my non-answer, but neither seems eager to start prying. Maybe that's a good thing.

"What do his parents think about the option of him moving?"

"They said they'd leave the choice up to him."

They'd certainly miss his presence, but since there's already someone else helping out with the family restaurant, I don't think they'd demand for him to stay in Japan.

"And up to you. I hope the two of you can manage to make this work. Maybe you can officially introduce him to us next time."

I can't help rolling my eyes at that. Yuichi's an employee of the company. Surely they've checked him out already.

"Uhuh..."

Mom frowns.

"You don't seem extremely talkative."

"Never mind me. I'm just a little tired. It was a long drive."

Dad makes a gesture towards the doorway.

"You can rest in one of the guest rooms if you like."

"That'd be good."

I drink the remainder of my beer and then follow Mom, who gives me a little tour of the kitchen and the dining room...

"Well, how about it? Do you think you could make yourself feel at home here?"

"...who keeps this place clean whenever you're in Scotland? Does Dad have hidden homemaking skills he's never shown until now?"

"We have a housekeeper employed who helps me out with keeping the house in order and who's also been willing to take care of breakfast and dinner in my absence, at least until your father starts his new job."

...the study...

"That room sure looks familiar."

"Almost as if he packed the old room in his suitcases and brought it along, isn't it? The actual room is a little bit smaller, so some of his books are stored in the attic, but overall we made this place identical to his study in Scotland."

...the bathroom...

"It's still larger than I thought. Instead of two families, that bath can now only house one, which is still way larger than the tub I have in my apartment."

"Your father has always liked relaxing soaks, though we don't need a bath like the one in Inverness anymore."

"Have you ever needed a bath that large during those years you lived in Scotland to begin with? Why get a bath that can house like seven or eight people when it was just you and Dad living there?"

"Because we had business delegations from Japan on occasion, and your father would often let them stay at our home instead of letting them sleep at a hotel. Since Inverness has no Japanese communal bath houses, it was not uncommon for the members of such a delegation to have a shared soak at our place. Obviously, this bathroom here will only be used by our family."

"Okay, that kind of makes sense."

...the attic...

"This place kind of looks like a small office."

"The study is your father's place to retreat do some work or reading, so I decided to claim this little room for myself. I'd like to start working again at some point, after things have settled down for Lilly and your father, and when I do, this place'll be my little base of operations."

"What on earth do you need an old typewriter for?"

"Heh, I wrote pretty much all of my articles on a typewriter like this one back when I was still in the reporting business. I like the nostalgic feel it adds to the place. I'll be using a personal computer for actual work, of course."

"Oh."

...and finally the bedrooms.

"Didn't get around to properly furnish this one yet, huh?"

"It's not that we didn't have time to give this room a personalized touch. It's just that we weren't sure what kind of touch you'd want."

"Me?"

"This house has three bedrooms in addition to the master bedroom, so you can all have your own room. Lilly has already given a few pointers on what she'd like her room to look like. We were hoping you'd be willing to do the same."

"Lilly visits this place almost weekly. It makes sense to give her her own room. It's not like I'll be in Japan that often."

"We have enough bedrooms available. If you don't have any immediate suggestions, I could also drop by your apartment the next time to see what your interior tastes are like."

"Uh..."

Mom gives me a teasing smile.

"Or I could just decorate this place exactly like your bedroom of 20 years ago. I remember that one vividly."

"I hope you're not being serious."

"I hope it won't be necessary. Anyway, I'll let you have some peace and quiet now. You can rest up a little bit for an hour or two."

"Two hours?"

"We're planning to pay one of the nearby shrines a little visit together later today. It's been a tradition in this family for as long as I can remember."

"It hasn't really been a tradition over the last couple of years."

"All the more reason to pick it up again now that we're back in Japan. I know your father's really looking forward to it. I really hope you're coming along as well."

"Well... Okay then."

"Great. See you in two hours then."

Mom starts walking out of the room, but turns around once more before closing the door behind her.

"Oh, by the way... Take a look in the closet for a little surprise."

And with that, I'm left alone in a bedroom that has little more than a bed, a closet and a desk in it. With nothing better to do, I walk up to the closet and take a curious look inside. The only thing in there is an admittedly impressive bright red kimono.

"Geez, how do you put these things on again?"

Suddenly those two hours feel ridiculously short.

02

"Is that shrine far from here?"

Dad looks at me from the rearview mirror and shakes his head.

"A minute or ten at most. We will be there soon."

Lilly smiles.

"I still remember how we used to celebrate New Year by visiting the nearby shrine together with Grandfather and Grandmother and then go home to play games, eat rice cakes and listen to Mother playing Beethoven's 9th Symphony on her cello."

Mom shrugs.

"I always thought it sounded bland without an orchestra to play along. You can't really play symphonies on your own and make it sound right."

"Still, it's a pleasant memory for me. I suppose I can't convince you to give us a little performance later today?"

"Sorry dear, but it's been a long time since I've played that piece, and I'd like at least a bit of practice before I'd feel confident about playing it again. Maybe next year."

"That's a shame. It is something that stands out in my New Year memories."

Mom nods and then suddenly snickers.

"Is something the matter, Mother?"

"Just digging through my own New Year memories, and I remember how we'd always go and buy those little sheets of paper that'd tell you your fortune for the upcoming year at the shrine. Those... eh... I think they were called o-mikuji. And you were always pretty anxious about that."

Lilly shifts a bit uncomfortably in her seat, but I let out a chuckle. I think I know what Mom's referring to.

"Oh right. There was that one time when Lilly burst into tears in the middle of the shrine because she picked an o-mikuji that predicted bad fortune."

"Akira! That was the third year in a row I picked bad luck, and I was only seven at the time."

"Heh, I did feel kind of sorry for you back then, you know."

Mom turns her head around and grins playfully at me.

"It's not like New Year was always kind to you. I remember when you were seven you convinced us to buy you a kite to fly on New Year. But after only a few minutes, you accidentally let go of the flying line, and the kite ended up stranded in one of the tallest trees in the neighborhood. You were so upset about that that you spent about an entire month throwing pebbles at it every day in an attempt to dislodge it."

"Oh my. I never knew. How horrible."

Lilly giggles and I hear way more amusement than sympathy in her voice. I roll my eyes and give her a poke in the ribs with my elbow.

"You be quiet. That was my first kite ever, and I only ended up having a total of five minutes to enjoy it. It was a very traumatizing experience, so don't make light of it."

"Hahaha. Did you ever manage get it out of that tree?"

"Not really. One day it was simply gone. There was probably a storm the night before that took off with it. Maybe it's for the better, or I'd still be chucking pebbles at it."

"The two of you will have to save the rest of the memories for tonight's dinner, girls. The parking lot belonging to the shrine is just down the road."

As Dad parks the car near the stairs beyond the shrine gate, I let my eyes sweep across the parking lot. I see quite a few cars here, and there's a bus nearby whose passengers have just disembarked and are now making their way up the stairs. We might end up having to wait in line for quite some time. Thank goodness it's not too cold right now. We get out, and I turn to Hanako, who's been silent for pretty much the entire trip.

"Hey Hanako, would you mind helping Lilly up the stairs? Tripping up and tumbling down would be a really rotten way to start the new year."

Hanako gives me a nod, and we start walking up the stairs with me in the front, Mom and Dad just behind me and Lilly and Hanako bringing up the rear. I can hear the bustling of the crowd of visitors ahead and the ringing of the bell before I make it to the top, but when I reach the shrine gate, I'm still overwhelmed by how many people are visiting here right now.

"Geez, how did all these people get here? There weren't *that* many cars in the parking lot."

Mom, who followed close behind, gives me a silly grin.

"Either those were clown cars down there or most of the people here used the public transport. You tend to forget how popular it is here when you live abroad for some time, don't you?"

"Yeah, kind of..."

My attention quickly shifts from Mom to Lilly and Hanako who have now also reached the top of the stairs and pause for a moment some distance away from us to catch their breath and take in their surroundings. The contrast between their reactions couldn't be larger. Lilly takes a deep breath and seems to enjoy the scent from the nearby trees and the murmur of the people nearby. Hanako, on the other hand, only seems to have eyes for one thing..the crowd standing between us and the hall of worship where shrine visitors can do their prayers. The serenity on Lilly's face seems to make the terror and panic welling up in Hanako's eyes even more jarring.

03

Damnit!

From what I've seen of her myself, the extent of Hanako's trouble with crowded places is hard to pin down. When she was visiting the indoor marketplace in Inverness, she seemed capable of traversing the place with a minimum of discomfort despite the fact that there were quite a few people there. Of course, that was during a vacation that, from what I've heard, she enjoyed a lot and she was probably in a good mood. The last month hasn't been exactly good to her - quite the opposite, from what Lilly has told me. I'm not sure if anxieties work that way, but it wouldn't surprise me if the rut she's been in lately has made her more vulnerable to things that trigger her apprehensions. The idea of having to stand in the middle of a mass of people for what would probably be over an hour has to be intimidating to her even on her good days.

"Hanako, are you alright?"

Perhaps Lilly has picked up a change in Hanako's breathing, since she turns towards her friend with a worried expression.

"I'm... okay."

I walk up to the two of them, eager to clarify the situation.

"It's pretty crowded here, Lils. Somewhere between 150 and 250 people who get to go before it's our turn. We'll probably be here for a little while."

"...oh."

A pained expression appears on Lilly's face as she realizes the situation.

"Do you think we should... ah...?"

I turn to Hanako.

"You say you're okay, but the look on your face says something else entirely, Hanako."

"Please d-don't w-worry about me."

"I'm not worried. I just wonder if spending an hour with hundreds of people all around you is really your idea of a good time. Because from what I can see, to most people here it is."

"Uhh..."

Hanako fidgets nervously. I think responses like 'I'm okay.' and 'Don't worry about me.' are kind of reflexes for her whenever someone shows concern for her. She hates the idea of burdening others. But I don't think that she's good enough at lying to tell me to my face that she trusts herself not to panic at some point if we were to join the crowd in front of us.

"I'll... b-b-be okay. R-Really."

"Hanako, whenever people do things as a group, the amount of fun they're having is partially based on how much the rest is enjoying themselves. If one person in the group is feeling miserable, then it takes some really willful obliviousness for the rest to have a good time. If you're gonna try and reassure me that you really are going to be perfectly fine, at least look me straight in the eyes while telling me that you'll be okay."

Hanako sighs loudly. She's obviously not convinced she can pull off what I just asked her to do.

"I could... m-maybe w-wait in the car?"

"I dunno. Maybe we should simply call the whole thing off."

Hanako's widen in panic.

"B-But, it's a f-family t-tradition, isn't it? You and L-Lilly s-should..."

I don't think it was Hanako's intention, but she effectively shut the argument down. I'm not going to navigate this particular minefield until I know exactly how she feels about this matter and this isn't the right opportunity to pry.

"I'll go and consult the folks. Let's hear what they have to say."

As I walk up to Mom and Dad, I find myself wondering how they're gonna react to this whole thing. How aware are they about Hanako's various anxieties? Lilly doesn't usually talk about them, and I had to figure out most of Hanako's issues through personal interaction with her.

"Hey, I've been thinking... How important is this to you two?"

Mom and Dad give me a puzzled look.

"Because this place is kind of busy, and it may be better to visit another shrine or maybe come back later when the crowd has thinned out a bit."

"It is true that there are many people here, but it does not seem to be busier than it usually is on New Year's Day. I do not think you will find a shrine that does not have a lot of visitors right now, and I suspect that things will remain that way until closing time."

"Then maybe we should leave and come back tomorrow or something."

Dad shoots me an incredulous look.

"Visiting a shrine on New Year's Day has been a family tradition for a very long time."

"Except during the last six years."

This earns me a scolding glare from Dad. Mom gives me a quizzical stare.

"Why? Why now? You were okay with this before."

I had other things on my mind earlier, so I completely forgot about the possibility of this happening. I would graciously accept blame for that.

"Hanako..."

Mom and Dad throw a quick glance in Hanako's and Lilly's direction. It's hard to make out Hanako's expression from this distance, but her slumped posture is easy enough to see, even from here. They exchange a glance, and I can see realisation dawning on them. Mom gives me an unsure look.

"Hanako and that crowd...?"

"...yeah."

"She wants to leave here?"

"Part of her wants to get away from here as soon as possible, I can tell that much just by looking at her. But she also hates feeling like she's a burden on others, so she's not going to ask us to cater to her. She offered to wait in the car, but I'm not sure if that's a good idea. She'd have nothing to do for over an hour except sit there and feel bad about herself."

"What do you think, dear?"

Dad looks pensive for a second and then lets out a disappointed sigh. He reaches into his pocket and hands me his car keys.

"Go ahead and take her back to the house. Then come back here afterwards to pick us up."

"Sure."

We make our way back to Lilly and Hanako.

"Hey Hanako... uh... Dad's given me the car keys and I'm going to go back to their place. Shall we go?"

She doesn't immediately respond and merely shuffles her feet for a moment while doing her best to avoid our gaze. There's a very guilty look in her eyes. Suddenly, Lilly speaks up.

"Father... would it be okay with you if I... went along as well?"

"...go ahead then. Your mother and I will offer a few additional prayers for your good fortune in your place."

"Thank you, Father."

Without much ado, we pass back down the stairs, through the gates and to the parking lot. This time, though, it almost feels like Lilly is helping Hanako navigate. We get in the car, and I drive back to our parents' home without anyone really saying anything. When we enter the living room, Hanako slumps down on the couch and holds her head in her hands.

"L-Lilly... Ak-Akira... I'm s-so sorry."

04

"Don't apologize, Hanako. It's really not that much of a big deal. Let's just relax a little bit, before you two get back to your books. I can afford to hang out here a little bit before I have to pick up the folks."

"B-But..."

"You know... back in the days we used to play games on New Year's Day after a shrine visit. Card games, backgammon, Lucky Laugh. Of course, Lilly would always win the latter. It's as much of a family tradition as the shrine visit was, and this one actually makes sense in my opinion. I don't see any reason for us not to honor this tradition right now."

Lilly smiles.

"Hanako, don't you have a deck of playing cards in your backpack? Why don't you go and get it? The two of us against Akira."

I grin.

"Bring it on."

Hanako looks a little doubtful, but then nods and walks out of the room. I wait until I think she's out of earshot and then turn to Lilly.

"I hope I wasn't being too overbearing with her back there. I kinda went with my gut instinct here. Given the number of people there, we would have been in the middle of that crowd for a long time and... If she had a panic attack ten or twenty minutes in, it would have been very difficult to quickly get her out of there, and we might have had a public spectacle right there with us at the center. Who

knows how Dad would have reacted to *that*. Ever since that screw-up at Kasshoku University Hanako's probably more paranoid around crowds than ever before. Maybe we should be too."

Lilly nods her head.

"I... think you did the right thing. I just feel bad about disappointing Father."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Lils. Set the good example for Hanako."

"I'll try."

We wait until Hanako returns with her deck of cards and then start playing, with Lilly and Hanako occasionally whispering to one another on which card to play. As the game goes on, I can see Hanako slowly starting to relax.

"Akira?"

"What is it, Lils?"

"Why do you feel a family visit to the nearby shrine doesn't make sense? I'm not sure why you feel that way."

"I didn't say it doesn't make any sense at all, Lils. I said that it doesn't make *much* sense."

"I still don't really understand why you would say that."

"Those shrine visits were a family tradition because the three people in charge of the family, that being Dad, Granddad and Grandma, are shintoists. With Granddad and Grandma not being here right now, we might very well have more catholics than shintoists in the home right now."

Lilly raises an eyebrow.

"Do you still count yourself among those catholics, Akira?"

"Naw, I haven't been much of anything for years."

Hanako gives me a mildly curious look.

"You were... um... catholic, Akira?"

"Used to be. Mom's a catholic, though it mostly translated into her giving us a pretty cross-shaped necklace to wear and sometimes telling us bedtime stories with a moral, like a shepherd who left his herd in order to look for one lost sheep or a traveller who was severely injured by bandits and saved by a member of an enemy tribe who had him nursed back to health out of compassion."

Lilly smiles.

"That last one was always one of my favorites."

"Mom's religion was always pretty low-key, but then I was thrown into middle school and some of those teachers started throwing the S-word around."

"Uh... S-word?"

"Sin. Nothing's more off-putting than people telling others they're lower human beings for the slightest infraction."

"Some of them were a bit heavy-handed, I'll admit."

"Anyway, I often wondered if a catholic saying a prayer at a shinto shrine isn't a sacrilege of some sort."

Lilly chuckles softly.

"I've always told myself that praying for the happiness and good fortune of one's loved ones is never sacrilegious, no matter the circumstances or the location. I'm pretty sure that Mother feels the same."

This discussion has made me curious about something. Having just finished a game, I wait until Hanako's finished shuffling and dealing the cards and then give her an inquisitive look.

"How about you, Hanako? Are you a shintoist yourself?"

Hanako looks a little awkward, but nevertheless gives it some thought.

"M-My parents were. We always went t-to our local shrine on N-New Year's D-Day too. B-But ever s-since... the accident, I haven't b-been to one. I d-didn't want to anymore, even though t-the orphanage staff usually visited the n-nearby shrine with t-the other children that day. I'm n-not really sure whether I'd even b-be welcome there anymore."

So the situation we just dealt with isn't even something new to Hanako. She's been faced with this kind of thing since she lost her parents.

"Oh..."

"It w-wasn't all bad though. We would usually eat some delicious rice cakes when the other c-children came back, and the staff would play games with us. That was... fun."

"You really like games, huh?"

She smiles gently and nods her head. I give her an encouraging smile back.

"Well, then let's play for two more rounds, and then I'll go back to the shrine, and you two can go back to your books."

05

"Aaaah..."

I stretch my arms as Lilly and I walk out of the bathroom after having taken a nice long soak. Lilly chuckles.

"That felt refreshing, didn't it?"

"Yeah, definitely a change from that cramped tub at my place. Though cramped has its benefits in certain situations too."

Lilly blushes a bit.

"Akira. That's kind of..."

Before we can continue on the subject, one of the guest room doors opens, and Hanako comes out and walks up to us.

"H-Hey. Was it... relaxing?"

"Yeah, it was pretty good. You can go ahead and get in yourself now. The water should be the right temperature for you."

"T-Thanks."

I give Hanako a friendly smile.

"You know, you could have taken one together with us, and I would have been more than willing to keep my eyes closed all the time. Soaking on your own is kind of lonely in such a large bath. Or Lilly could have accompanied you instead of me."

Hanako smiles uneasily and then shakes her head.

"It's... okay. I... already t-took a bath with L-Lilly yesterday. It... m-must have been some time ago when y-you and Lilly last bathed."

"Well, that *is* kind of true. The home we used to live in had a large bath too, so she and I used to take soaks together all the time. That kind of changed when I started working though. The last time we bathed together must have been..."

I rack my brain a bit, but can't come up with an exact answer. I give Hanako a goofy grin.

"...about the time Lilly's chest started getting larger than mine."

"Oh my..."

Lilly is visibly flustered by my joke, but then a playful smile appears on her face.

"...has it really been that long?"

Son of a- OUCH!

Hanako immediately turns her head away, obviously trying to hide her grin. I snicker a bit at Lilly's comeback, but am still determined not to let that little jab go unpunished. I give Lilly a playful poke in the side while at the same time winking at Hanako.

"You know, you'd better not diss my chest. After all, at least I have someone to admire mine. As does Hanako. As does Mom. You're currently the only person in this house who's headed for spinsterhood unless you learn how to accept date requests from people who aren't Hanako."

"I b-beg you pardon?"

The expression on Lilly's face is so comical that Hanako lets out an amused giggle before she can stop herself. Upon hearing this, Lilly smiles awkwardly.

"I have the impression I'm being made fun of."

"It's a joke, Lils. I hope you're not angry."

"Don't worry about it."

Hanako, probably having determined that the little spectacle before her has come to a conclusion, gently pushes her way past us and gives me a little nod before closing the bathroom door behind us. After hearing the door's lock snap into place, I turn to Lilly.

"Hope I wasn't out of line just now."

"I could very well ask you the same."

"Naw, you can make fun of me as much as you like. Especially if..."

"Especially if?"

"Especially if it cheers up Hanako. She looked a little down during our ride to the shrine and during dinner..."

Not just down, but also a little lonely if I remember correctly.

"...and she seemed downright depressed while we were driving back, but she was smiling again just now when she entered the bathroom."

"That's a relief to hear."

"You'd better get back to your books for a little while. If you feel up to it, that is."

"Hmmm... Have you finally joined the choir, Akira?"

"Heh, you're probably getting tired of all the prodding, but if you want to pursue your dream you'll have no choice but to do well on the National Center Test the upcoming month. They don't employ English teachers at Satou Medical Technology, so you can't take shortcuts like I did."

"I'll do my best. And Akira?"

"Yeah?"

A teasing smile appears on her face once more.

"I may not remain single my entire life, you know?"

"Meow, Lils."

Still chuckling, we each go back to our respective rooms. I lie down on the bed, take a manga issue out of my bag and start reading. I make it to page 20 before I hear knocking on the door. Too irregular to be Lilly's and too loud to be Hanako's. Not pronounced enough to be Dad's.

"Yes?"

The door opens and, as expected, Mom walks into the room. I give her a look as if to ask what she wants, but she merely stares at me for a moment.

"Uh... Is something wrong?"

"Hey. Did you and Lilly have a pleasant soak?"

"It was alright."

"No longer feeling tired?"

"Not really, it was pretty refreshing."

"If that's the case then would you like to join your father and me downstairs?"

Ugh. I was already wondering where this conversation was headed. Now I kind of feel like she set me up.

"I'd... uh... rather stay here if that's okay."

"There's not exactly a lot to do here."

"Until I finish this manga, that's probably not going to be a problem."

"That's gotta be one hell of a manga."

I manage to resist the temptation to ask her what on earth she meant by that and simply get back to reading. But contrary to my expectation, Mom doesn't walk out of the room. Instead, she sits down on the chair near the desk and just keeps looking at me without saying something. I raise the manga closer to my face in an attempt to block her out, but somehow her gaze manages to unnerve me enough to make further reading impossible. I sigh loudly and put my manga back in my bag before returning the stare that's aimed at me.

"Okay, what's the problem?"

06

Mom doesn't immediately answer and merely twirls one of her bangs around her finger.

"What do you think the problem is?"

I'm not in the mood for charades like these.

"Mom, if you have something on your mind, I'd rather get it over with now."

She lets out a tired sigh.

"When I heard that you were coming over today, I was hoping we'd get the opportunity to... you know... maybe not reconcile, but make a start to mend our differences. I didn't think there'd be a more appropriate day for making a new start than New Year's Day."

"Oh..."

"But that's probably not going to happen, is it?"

"Sorry I couldn't meet your expectations."

"Couldn't or wouldn't? It's been kind of weird to see you today, you know? Whenever Lilly and Hanako are nearby, you're like all smiles and sunshine. But the moment they're out of earshot, the temperature suddenly drops like 30 degrees."

"What did you want me to do? Put on a fake smile and pretend nothing's wrong?"

"For the love of God, no. I know a lot has happened between us, and it'll probably take a long time to move past that, but... It felt like you weren't even trying today. Whenever we talk to you, you answer in single syllables. You took literally every single opportunity you could get to avoid us or get away from us."

"At least I haven't started any arguments."

"Akira, why exactly did you come here today? You've declined Lilly's invitations before, so why not now? You could have spent time with Lilly before or after her stay here. If today wasn't a gesture of reconciliation and you dislike our presence this much, why come here at all? Why let us mar your day?"

I never came here to reconcile. If that's what she expected then it's no wonder she's disappointed.

"It's complicated."

My gaze briefly wanders towards one of the walls. Mom follows my gaze and then nods.

"Hanako?"

She picked that one up quickly, I have to admit that much.

"I wanted to keep an eye out. Just in case. Make certain she'd be alright. That's why I came."

Mom lets out a bitter chuckle.

"You came here to protect her against us? I'm not sure whether to be laugh or cry about that. A few weeks ago, you still gave us your blessing. We wouldn't have gone ahead without that. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"No change of heart. Dad asked a very specific question, and I gave a very specific answer. He asked if I objected to having Hanako as my little sister. I said I didn't, and that hasn't changed. She's a sweet kid, and I really do feel a certain bond with her."

"I agree. And she doesn't seem to have a lot of people in her life right now. Don't you think she deserves a family?"

"I think she deserves a family, alright. I'm just not so sure whether she deserves this one."

"Any specific objections?"

"Come on, Mom. Don't play dumb. What if Hanako had been a few years younger and you would have had to go through the orphanage staff to make the arrangement? Do you think they would have gone along with it if they knew about your track record?"

"They just might have. There's one heck of a lot of adoptions taking place each year in this country, but only a minuscule part of those adoptions actually involve children who are in need of a home. Adoptive parents aren't all that common. Nearly all adoptees are successful adult men."

"So you'd be counting on their desperation? That sure is a big reassurance."

"Your cynicism is noted."

"My cynicism, huh? I wonder..."

"Yes?"

"She hasn't given you an answer yet, has she? Not when you first asked her, not during the week that came after and not today, even though New Year's Day would have been a perfect occasion to make a 'new start' as you put it."

"No. Not yet. But we told her she could take her time. And she really should be focussing on the National Center Test and her entrance exams. Get those out of the way first."

I study the expression on Mom's face carefully, and I detect the same slight sense of anxiety that I noticed on Lilly's face when I briefly asked her about this subject during our shared soaking session. It's pretty obvious that both had been expecting Hanako to have jumped at the offer when it was made to her.

"I wonder if you guys also thought of an exit strategy in case Hanako isn't interested."

"We told her that the decision is hers to make. If she declines, she'll still always be welcome here as an honored guest."

"Surely you don't believe that it's that simple. Hanako probably feels that declining would be an insult. Even if she declined, she'd still be roommates with Lilly. She'd still be living in an apartment that you two are paying for and that you might be visiting every now and then too. Do you realize just how awkward that would be for her?"

"You almost make it sound like you're secretly hoping for this whole thing to fall apart."

07

"That's not it. I'm simply hoping for whatever outcome is best for Hanako. That girl's been hurt a lot in the past and is still lugging around one hell of a lot of baggage. The last thing she deserves is to be let down again. You couldn't be bothered to take responsibility for your own child six years ago and now you think you have what it takes to take responsibility for someone else's. Can you even imagine what that's like? Don't answer that! I know you can't! But I can, thanks to you!"

I promised myself not to make a fuss today. I'd just go here, hang out with Lilly and Hanako and bottle up whatever anger I feel towards Mom and Dad. As long as I made sure not to interact with them too

much, things'd be fine. But now it looks like I'm about to break my promise. Something about Mom managed to touch a nerve, and now I feel my old wounds are bursting open.

"Akira, calm down. I'm not justifying what has happened in the past."

"No, now you're downplaying it instead!"

"I wasn't downplaying anything."

"You come in here and act offended, because I haven't forgotten about you having abandoned Lilly. You're like: 'What's the problem, we're here now, aren't we? Just shut up and forgive us already.' Like it was never a big deal!"

"I'm not..."

"Yes, you are! You're lecturing me about how New Year's Day is such a perfect date for a new start. Do you know what would have been an even better date for a new start? Well? The previous six friggin' New Year's Days! That's all Lilly wanted for New Year, you know. For you to come back to her!"

"I..."

"Just because Lilly isn't going to call you out, doesn't give you the right to scold me for rightfully holding you responsible. Even though you don't want to be reminded that you left your youngest daughter in the care of a girl barely out of high school, that's still exactly what happened. Either that or you were planning to rely on a mother-in-law suffering from ulcers, shortness of breath and high blood pressure to clean up after you... like you've been doing for years anyway."

"Akira..."

Mom gets up from the chair and takes a few steps towards the door, but before I can reach into my bag to retrieve my manga, she stops, turns towards me and shoots me a vicious glare.

"It's nice to see that you're so committed to Lilly's well-being that you're attacking us on her behalf. You've probably convinced yourself that she's secretly thankful for it, too. What I remember Lilly telling me is that it's her dream to get our family back together again. And she's been trying really hard. I don't think it'll be easy to move past the last few years, but I still believe it's possible and that we can come out of this closer than we were before, if we give it an honest try. But you don't really believe that, do you? Neither do you want it. You've already given up on our family, and you're more comfortable with the way things are now! You wouldn't mind if things remain this way forever, but you're afraid of admitting this to Lilly, so you're playing along on days like this while blaming any lack of progress on us. Shout at us as much as you like if that makes you feel better, but at least stop pretending to have her best interests at heart! Because you don't!"

"Oh, shut up Mom!"

I'm shaking with anger at her words, and it takes all my strength to fight off the urge to punch her. I probably would have thrown my book at her if it had been in my hand right now.

"Mother... Akira..."

We've both been so occupied with our hostile stand-off that neither of us noticed that the bedroom door softly opened, revealing a very upset-looking Lilly standing in the doorway.

"Please... Stop fighting..."

The hurt expression on Lilly's face is enough to make me forget about the anger I just felt and replace it with a weary resignation. When I look at Mom, I notice the combative look in her eyes has vanished as suddenly as it appeared and has given way to a tired expression. She sighs as she briefly puts her hand on Lilly's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, dear."

"Sorry, Lils. I'll keep my mouth shut from now on."

Without responding any further, Lilly turns around and walks out of the room. Crap. I really messed up this time. I wonder how much of that argument she overheard. Probably all of it.

Mom turns to me and lets out another weary sigh.

"I... may have been out of line just now."

"I could really use a beer right about now."

"Yeah, me too. Want to go and grab one?"

"...why not?"

I follow Mom to the kitchen where she opens the fridge and takes two cans of beer out of it. I take one of them from Mom, and we open our cans with a loud snap. Neither of us looks at the other or says a word as we drink. I doubt there's much to say to begin with. When I finish my beer and prepare to throw the can away, I suddenly notice a small box on a sidetable that wasn't there when I got a tour of the kitchen.

08

"What's in there?"

"Oh, we picked that up today. We got it for Lilly, Hanako and you. We were planning to give it to the three of you later this evening. Now that I think about it, now would be a good time to do so. I doubt Lilly's currently in the mood to do any more studying. Would you mind getting the girls?"

"Well, okay."

I go upstairs and visit Lilly and Hanako in their rooms, telling them that Mom and Dad have something they wanted to give to them. When we get back to the living room, Mom and Dad are already waiting for us with the box I noticed earlier on the table in the middle. The three of us sit down on one of the couches, and Dad scrapes his throat.

"Ahem, I trust the two of you are satisfied with the amount of studying you have managed to get in for today?"

"I have, Father."

"I... umm... t-think so."

"Very good. Since the three of you were absent during our visit to the shrine's hall of worship, we made certain to bring you some of these. With the exams so close, we felt it could not hurt."

He takes the box off the table and opens it. It's filled to the brim with o-mikuji. Mom smiles.

"Hopefully a little good fortune for the exams you're facing this month."

I scratch my head.

"You sure bought a lot of those o-mikuji."

"The three of you can take one each. I'm going to take the rest of them to my colleagues in Inverness on my next trip there. They love this kind of stuff."

Father makes an inviting gesture towards the box.

"Go ahead and take one."

Lilly, Hanako and I each pick a piece of paper from the box and unfold it. With more than a little hint of excitement, Lilly shows me her piece.

"Can you tell me what mine says, Akira?"

"You got 'Good Luck', Lils. I hope that translates into good results later this month."

Lilly beams.

"I really hope so too. What did you get, Akira?"

"I got a 'Bad Luck' one. No biggie."

"Oh..."

I roll my eyes at Lilly's slightly worried expression.

"You know, I don't really believe in this stuff, so it doesn't faze me."

"Even so..."

My eyes shift from Lilly to Hanako who has just unfolded her piece, but doesn't really react to it.

"What did you get, Hanako?"

Without saying anything, she gives me her piece of paper.

"It says 'Great Luck'. Looks like we have a winner here."

Mom makes a quick 'not so fast'-gesture with her finger.

"You know what you have to do to draw out its full potential, don't you?"

09

"You know, I think we may have already used up all our good luck when we made our way up these stairs in the dark without breaking our necks."

"I think you may be exaggerating a bit."

It was still trickier than I thought though. After we each picked an o-mikuji, Mom suggested I drive back to the shrine together with Lilly and Hanako and tie our pieces of paper to the pine tree on the shrine grounds. As custom would have it, bad fortunes can be avoided that way while good fortunes are strengthened. Seems a bit silly, but I was kind of aching for some fresh air anyway, and there were some things I wanted to say to Lilly without Mom and Dad being anywhere nearby, so I gave in and drove back with the girls in tow. We very carefully climbed up the stairs to the gate, and now we're standing on the road leading to the various buildings. The shrine's been closed for hours, but fortunately there's no need for us to enter any of the buildings. The tree that visitors tie their o-mikuji to has to be somewhere nearby. It's probably near the hall of worship, so that's where we're headed right now.

"It might not be easy to find that tree with the shrine grounds being this dark, but a tree containing hundreds of pieces of paper must produce a pretty distinct rustling sound, so keep your ears open."

"Hmmm... I think you're right. Are we near the right building already?"

"We're pretty close. Do you hear anything?"

"Somewhere... to our left.

I peer through the darkness in the direction Lilly pointed out and vaguely see some light shapes moving in the wind.

"Yup, we've found the spot. I'll hold out a branch and you can do the tying, okay?"

"Alright."

I approach the tree, grab one of the branches and hold it in front of my sister who starts meticulously tying the pieces of paper to one of its unoccupied parts.

"I'm almost done. Can I have your piece as well, Hanako?"

No immediate response. Hanako's merely standing there looking at her o-mikuji as if the thing's calling her names.

"Hanako?"

I hear a tired sigh coming from her and then the piece of paper is pressed into Lilly's hand, who wastes no time attaching it next to our pieces.

"Hey Hanako, is everything alright?"

"Y-Yes. It's just..."

"Hmmm?"

"I... d-don't really believe in t-this either."

Earlier today, she told us that she and her parents used to visit a place like this during New Year's Day. I wonder what her last o-mikuji said back then, assuming she picked one. Maybe she picked a 'Great Luck' fortune back then too, only to be orphaned and disfigured later that year. That would turn you off to the practice pretty quickly. On the other hand, maybe the fact that she survived at all is great luck in a really twisted way. I wonder...

"Good evening. Are you here to... sight-see? I'm afraid we're... only open between 9 and 4."

Hanako lets out a cry of surprise when we suddenly hear an unknown voice behind us speaking to us in rather awkward English. We turn around and see a girl who's probably not much older than 16 standing in front of us.

"Uh, hey. Good evening. Sorry for intruding."

"Oh... ah... excuse me."

She seems a bit surprised when I answer her in Japanese. Due to our blond hair and the weird time of our visit, she must have mistaken us for tourists.

"We weren't really here to see the sights. We just finished hanging up our o-mikuji."

"Ah... Okay."

Lilly, sensing the awkwardness in the girl's voice, steps forward and smiles in her general direction.

"I realize that we're visiting at a really awkward time, but we've spent most of the day studying at our house, and we need all the good luck we can get for the weeks that lie ahead."

A look of realization appears on the girl's face almost immediately.

"The Center Test?"

"Indeed."

"Good luck. I hope you'll do well."

We exchange bows and prepare to leave the premise when the girl suddenly calls out to us.

"Excuse me."

"Yes?"

"Would you... ah... like to use the hall of worship?"

"The hall of worship? But the shrine is closed, isn't it?"

"The doors aren't locked right now because I just finished cleaning it. If you like, you can make a wish there while I finish my remaining chores at the administrative building."

Lilly gives me an encouraging look.

"Well, okay then. Thanks. We greatly appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I have an older sister who worked here as a shrine maiden during the last few New Year's Days, but now she's busy studying as well, which is why I've taken her place this year."

After thanking the shrine maiden again, we wash our hands at the nearby purification basin and then enter the shrine building. It's still pleasantly warm inside the building, especially compared to the rather chilly night air, and the presence of several lit lanterns in the room gives it a cozy atmosphere. Looking at the row of low seats in the center of the room gives me a sudden urge to take a load off.

"It's kind of cozy in here. Seeing that that shrine maiden sounded like she might still be busy in the other building for a little while, we might be able to take it easy for a few moments without running the risk of wearing out our welcome."

The girls think about it for a moment and then give an almost simultaneous nod. We put three of the seats in a circular formation and sit down. This is probably the most relaxed I've felt all day. I guess this would be a good moment to apologize to Lilly. I could do it after today, over the phone, but I'd really prefer to do things like these in person. I don't think either of us minds Hanako being nearby.

"So... umm... Lils, what did you think of today?"

"It was good to celebrate New Year's Day together again after being separated for such a long time."

"So you enjoyed it despite me... well... causing trouble?"

Lilly's smile falters a bit. Looks like she picked up what I'm talking about.

10

"You're still troubled by Mother's words, aren't you?"

"You think she was on to something?"

A pained expression appears on Lilly's face. This isn't a comfortable subject for either of us, and the silence that follows merely reinforces that.

"You can tell me what you think, Lils. I won't be upset if you take Mom's side in this case."

Lilly's shoulders droop upon hearing my words. I can't help but feel that what was meant to be a reassurance had exactly the opposite effect.

"Akira... I don't want to take sides. I don't want to feel like having to choose between you and our parents anymore. There shouldn't be any sides to begin with. Why can't you understand that? Why won't you understand that?"

She's right, of course. There shouldn't be any sides. Yet ever since Mom and Dad left Japan, that's exactly how things have been in my mind. They abandoned us. They abandoned Lilly. So from that moment on, it was us and them. They sent all the financial support we ever needed and then some, but as far as emotional and practical support were concerned, I was the only person Lilly had left. From that point on, it was up to me to be a father and mother figure at the same time. I promised myself back then that I'd be a better parental figure to her than Mom and Dad could ever be. That bar

wasn't set particularly high. All I had to do to stay above it was simply vowing to never abandon Lilly. Easiest vow I've made in my life.

"There shouldn't be, but when Mom and Dad left, I really did feel like our family was split into two halves. That was simply the way things were."

Deep down, I felt the schism in our family was permanent. Even if they'd return one day, things wouldn't be the same. It would still be us and them. It would always be us and them. Even though I felt angry, even bitter, about it, I accepted this to be reality from then on. Looking back on things, I think I did more than merely accept this new reality. I think I also grew comfortable with it. Like we were better off without them anyway. Maybe I grew too comfortable with the situation.

"Maybe. But I don't think that's the way things should be."

The same obviously can't be said for Lilly. Deep down she never made peace with the way our family split up and probably always hoped they'd unexpectedly return to Japan and we'd pick up exactly where we left off. Then we took that first trip to Inverness, and we experienced first-hand how much we had grown apart. It didn't really faze me since it merely confirmed what I already knew, but Lilly was very troubled by it.

"I've been thinking about it, and Mom's probably right about me. I have given up on this family. Probably gave up a long time ago. Look, I'm really sorry for kicking up such a fuss."

When Mom and Dad asked Lilly to move to Inverness, I didn't really know what to think about it. Part of me felt like she was better off staying in Japan. She had her friends there and a little semi-family of her own. We'd stay in contact regardless. If she'd really move to Inverness, I'd still get to hang out with her, but I didn't think she'd really get that close with our parents.

When Dad got hospitalized, the various confrontations between us reached a point where I feared that the two halves that made up our family were in danger of falling apart themselves and I hated the fact that I couldn't reliably support Lilly on this particular issue. So eventually, I turned to Hanako who was the closest thing Lilly had to a sister aside from me. I'm not really sure what Hanako talked to her about - Lilly's never been willing to tell me - but the next time I saw Lilly, she seemed to have found a new sense of determination and purpose.

Things really changed after that. When I mentioned to Lilly that people at the office seemed worried about going to the States without Dad and Mom, she suggested for Mom to go and me to accompany her as Dad's representative while she stayed behind in Inverness to look after Dad in Mom's place. We ended up going with that suggestion, and Mom and I spent quite some time in each other's company, although we didn't really do any bonding. Lilly, on the other hand, really managed to make an impression on our old man while we were gone, and after we got back I couldn't help but feel that he developed a genuine soft spot for his youngest daughter. When we learned that Dad was going to be replaced as CEO of the company and Lilly made the proposal for them to come and live in Japan again and Dad seemed to be willing to give it some thought, I did what I felt I had to do - throw my support behind my sister.

"Even if you have given up on us, we haven't given up on you, Akira. Nor will we ever."

"Heh, 'we' meaning 'you', Lils? Are Mom and Dad really this eager to have their black sheep back?"

"I think you're being too hard on yourself."

I dunno about that. As far as I'm concerned, Mom and Dad always considered me a bit of a troublemaker. While other kids in the neighborhood were spoiled by their mothers, I was continuously told what was or wasn't the proper way to act. Them eventually sending me to that horrible middle school was just one more attempt to turn me into something I never was, nor ever could be. Maybe that's why I so quickly became comfortable with the situation of things coming down to me and Lilly. Between the two of us, there was always unconditional acceptance. If the four of us would 'get back together again', there's no question who'd end up eventually falling by the wayside again, like always. Maybe that's why I feel the way I feel.

"It's not myself I'm being hard on. I'm fairly comfortable with who I am even if most others aren't."

"They may be hesitant to show it, but your happiness is very important to them. In fact... While I was selfishly trying to convince you to accompany us back to Japan, Mother and Father felt that maybe it was a good idea to give you the opportunity to find out if you could become happy in Inverness. They were thinking of your well-being when I wasn't. It was Father who told this to me."

"Heh... Dad?"

"He also told me he could never dislike you... because you remind him so much of Mother."

"A couple of months ago, I would have insisted he'd take a drug test for that saying kind of thing."

Lilly giggles.

"I agree with him. You two really do seem to have a lot in common. I think... it made it easier for me - to reconnect with her."

"Don't remind me, please."

It's probably not Lilly's intention, but her words give me an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach, just like seeing Mom's interaction with her tends to do. At first, I believed Mom somehow thought that imitating my way of interacting with Lilly was some quick and easy way to bond with her. I was quite insulted by the idea of such a cheap trick actually working. It wasn't until I spent some more time at head office, where Mom and Dad were frequently brought up, that I started second-guessing my initial impression.

"I... um... t-think it's actually t-true as well."

I smirk slightly as Hanako jumps in for the first time since we sat down here.

"You wanna know something funny? I hear this all the time at work. Just about every time I have a bit of fun with a colleague, I hear stuff like 'That's your Mom talking'. It's actually starting to get on my nerves a bit, being compared to her all the time."

Lilly smiles.

"I think they're complimenting you. Mother was greatly respected at work, wasn't she?"

"Mom and Dad both - from what I've been able to tell so far. Dad was considered the brains of the operation. Very sharp business instincts and a knack for playing the long game, but also a bit distant and... heh... a bit repressed. Mom was more considered the heart of the business. She had the reputation of being sociable and easy to approach. She'd usually be the one to smooth over

misunderstandings between the staff and either Dad or people from the Japanese branch, and she also acted as confidant for people on the workfloor. Heh, over the last few months people have been randomly walking up to me - probably under the assumption that I am her successor or something..."

"This is merely conjecture on my part, but I believe you and Mother will probably get along very well with one another once you manage to work out your... differences."

"Don't misinterpret my words, Lils. Just because she could earn my respect as a colleague doesn't mean I could respect her as a person, and without personal respect it would be really hard to get along, don't you think?"

"That's... pretty harsh..."

"Don't you wonder about it then?"

"Wonder about what?"

"Mom used to be so different. She was pretty much the ideal housewife from a traditional male perspective. Quiet, elegant - but also a bit of a doormat. I mean... When Dad summoned her to Scotland, I wasn't even that surprised she went along with it without putting up a fight. She almost always deferred to Dad. For some time, I simply saw her as just another victim. But that's kind of hard to believe now. If this proper lady thing was really an act, put on to 'set the good example' or whatever lame excuse Dad gave, why didn't she tell him to stick that summoning where the sun don't shine? Unless, of course, she really did want to get away from us."

"I don't really have an answer to that. Except we don't really know what went on between them. Maybe there was a confrontation, and we simply don't know about it. Maybe we'll find out some day. "

"I don't really get it, Lils. Is it really that easy for you to forgive them like that? Are you a saint, or am I simply dead inside?"

Lilly giggles at that.

"I think neither. Can I say something that will remain within these walls?"

"My lips are sealed."

"M-Mine too."

"The truth is that... I haven't forgiven them myself yet either. But... I'd still like them to be part of my life in the meantime while I deal with that. I don't think I can go back to the way things were, because I perceive them in a different light now. Perhaps less as infallible authority figures and more simply as ordinary people, just like you and me - with both qualities and flaws. This makes it easier to appreciate their qualities and overlook their shortcomings. I'd like to give them a second chance to prove themselves. Deep down I feel that Mother and Father genuinely care about us and about our well-being. I want to try and have faith in them. I can't really explain it myself. Call it female intuition."

Faith, huh?

"Hmmpf, I wonder why I don't have any of that 'female intuition' of yours..."

11

"Hmmm..."

Lilly raises her hand to her mouth in order to hide a playful grin, and I realize that I just set myself up for the world's easiest punchline.

"If any of you dare suggest that it's because I'm not feminine enough, you'll either be walking back to our parents' place or sleeping at the shrine. Just sayin..."

Lilly and I share a hearty laugh with even Hanako joining in eventually. After this little moment of silliness, Lilly slowly gets up from her seat.

"Seeing that we're indeed still at a shrine, perhaps it would be a good idea to do what we came to do here. Our host is probably finishing up as we speak."

"Good point. Let's go ahead and make a wish then."

We get up, I put some coins in the nearby offering box, and Hanako walks up to the bell cord on one side of the room, ringing the shrine's bell twice. As she joins Lilly in a silent little New Year's prayer, I find myself trying to put my thoughts in order.

For all her polite approach towards our parents, Lilly has a surprisingly down-to-earth attitude towards them that took me off guard a bit. Maybe I really should back off a bit and avoid shouting at Mom and Dad on her behalf.

Is it really possible to move on without forgiving them first?

Can I have faith in them?

Do I even want to?

If I want to keep interacting with Lilly, I can't keep avoiding our parents, tempting as it seems.

I wonder what kind of future we have as a family, if any.

Making a wish for our family to fully reconcile might be insincere on my part for now.

Maybe something more generic. I take a quick look at Lilly and Hanako and then silently nod to myself.

I wish...

I wish for everyone I've been with today to have good fortune the upcoming year...

...that includes...

...I suppose...

...Mom and Dad.

Yeah, that'll do.

12

Chapter 48 (Hisao)

01

"H-Hanako..."

As beads of sweat start appearing on my forehead, and my breathing gets more frantic by the second, I whisper the name of my girlfriend in desperation. I moan as the sensation I'm feeling right now grows even more intense.

02

Not now.

Keep it together.

Deep breaths. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

I struggle to regain control of myself. If I wasn't sitting behind my desk right now, I probably would have collapsed in a heap already.

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

My heart's still pounding like a jackhammer, but its pace doesn't seem to be increasing beyond its already frantic rate.

Breathe in, breathe out...

I might be able to get up. If this is still going to get worse, I might as well have my episode in the hallway and hope somebody notices and gets help.

At least I'll know the face of my sudden assailant.

I struggle to get on my feet and shuffle towards the door. Just when I reach the doorknob, I feel my heart slowly calming down. I lean against the door with both hands and try to avoid panicking, concentrating on keeping my breathing steady and emptying my head of any thoughts that might cause distress.

As my heart slowly returns to its 'normal' rhythm, I turn my head around and look at my alarm clock. It's 00:30 on January the 19th right now and under normal circumstances, I would have been asleep at this time of night already. But tomorrow (technically today) will be the first day of the National Center Test for University Admissions, and just about all the subjects I'm not extremely confident about, such as English and history, are on the books this day. That's why I decided to involve myself in a last-minute late-night cramming session.

I've been doing very little else than studying over the course of the last few weeks with the occasional nap thrown in for good measure. I know that it's not a healthy schedule, but until recently I was convinced that I'd be able to hang in there without any serious issues popping up.

But then this night came along. I wasn't feeling well, but I've been reminding myself that I'll be able to take it slightly easier after this weekend. All I had to do was hang in there for a little while longer. I was studying when there was suddenly an unusually loud knock on the door that startled the hell out of me and caused my heart to skip a beat, then another beat. Just when I realized that this could spell big trouble, my heartbeat returned, only for it to accelerate... and accelerate... and accelerate.

While fighting the urge to pass out from the strain, there was interestingly only one thought on my mind.

What will happen to Hanako if I die here tonight?

Thankfully, after what felt like an hour but was probably closer to 20 seconds, my heart started slowing its dysfunctional rhythm, and I slowly started regaining my senses.

That was close.

And now I'm at the door of my room. Whoever nearly scared me to death better have a good reason.

"I was starting to think you dozed off. This is no hour to keep a bro waiting, man."

I let out a frustrated sigh.

"Damnit, Kenji..."

Of course, who else? I consider shouting at him what an idiot he's just been, but then realize I probably don't even have the strength to keep that up and would achieve little anyway aside from getting into trouble with the dorm keeper. So instead, I walk past him and into the bathroom where I soak one of the washing cloths and use it to wipe the sweat off my forehead. As the cool cloth soothes my throbbing head, the adrenaline rush from the experience back in my room makes way for an overwhelming tiredness, so I sit down on the nearby shower seat and wait for my body to get its bearings back.

"Man, you're not looking so great."

Looks like he's still completely oblivious to what just occurred. Of course, obliviousness has always been one of Kenji's strong suits. Even the stress of the upcoming test hasn't changed that. I briefly consider how this could have turned out. The last sight of my life being Kenji looking down at me. What a depressing way to go that would be.

"I think I just got uncomfortably close to keeling over and dying."

"You mean like... that thing with your heart happened again?"

Wow, I didn't expect him to actually grasp that. Maybe my first impression was wrong.

"Y-Yeah, that thing with my heart happened again. I'm kind of impressed you still remember that. The only time I mentioned that to you was nearly half a year ago."

That was after my hospitalisation, while I was trying to keep him away from Hanako and Lilly working things out in my room. Man... that feels like such a long time ago. A lot sure has changed since then.

"Of course I remember that. They operated on you and placed that tracking device inside you, right?"

And other things haven't changed in the slightest. I guess there's a reason people like to rely on their first impressions after all.

"Forget about the tracking device. Why did you have to knock so loudly? You nearly killed me just there."

"Killed you? That's not a cool thing to say, man. Not cool at all. If I really wanted to kill someone, I wouldn't start making noises and scare 'em to death. I'd do something like... drop him off a roof or something... make it look like an accident."

"Look, you startled me with that loud knock. That caused my heart to act up."

"It's gotta be something more. Maybe someone spiked your food. Do you remember it tasting funny?"

"It wasn't the food, Kenji, it was the knocking. Besides, who'd want to poison my food anyway?"

"The feminist conspiracy - or someone working for them. They're trying to keep you from graduating and getting into a university."

"Why would they want to do that?"

"Universities in Japan are still largely dominated by men. They're among the last remaining bulwarks against the feminist influence. So now the bitches are conspiring to keep as many men out of there as possible and eliminate contenders before they have the chance to make it in. One at a time. You're lucky you're still alive."

"Is that why you're studying so hard to get admitted to a university yourself?"

"Am I ever! And it looks like I got their attention. Damn, now that I think about it, they may have been after me all along. Got the meals mixed up."

"I doubt it. The person who's been making us meals over the last few days is a member of the science club. You said you personally vetted all of them. Shouldn't that clear him?"

"Oh, right. So I guess it wasn't the food. Did you pass any girls carrying umbrella's lately?"

"Why?"

"There's the old trick with the poison-tipped umbrella. You pass a chick carrying such a thing, you feel a little prick in your ankle and by the time you're keeling over, the perp is already on the other side of the country."

"It was the knocking, Kenji."

"Did you receive any letters containing some strange powder lately?"

"It was the knocking, Kenji. Why is that so hard to accept?"

"Because I knock like that all the time whenever I need a favor, man. And you've always handled it just fine."

That's kind of difficult to deny.

"You know, maybe you're right. Maybe I'm just way more out of shape than I thought."

"You don't really look in good shape, dude. Maybe... you know... you should get some sleep. You look like you need it."

I'm already kind of used to Lilly and Hanako mothering me, but if even Kenji starts telling me I need to take it easy, I must be a really sordid sight.

"...maybe I should. Tomorrow's gonna be one hell of a day. I doubt I'll get much more cramming done anyway."

I get up from the shower seat and carefully make my way back to the door to my room. Before going in, I turn to Kenji, having just remembered something.

"By the way, why did you want to see me at this hour to begin with? Was it really that important that it couldn't wait until morning?"

"Oh yeah, that's right... it was. It was about... uh..."

A new feminist plot? Breakfast money? Or something even more...

"...your science notes. I need your notes on the aerodynamics stuff. You're the science club president. You took notes on that, right?"

... mundane? Gee.

"Yeah, I'll go and get them."

Still feeling tired, but no longer as anxious, I enter my room, get the notes he asked for and walk back out.

"Here's what I have on the subject."

"You're a real pal. If I can't make it into university, I might as well keep the honor to myself and eat the feminists' fuckin' poisoned food right here and now. And uh... Sorry about the knocking, man. Didn't expect you to take it that badly."

"Thanks. I didn't expect it either, so maybe it was a wakeup call."

"I'll return them when I'm done with them."

"It's okay. I think I know what's in them anyway. You might not be able to use them though. I wrote in rather tiny letters when I took those notes. You might have trouble reading them."

"Hey, don't knock the eyes, man. They've seen things. Terrible things that you can't imagine..."

He's back in his own world again.

"Good night, Kenji."

"Like when I made a ship in a bottle and my mom sat on it..."

03

I'm woken up from my slumber by the sudden sound of my cell phone ringing. Still groggy, I stumble out of bed and manage to snap it open just before my voicemail would have kicked in.

"Hisao Nakai..."

"Good morning, Hicchan!"

"Wha... Misha is that you?"

"Misha? Don't you recognize the voice of your own mother anymore?"

"Sorry, Mom. I just got out of bed."

I'm now awake enough to remember that Misha and Shizune weren't even the first people to use that nickname on a regular basis. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that Mom's calling me today. I was just taken off guard by how early she called. She probably wanted to make certain I wouldn't oversleep.

"I hope you weren't too nervous to sleep."

To be honest, that little episode last night did manage to rattle me, and I started wondering whether it was even a smart idea to set my alarm clock before ultimately deciding that without it I was almost guaranteed to oversleep. Now it turns out that I was never in danger of that to begin with.

"No, not really."

I turn off my alarm clock and start opening my pill bottles with my free hand. I might as well get that out of the way now that I'm awake.

"This is the day you're most nervous about, isn't it?"

"Yeah. History and languages are on the menu today. The most important subjects for me aren't up until tomorrow, but I'll still need to do fairly well on today's exams in order to keep my average up. I have some leeway due to science and math being weighed way more heavily by the faculty I'm applying for than today's subjects, but they could still drag me down if I'm not careful."

"You've been studying so hard over the last few months, I know you're going to do well."

"I really hope so."

"When do you expect to know the results?"

"We're not going to get official results, but the school's making copies of our answer sheets for us and the National Center for University Entrance Examinations is publishing the answers this evening, so that's when I'll know how I did. Same thing tomorrow. Tomorrow evening I'll be able to tell whether I have a chance to take the entrance exams for university or whether... I'll have to look for other options."

I'm really hoping it won't come to that. There are smaller universities in the area that don't look at the results of the Center Test for student admittance, but after Mutou's countless lectures about aiming high, I would be very reluctant to apply there. Assuming I won't feel too guilty to approach him, Mutou would be a good person to discuss alternative options with in case I flunk the tests this weekend.

"Let's not think about that yet. You'll let us know once the results are in, won't you?"

"Of course."

"I'll soon be heading over to the shrine a few blocks away to get some good luck charms for you and pray for good luck. The rest is up to you, Hicchan."

"Thanks Mom."

"Well, good luck today."

"Ah, Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Could you... Get some good luck charms for Hanako too? And pray for her good fortune? She's going to need it just as badly as I do."

"I will. How has she been doing?"

"Alright... I think."

"Good luck to both of you today."

"Thanks, Mom."

Having finished my morning diet of medication, I take a quick shower and go down to the kitchen to have breakfast, taking one of my study books with me to do some last-minute cramming while I'm eating. There's been an initiative from the junior students over the last few weeks to prepare meals for the seniors so that we had more time to study. It's one more example of the close community that this school is, and I for one am really thankful for it. After finishing breakfast, I pack up my things and head for the girls' dorm.

The girls' dorm's common room is really crowded right now. I see several 3rd years sitting at the tables, eating breakfast with one hand while leafing through a book with the other. I recognize Natsume and Naomi at one table, both studying intensely and catch Naomi letting out a pronounced yawn. She sure looks like she's seen better days though she'd probably say the same of me if she heard me say this. I also see Misaki from my class swapping notes with another girl whose name I can't remember. In one of the corners of the room sits Shizune, her back partially turned to the rest, calmly flipping through the pages of one of her books. Two girls whom I remember being in Lilly's class head towards the exit, and I quickly step aside to let them pass. The common room's probably way too crowded for Hanako to be here, so I head for her room, hoping she hasn't already left. As I enter the hallway leading to Hanako's and Lilly's room, I notice Lilly standing there talking to one of the teachers. I approach them and give the teacher a polite bow.

"Good morning, Lilly. Good morning, Miss Miyagi."

"Oh, hello Hisao. How are you? Are you feeling up for today?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Lilly. I'll be happy when this day is over, but I haven't counted myself out yet."

Our English teacher raises an eyebrow at my optimistic description of my own condition, but thankfully doesn't say anything. I've already decided that I'm *not* going to let Lilly (or Hanako) in on what happened in my room last night. The last thing I want is for one of them to have a flashback to what happened

with Mister Satou. It's funny, but I think I'm starting to understand how he must have felt; slowly feeling your limits approaching, but also realizing that the stakes are currently too high to quit or slow down. You don't hold back and save your strength in sight of the finish line. You go all out.

Lilly smiles.

"Miss Miyagi has been going around this morning giving pep talks to the girls who are about to participate in the test. Maybe she can give you one as well."

Lilly's homeroom teacher gives me a look-over.

"You're Mutou's star pupil. You'd better make it through this weekend, or you're going to break his heart."

"That's not the most uplifting pep talk I've ever had."

"What tests are you taking today?"

"Ethics, Japanese History, Japanese Literature and English. History's going to be a bit rough, but it's the last one I'm most worried about."

"Just focus on one subject at a time without worrying about the rest and try not to spend too much time on one question. Since all your most important subjects won't be tested until tomorrow, just try to do the best you can and save your strength for the subjects that give you the most points, namely literature and English. There'll be an English listening test at the very end, but the written test is the one you should try to do as best as you can in since it carries a lot more weight."

"I'll do my best. How about your star pupil?"

Miss Miyagi gives Lilly a confident nod.

"I think I can safely stake my job on her acing the English test today. Many students have been dreading the listening part of the test ever since it was introduced two years ago, but someone who was both raised bilingually and is used to paying close attention to audio cues should have no problem achieving a perfect or near-perfect score there."

Lilly smiles humbly.

"I'll do my best to live up to your expectations. English will be the easy part today. I'll still have Contemporary Social Studies, World History and Japanese Literature to deal with first. And there's... tomorrow."

"You've been studying pretty hard over the course of the last two months. It should be sufficient. Just concentrate on doing well on the subjects that carry the largest amount of weight for your university application."

"I'll do my best."

"Why are there teachers in the dorms, by the way? I noticed Mister Hoshino walking around the guys' dorm this morning as well."

"We're essentially doing a head count. Making sure there are no students who are set to take the tests today who accidentally oversleep."

"The school really seems to be going out of its way to help its students make it through examination hell."

"In the end the actual studying is still in your hands, but yes, we do try to accommodate you as much as we can. That's also why you're allowed to take the tests here on the school grounds instead of having to travel to the nearest university to take part in the examinations. Normally, only the larger high schools would be granted this privilege. You can thank us for our efforts on your behalf by doing well on your test this weekend."

"Have you already seen Hanako this morning? I came here looking for her."

"Not yet. I was about to go and check on her."

Lilly takes this moment to speak up.

"I believe I have heard her early this morning. She probably went to get some breakfast, though she's been eating in her room - as usual lately."

I must admit I'm still a bit worried about her. From what Lilly has told me Hanako only leaves her room these days to attend the supplementary lessons the school made her take. She eats and studies in her room with the door locked. At least, I hope she's been able to study."

Lilly's homeroom teacher walks up to the door leading to Hanako's room and gives a few gentle raps on it.

"Ikezawa? This is Miyagi."

There's no immediate response, but just as the teacher raises her hand to knock again, the door opens just a bit, and I can see Hanako peering at us from inside the room.

"Ikezawa, it's about time for everyone to head for the gymnasium. Are you ready to go?"

Hanako opens the door further and gives a nervous nod. She takes her bag and then walks out, closing the door behind her.

"Hey Hanako."

"Good morning, Hanako. Let's both do our best today."

"H-Hey."

"Good morning, Ikezawa. What subjects will you be taking today?"

"Umm...P-Politics and Economy, J-Japanese History, Japanese Literature and ah... English."

"And you have studied hard for them, haven't you?"

A silent nod.

"All the teachers here know that your mock exam results weren't an accurate representation of what you're really capable of, so please do your best to prove us right today."

"I'll t-try."

"What study are you aiming for?"

"J-Journalism and Media."

"Then those first two tests will probably be critical. Do your best."

"Y-Yes."

"The three of you should go now. My colleagues have probably unlocked the gym already. Also..."

04

"TEACHER!"

We turn around, and I notice one of the girls from our class running up to us.

"We're not supposed to be running in the hallways, Komaki."

"Sorry, but... in the common room... Inoue."

05

We hear our teacher softly curse under her breath, causing Lilly to cringe, before she takes off and runs down the hallway with Hanako following close behind her.

"This doesn't sound good."

We make our way down the stairs to the common room as fast as Lilly's navigation skill allows us, but by the time we arrive it's already so crowded in there that I can see neither Hanako nor the teacher. Even though I can't see Miss Miyagi in the crowd, I can certain hear her.

"Damnit, can you give us some room already?"

"Suzuki, hand me that pillow over there please!"

"Miura, go and get a nurse to help out. Wait, get two of them! Tell them to bring a stretcher too!"

"Get the chairs away from here. Put them in the hallway!"

"Look, this isn't working. No more spectators! Everyone who's taking the test, go to the gymnasium at once. Everybody else, go to your room! Come on! Today, please!"

At this point, the crowd starts to disperse, and as the common room starts emptying I finally start taking in the scene before me.

Naomi's lying on the floor of the common room, her limbs thrashing about as if she's being electrocuted. One of the tables and several chairs are scattered about. Miss Miyagi is kneeling by Naomi's side, holding a pillow under her head and trying to prevent her from hurting herself. I've seen Naomi have fits before, but the sight of them still never fails to make me feel freaked out.

Now that the bystanders are all gone, the only people in the room besides Naomi and Miyagi are Lilly, Hanako, Natsume and myself. Hanako and Natsume are both holding their hand in front of their mouth to partially mask their expression, but the look in their eyes is all too telling.

They both look crushed. I think they both realize the implication of this event. We all do.

"I really don't think the four of you should still be hanging around here. The nursing staff will probably be here any second now, and they'll take over from me. There's nothing you can do for Inoue right now."

Natsume nods sullenly, and when she speaks up her voice sounds like it's about to break.

"M-Maybe not right now, but... I think that... someone should stay by her side. When she wakes up and she... she realizes what happened..."

"I hope you're not talking about yourself. I could give Takawa a call. She can probably handle it."

"Natsume?"

We turn around and see a frail-looking girl standing in the doorway whom I recognize as Hanako's and Naomi's friend from the writing club.

"Jun!"

"I... ah... probably won't do as good a job at this as you would, but I'll stay here with Naomi. You and Hanako should get going and pass your tests."

Natsume and Hanako exchange a short glance and then simultaneously nod their head.

"Thank you Jun. That's really kind of you. We'll leave Naomi in your care then."

With that issue taken care of we quickly leave the dorm building and head towards the gymnasium. As we pass the main school building, Natsume lets out a depressed sigh.

"She was so looking forward to graduation too. I really wonder how she's going to take this. Even though she's been a little careless lately, she didn't deserve having the rug pulled out from under her in a way like this."

Lilly's ears perk up.

"I'm sorry, but... did you say she was careless? This didn't come completely by surprise?"

Natsume thinks for a moment and then shrugs as if to say 'why not?'

"Naomi can't really do much to prevent her episodes completely, but whether they occur occasionally or all the time depends a little bit on her lifestyle, which hasn't been very healthy lately."

"Are you saying that she overstepped her own boundaries?"

"Stress and sleep deprivation are things that make her more vulnerable to seizures. Her episodes have been increasing in frequency lately, and over the last week she was down to one every 48 hours or so. I

was really afraid that she was going to damage her brain if she kept going like this. She was caught up in this downward spiral that only seemed to get worse."

"What do you mean?"

"The more seizures she went through, the more stressed she became, and the more time she spent cramming in an attempt to make up for all the time all those fits were costing her."

"What a horrible situation to be in."

"I was really hoping she'd be able to hold out until the end of the weekend. She kept telling me that she'd take it easier for a bit after tomorrow."

Ugh.

"Please give her my regards when you speak to her."

"Thanks, Satou."

"H-Hisao, are you... alright? You look a bit pale."

"I'm okay, Hanako. Just a little upset about what just happened and more than a little nervous about the tests today. I'll be fine. As long as I can struggle my way through history and English, that is."

When we reach the entrance to the gym, we can see that a lot of people have already gathered there. I even see Yuuko hanging around near the entrance. Is she taking the Center Test too? Several groups of students, especially the females, are speaking to each other in hushed tones. It's not difficult to guess the subject of their current conversation. Rather than join one of the groups, Natsume secludes herself some distance away from the rest. She's probably not fond of the idea of people approaching her about Naomi right now. Before we can decide on whether to join her or not, I see Hanako pointing something out, and a moment later I see Lilly's homeroom teacher approaching.

As she reaches the place where we're gathered and several female students walk up to her, Miss Miyagi loudly claps her hands a few times in order to get everyone's attention.

"Alright, listen up everyone! We're all a little shaken by what happened to Inoue this morning, but the situation is under control, the nurses are looking after her, and we'll be talking to the National Center of University Entrance Examinations to work out a solution to this later today! So put this issue to rest and focus on your exams! I'll be acting as one of the proctors throughout the day, and if you're in my class and need my assistance with anything sight-related, but not question related, just silently raise your hand and I'll be right with you. There's a representative of the National Center keeping an eye on things as well today, so there's not a lot of room for leniency. Good luck everyone and go and give this your all!"

Almost as an indicator that she's finished, Miyagi pulls out a cigarette and lights it. The first students start pouring into the gym and Lilly, having smelt the smoke, approaches her mentor with a slightly uncomfortable expression and gets a sigh and semi-guilty look in return.

"Borrowed these from the dormkeeper's office just before I left. I really felt I needed one. And to think I was going to give up smoking for real this year."

Natsume approaches Miyagi with a wary expression.

"Teacher, what solution could possibly be worked out? Regulations on tardiness and absence are extremely strict for this test and there's no chance for retakes. Are there loopholes we don't know about?"

Miyagi gives a tired sigh while dropping her cigarette on the floor and putting it out with her heel.

"What else was I supposed to say? I don't want this lingering in the back of everybody's head all day long."

Both Natsume's and Hanako's face drops upon hearing this news. Miyagi looks a little bit uncertain, but then puts one hand on each of the girls shoulders and gives them both a tiny squeeze.

06

"You two need to shape up! It's more important than ever that the two of you do well today. Seeing that you are both good friends of hers, how do you think Inoue will feel if this little incident ends up costing both of you your chance to make it into your university of choice?"

That strategy has an extremely familiar ring to it. It's the same approach Miss Takawa used on Lilly and me. I wonder if this kind of guilt-tripping is the standard approach among school staff. Nevertheless, I can tell that Miyagi's words get through to Natsume and Hanako.

"Inoue is going to feel really bad about this, but if I know her a little bit I don't think it's going to keep her down for long. She'll be set on throwing you two a celebration party in the upcoming spring, so make sure not to deny her that opportunity."

With that, Miss Miyagi enters the gym. Natsume and Hanako exchange a confused look, but then I see something dawn on their faces. Suddenly, Natsume sticks out her hand at Hanako.

"I think Miss Miyagi's right. Naomi will probably be cheering on us, so let's not let her down. Let's do this, Hanako!"

Hanako gives the most determined nod I've seen for months and puts her hand on top of Natsume's as if to reinforce this pact.

"Let's k-keep this burden off Naomi's shoulders, Natsume. Let's make her p-proud of us."

"Right!"

"Right."

The two give a defiant nod and then follow the rest of the students into the gymnasium. I turn to Lilly who now has an admiring smile on her face.

"Hanako was looking really determined just now. It pains me to say this, but maybe this was just what she needed."

I've seen this kind of look on Hanako's face before. It's that look of intense concentration she sometimes puts on during a game she's determined to win. And she often wins when that happens. I really believe she's going to give it everything she has today.

"We can't do any less, Hisao. Let's do our best today as well."

And with that, we walk into the gym ourselves and take our place in our designated spots. When the proctor gives the signal to begin, the only thing on my mind is getting a good score today.

But nevertheless, during the break between the Japanese History exam and Japanese Literature test, my thoughts briefly return to the sight of Naomi convulsing on the floor of the common room. I didn't tell Hanako and Lilly, but what happened to Naomi hit really close to home for me this morning.

It could have been me.

Naomi's situation sounded eerily similar to my own. It probably was.

It could have been me.

I could have had an episode less than 12 hours later, and I would have lost an entire year. In just a single moment, all the studying I've done over the last few months would have been rendered meaningless. I make a sincere vow not to let this happen to me.

Tomorrow is primarily science and math. I'm pretty good at both of them. I've been studying on them for weeks.

Maybe I really should be going to bed early tonight.

07

Chapter 49 (Hisao)

01

"Come on in."

As the person behind the door responds to my knocking, I reluctantly open the door and walk into the office. I'd rather not be here, but as things are I think I'm going to need the peace of mind in order to study better.

"Good to see you, Hisao. Please take a seat."

The nurse makes a welcoming gesture towards one of the chairs and then goes back to typing on his computer.

"Just have to finish this report. I won't be long."

"Perhaps I can come back some other time?"

It's not like I have a lot of free time right now.

"Actually I've wanted to see you for some time now, so I'd appreciate it if we could get it out of the way now that you're here."

"Oh?"

"Earlier this school year, we'd see each other on a daily basis, and I thought that was a good habit. It allowed me to keep a close eye on the state of your condition and keep you in optimal shape. I haven't really seen you for over two months and I'm quite curious about how you're doing."

I'm kind of put off by the flat business-like tone in his voice. He usually only adopts that tone whenever he's upset about something. The occasion just now was pretty much perfect for a remark like 'I've missed you and our daily intimacies' or something else embarrassing, but for some reason he doesn't seem in the mood for stupid jokes. And whenever he's not in the mood for stupid jokes, I automatically get kind of worried.

"Well, I guess I'm doing okay, though also very busy studying for my entrance exams. I didn't do all that well on the mock exams, but I studied hard to make up for that and I managed to get a sufficient score on the National Center Test to be allowed to take part in the entrance examinations for the university I applied to."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Lilly and Hanako also made it through the Center Test. I'm especially relieved about Hanako, because her mock exam results were really bad. It's a shame that one of Hanako's best friends flunked. Or actually rather than flunk she didn't even make it to the test. She really had rotten luck."

"Oh yes, I know all about Inoue."

He sounds a bit annoyed.

"Excuse me?"

He shakes his head as if dismissing the matter.

"Never mind. So now you're preparing for the university-specific exam?"

"Yes. It's pretty stressful. I mean, it's largely focussed on science, which I'm not too bad at, but I'll be competing with nothing but people who are good at science."

"Yes, I remember my own examination period. Very hectic time. And at least I had the luxury of only having to be concerned about getting into my university of choice."

He finishes his report with a dramatic keystroke and then turns to me.

"I didn't have to worry about endangering my health."

"As you can see, I'm still here."

"So I see."

He opens one of his drawers and takes out a stethoscope.

"It's been a while since you've been here, but I'm sure you still remember where we go from here."

I nod and remove my shirt. I shiver a bit as the cold metal of the chest piece is pressed against my body. The nurse listens intently for several seconds, then moves the piece slightly upwards and repeats the process. After going through this procedure several more times, he puts the stethoscope away and gestures that I can put my shirt back on.

"So... did it still sound okay?"

"I'm afraid it didn't. I could hear an irregularity in your heart rhythm. But you probably knew this yourself already, and that's why you came here. Am I right?"

"Yeah, that's kind of the case."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"I actually had a rather nasty heart flutter on the night before the Center Test. I was busy cramming, a hallmate came to borrow some notes, he knocked on my door rather loudly, I got startled, and then my heartbeat suddenly went completely out of control. It passed eventually, but it was pretty scary. It's been such a long time that I actually forgot how frightening that kind of thing is."

The nurse groans.

"The Center Test was on January the 19th. That was nearly a week ago, and you didn't think it was important to tell us until now?"

"I had exams that weekend and I went to bed rather early the night afterwards. After hearing that I passed the exams, I figured I'd take it slightly easier for a few days and things would be okay, but..."

The truth was probably that I also didn't want a lecture about how I had to slow down. I already know the problem without someone having to rub it in for good measure.

"The same thing happened again today?"

"Not yet. I actually figured I got away with it. But the memory keeps buzzing around in my head, even though it's been days. I'm starting to lose sleep over it. I was hoping you could give me some peace of mind."

The nurse gives me a very stern glare.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't. Something definitely sounded off just now. You're walking an extremely fine line here, Hisao."

"I know that."

"How much sleep are you getting on a daily basis?"

"Between five and six hours a day. I realize it's not much, but a lot of other students I've spoken to have similar schedules."

"Are you still eating enough and is the food healthy?"

"Yes. The juniors and the students who failed the Center Test are preparing the meals and doing the shopping for the 3rd years who are still in the running. It's a pretty convenient initiative on the school's behalf."

"How much physical exercise do you still partake in?"

"Emi has probably told you already."

"I know that you haven't visited the track in quite some time. Any other physical activity at all?"

I think I get what he was referring to. Under other circumstances, that question would probably have been accompanied by a knowing wink, and he would have snickered at my embarrassment. It's a good thing his tone is so neutral this time around, because I feel the answer kicking me in the teeth while it's leaving my mouth.

"...none whatsoever."

Ever since Hanako lapsed into a depression following the incident in that lecture hall, our sex life has pretty much been dead in the water. During the last time we did it, it became clear that she wasn't able to get into it or even enjoy it, so we basically ended up putting that part of our relationship on hold until Hanako is able to pick herself up again, whenever that is. The sudden bout of abstinence initially left me feeling inadequate, and it used to feel immensely frustrating, but at this point in time I feel that maybe it's a good thing. That's because I'm having sincere doubts right now about my ability to get into bed with her and not have my heart act up. At least now I won't have the need to make excuses to Hanako.

"Sleep deprivation, stress and no physical exercise make a pretty toxic combination for a person with your condition, Hisao. I hope you can bring yourself to admit at least this much."

I know all about that. It's the same poisonous cocktail that caused Lilly's father to nearly end up visiting his ancestors.

"I know."

Kenji's defense about how he didn't knock louder than usual left me thinking. He should have restrained himself more, but the experience that night left me forced to admit that I've been allowing my condition to slowly but steadily start deteriorating, kind of like how Hanako's mood started regressing slowly but steadily after that traumatic incident last year. For the first time in months, I've started considering my own mortality again.

"I could draw you up a training schedule and a study planning that involves a responsible amount of sleep and a modest amount of physical activity, but I'm only going to do that if I know you're actually going to adhere to it."

"I'd have to see the schedule before I can decide that."

"The last person I made such a planning for ended up ignoring it altogether, and my hunch is that you'd find it too strict as well."

I wonder if that person was Naomi. That would explain the annoyed tone in his voice when I brought her up.

"Maybe. It's just... I really don't want to flunk my exam and find out that I could have passed it if I had spent just a little bit more time studying."

"I hear that one all the time. But it's going to be tricky doing something about your problem if you're going to just disregard whatever advice I have for you."

"I was wondering... could you perhaps prescribe some additional medication? Like the medication I was on shortly after my last release from the hospital? I reacted pretty well to that and don't recall any major side effects."

"Is that why you came here? Drugs are no substitute for healthy living habits, Hisao. If they were, I wouldn't have been pushing so hard for you to get yourself in proper shape."

"It's only for a few more weeks. I feel I'm really close. I can't afford to trip up just before the finish line."

The nurse nods at my words, but I can tell from his expression that he's not convinced, so I continue.

"Look, it's really important for me to get into this university. Lilly and Hanako are going there too. I don't want to fall behind them. If I fail now, not only will everything have been for nothing, but I'll be forced to go through this again next year. Not at Yamaku with its full-time nursing staff, but probably at some random cram school that won't even know how to deal with my condition. That's going to be even more risky. *If* I'm going to push myself, this school would still be the safest place to do it. I've already made it through the Center Test. I just need a few more weeks to finish this."

The nurse rolls his eyes.

"It sounds like you've been rehearsing this little speech."

A little bit. I suspected I was going to need it.

"I'm only trying to put into practice what the school has been encouraging us to do."

"What the teaching staff have been encouraging you to do. And even they wouldn't go around encouraging you to kill yourself or do anything else that might make you miss your exams."

He lets out an exasperated sigh before proceeding.

"To tell you the truth, entrance examination season is my least favorite time of the year. Of course the teachers' arguments are perfectly valid, and it makes sense for all the students attending here to go for the best academic credentials they can get, but the stress of examination hell can cause some real trouble at a school like this, and sometimes I feel that the teachers are a bit too eager to lean on the medical staff for damage control."

"I guess I'm not the only student who's having a bit of a struggle with his health right now then."

"Sleep deprivation, stress and high blood pressure are bad for anybody's health, but some people take it worse than others. Heart patients, epileptics, diabetics - just to name a few. This is always a hectic time for the nurses here."

"So situations like the one with Naomi are not uncommon around here at this time of year?"

"We've had years where nobody was forced to drop out prematurely, and we've had years where worse happened."

"Worse? Nobody died, I hope."

"Fortunately not. But a few years ago, before I was employed here, we had a student with epilepsy here, like Inoue. He made it through the Center Test just fine, but things went wrong when he went to take his university-specific entrance exam. Back then, our students still went to take their entrance exams at the university they applied at, just like everyone else."

"He had a seizure during the exam itself?"

"Yes. Now imagine a hall packed with students who have probably been cramming non-stop for months and are wound extremely tight due to crushing pressure from their family to succeed that day. Can you imagine the results when all of a sudden a person in that hall falls off his chair and appears to be dying with no medical professional nearby to quickly jump in?"

"I can imagine getting spooked like that could cause a blackout or at least a negative effect on one's performance. Were there a lot of failures that year?"

"Certainly a lot more than usual. Yamaku received quite a few complaints from angry parents that year. From that point on we got around that problem by making arrangements with the universities our students applied for so our 3rd years can take their entrance exams here under the supervision of a representative from the National Center of University Entrance Examinations who comes over for the occasion. That way, we can have our nursing staff on stand-by and they can take immediate action if a similar incident were to happen again."

"That's a pretty nice arrangement."

"Of course, our own students would still be impacted if a student were to have a seizure or a heart attack in their presence in the middle of an exam. That's probably a good thing to keep in mind, Hisao. Being reckless may not just put yourself at risk, but could also cause trouble for others."

I didn't really think of that, but it doesn't change the way I feel.

"Would it be selfish of me to say that I'd still like to take the risk?"

"Probably. But it's not like I can stop you from taking it."

He gives a resigned sigh, takes a note from his desk and starts writing a short list of medication on it. He then holds it out to me, but when I take it he doesn't let go of it.

"I'd like you to get one hour of sleep a day more than you've had over the last few weeks. That's not a request, that's a condition."

"Okay."

"If you feel anything out of the ordinary - anything at all - come back here and let me know about it. Not the week afterwards or even the day afterwards, but as soon as humanly possible!"

"I will."

He finally lets go of the note, and I quickly put it in my pocket before he can change his mind after all.

"Good luck with your cramming sessions, and try not to do anything that'll cause my head to end up on the principal's chopping block."

"Thanks."

I get up and walk out of the office, but before I can close the door, he scrapes his throat to get my attention one more time.

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still going to draw up a training schedule and a dietary plan. I want you back in adequate shape before this year's graduation ceremony, so prepare yourself for workout hell the day after your entrance exams are finished."

"I'll be looking forward to it. Go ahead and tell the workout imp to go and sharpen her pitchfork."

I close the door before he has a chance to reply, but the last thing I see is that familiar grin of his. Which honestly feels like a relief.

"Oh, hey there."

02

But when I turn around, I find out that I'm not alone in the hallway. Standing in front of me and looking me over is a familiar face.

"Naomi!"

" 'scuse me."

She nods at me and then walks past me, knocking on the nurse's door before opening it and walking in.

I wonder what she's here to see the nurse for.

Dammit, did she just hear the nurse's last comment?

I'd like to drop by at the apothecary and get back to my books as soon as possible, but the fact that Naomi just saw me leaving the nurse's office troubles me a bit, so I decide to wait for her and make sure she's not going to pass this event on to Hanako. The last thing I want is for her to get worried over me.

Surprisingly, Naomi comes walking out of the office less than five minutes after entering. Whatever she wanted to talk about probably didn't take long. As she closes the door, I notice a note in her hand not completely unlike mine.

"Hey there."

"Oh, didn't think you'd still be around. Hey there."

I shoot a brief look at the door of the nurse's office.

"That didn't take very long."

Naomi rolls her eyes.

"He used to make small talk, but I don't think he likes me very much anymore at this point."

"You got on his bad side?"

Naomi lets out a weary sigh.

"My parents were pretty pissed when I missed my exams that day and made an angry phone call to the principal, who in turn went to chew out the nurse, but he said he gave me a daily planning I didn't bother to follow, so now both my parents and the nurse are mad at me. And all I did was try and prepare myself well for my exams so they'd be proud of me. So much for appreciation of my efforts, huh?"

"I'm really sorry to hear that."

"It's so easy for everyone to say I've been too rash. But if you were running in a race on the track or something and you tripped and fell on your face, would you take it easy or would you double your efforts so you could catch up with the rest? That stupid schedule required me to sleep for a total of eight to nine hours a day. How on earth can I compete with people who have so much more time to study than I can?"

"I think I know how you feel. I hope your parents weren't too upset."

"We'll be okay. They just need a little bit of time to let it sink in. Deep down they know I didn't fail my test on purpose or anything."

I point at the note in her hand.

"Looks like we're both headed for the same place."

"Yeah, I guess I'll come along."

We start walking down the hallway, and I take another look at Naomi. She's probably still bummed about missing the Center Test, but she looks to be in better shape now than the last time I saw her.

"Have you already decided what you're going to do now?"

"Welllll... I'd like to give it another try next year. I mean... If I'm destined to crash and burn, I'd at least like to properly fail my tests instead of missing them altogether."

"Do you think your parents are going to go along with that?"

"I think so. I remember they were really proud when Hanako, Jun and I won a prize in that writing contest. I think they'll support me in the end. At least for one more year. I'd better not press my luck after that. It's not like university preparation cram school is cheap."

"So you're probably going back home after graduation, right?"

"Yeah, I think I'm going to move back in with my parents for a year and attend cram school in my hometown. I'm gonna miss the freedom of the dorms here, but it's not like I have anywhere else to go."

"Cram school, huh?"

"Yeah, at least for part of the year. But until the graduation ceremony, I'll be sticking around here and help out wherever I can. Both at the newspaper club and at the dorms."

"You're helping the juniors taking care of the 3rd years who are still studying?"

"Yeah, the usual stuff like cooking meals and doing shopping. I try to give Natsume some extra priority. She can use all the help she can get?"

"She's struggling?"

"She's applied for a university that has a pretty tough entrance exam. She's clever enough to make it in, but the stress is causing her arthritis to act up and that's making it harder for her to study. I dropped by the nurse today to get her some additional medication."

"So... Natsume too?"

"Yeah. I think my episode last month only worsened the pressure on the rest. Like... It showed everyone that many of us can still fail through no real fault of our own. That the deck is still stacked against us. It's kind of depressing. Maybe that's why the nurse was looking so glum. I bet his people are really busy right now."

"On the other hand, it's pretty clear this entire school is doing its best to reshuffle the stacked deck. They're making arrangements with universities so we can take our tests here on campus with the nurses close by. Junior classmen are taking daily chores off our hands. It's motivating to see that this entire school is working so hard as a community to get its 3rd years to succeed."

"Hey, that's true. It does make me feel kinda sorry that we won't be there to support them when it's their turn."

"There'll be others looking out for them."

"Yeah..."

As we get to the doorway leading to the apothecary, Naomi takes a look at the note I'm holding.

"I bet that unlike mine, that note you're holding isn't for someone else."

"I convinced the nurse to raise the dosage of my medication a bit. I'm hoping it's gonna be enough to carry me through the upcoming weeks."

"Figured as much. I considered something similar myself back in January, but I've been on the same meds for close to three years, and there's a lot of stuff I don't react well to, so there was no time to experiment. Might be an option for the upcoming year though."

"By the way, I was hoping you could be so kind as not to mention to Hanako that I was here. I don't want to worry her."

Naomi makes a face.

"And here I was thinking you were waiting for me because you desired my exciting company."

"Promise?"

"Well, okay. Fine with me."

We give our notes to the nurse on duty at the apothecary, and after a few minutes, we're handed our fresh batch of medication. As we leave the nurse's building, Naomi turns to me.

"Have you talked to Hanako recently?"

"I'm afraid I haven't. Do you have any idea how she's doing?"

"Huh?"

"What is it?"

"She's your girlfriend and you don't know how she's doing? You two don't have relationship problems, do you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We don't have a very active dating life right now, but there's a good reason for that."

Truth be told, I do feel like we've been growing apart a little bit lately. Hanako started secluding herself after the mock exams and lately, I've been doing exactly the same. Still, I'm convinced it's nothing we won't be able to patch up after graduation when we'll finally be able to take it easy and relax.

"Yeah, I get that you guys are all busy with studying, and it's really important, but I remember that the three of you used to study together all the time. It'd be a good opportunity to spend some time with one another and still get some studying done, right? Why not continue that?"

"We did that until the mock exams, but afterwards the school started dumping all those supplementary lessons on Hanako, and she was usually too tired to do a lot of studying with us afterwards. I didn't feel comfortable just studying with Lilly all day long, so we all ended up studying on our own."

"But those supplementary courses ended after the Center Test, didn't they?"

"Yeah, but... uh... since we're all studying for an entrance exam in a completely different subject, studying together wouldn't really add much anymore."

"Hmmmm."

Naomi gives me an investigative look that tells me she's clearly not buying it, but I don't really feel like discussing the real reason with her right now, despite the fact that she can probably guess what it is based on her own experiences.

After what happened just before the Center Test, I simply don't fully trust my body anymore. If I had an unexpected heart flutter in front of Hanako or Lilly, it'd be extremely likely that they'd lose what little sleep they're still getting worrying over me. I don't want to be responsible for putting even more stress on them than they're already under. I'll have time to hang out with them after the exams - after I've gotten back into shape a little bit.

"Of course I'm a little worried about Hanako, but I'm not sure if there'd be much I could do to help her at this point. I'm kind of walking on thin ice as it is and worrying too much about her would be bad for me too. So I'm concentrating on my own exam as much as possible, and I'm trying to maintain faith that she'll do the same. She did really badly on the mock exams, but she surprised everyone when she made

it through the Center Test with adequate grades all around. I think she can pass her entrance exams too if she really wants to."

"Entrance exams? As in more than one?"

"Hanako filed an application for an additional university that holds its entrance exams on a different day. I'm still not sure whether she did this simply to appease Mutou or because she's trying to keep as many options open as she can, but the gist of it is that she'll be participating in two entrance exams, rather than just one."

"Whoa! How does she do it?"

"Well, they're two exams about exactly the same subject, so it's not like she'll need to study twice as much material. But we're getting kind of off-topic. You still haven't answered my question."

"I went to see Hanako after the answers to the Center Test were posted. I mean, failing sucks, but it would have been worse if I had also dragged Natsume and Hanako down with me. When I heard that they both made it through, it felt like part of me passed anyway. I looked Hanako up that evening and told her that. She was... like... beaming when I told her how relieved I was. But..."

"Yes?"

"Just when I was heading out the door, that smile of hers turned sad again. I made me uneasy. I don't think we're out of the woods yet. I haven't seen her a single time over the last two days. I always leave her meals at the door. I can't help but feel like she's starting to seclude herself again. Maybe she's just busy. I hope this is not a sign of a relapse coming up."

It's obvious that Naomi is worried about her friend. I'm getting a little worried myself by listening to her. Is Hanako still okay? How is she doing? Is she studying diligently, or is she just sitting in her room all day long? If she's keeping her door locked, is she going to open up for me? Or would my presence merely make things awkward? I remember Miss Takawa's words that Hanako's mood might drop as we get closer to graduation day. And what's Lilly doing? Wouldn't she step in if she suspected that Hanako was struggling? No, that's not fair to Lilly. She has her own exams to worry about too.

I think I have an idea to cheer up Hanako a bit. I hope it works.

"Naomi?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you happen to have a pen and paper on you?"

"Of course! I'm a journalist, so I always carry a pen and blocknote."

"Could I use them for a moment?"

"Uh...sure."

Naomi opens her handbag and takes the pen and blocknote out of it. I take them from her and start scribbling a little note.

Hey Hanako,

Sorry for not having been around lately. I hope you're doing well. Things are pretty hectic for me right now, but I'm still managing. Whenever I'm not thinking about aerodynamics, electric circuits or quantum mechanics, I'm thinking of all the fun times I'm intending to have together with you after we've graduated together. It really keeps me going.

Let's both hang in there,

Hisao.

After finishing it, I neatly fold it up and hand it to Naomi.

"Could you deliver this to Hanako?"

"Well, she's probably not going to let me in even if I knock, but I could slide it under the door."

"Actually, I'd like you to include it with her meal. Maybe wrap it around her chopsticks?"

"Awww, that's a really cute gesture. Yeah, I'll do that. No problem."

"Could you also... like... try to avoid reading it?"

"You're no fun at all."

I say my goodbye to Naomi and quickly head for the boys' dorm...

...though not quickly enough to prevent Naomi's 'Daaaaaaaa' from catching up with me.

03

Chapter 50 (Hisao)

01

One more day.

That thought keeps returning to me as I look around the nearly-empty space of my dorm room. Tomorrow is the day we'll be graduating - the day we'll be leaving the school that I've come to call a second home. Over the last few days, the results of various entrance examinations have been slowly coming in. There's a notice board in front of the main school building that's being used to display the results for everyone to see. I've been paying the notice board a visit every day since the school started posting results.

Not so much for my own results, since those weren't set to come in until tomorrow, but simply to see which of my classmates managed to pass. Two days ago, I learned that Natsume made it through. That's probably a big load off Naomi's mind. Yesterday, I found out that Shizune successfully passed her entrance exam. I can't say I'm surprised about that, given her fiercely driven nature.

Tomorrow, the uncertainty will end. The fact that graduation ceremony is also tomorrow means that the diploma I'll be getting will either be the cherry on top of the cake or a consolation prize that'll do little to take away the utter disappointment I'll be feeling.

I remember how apprehensive I felt about coming to live here at Yamaku. How trapped I felt here. Yet now, nearly ten months after I first came to this school, I've grown so comfortable here that the day of departure kind of crept up on me. I tried not to think too much about it.

About a week ago, I started making a list of people I thought I should say goodbye to before I leave Yamaku tomorrow. The first rule I laid out for myself was that I would not try to write them down in any kind of special order, like least important to most important.

Somehow it ended up like that anyway, though it also ended up being slightly longer than I expected it to be. As I skim it over, my thoughts again go out to all the people I've met here and who became part of my life.

Yuuko... Being an avid reader and Hanako's boyfriend on top of that meant I probably had more interaction with her than most students. I remember her telling me that she was working those jobs at Yamaku and at the Shanghai for the purpose of financing her studies. It made me appreciate the fact that my parents have shown willingness to pay for my studies - as long as I make it into university and not spend years at cram schools attempting retakes. The last time I spoke to Yuuko she mentioned that our efforts at passing our tests had motivated her to do well on her own entrance exams. I wonder if she'll decide to go through with things this year or if we'll have a reunion here in 10 years or so and still find the same Yuuko bumbling her way through the library. I really hope not. She's a pretty nice person beneath that neurotic exterior, and she's shown so much enthusiasm towards her chosen subject that it'd be downright cruel if she never got to study it in university.

The head nurse... After taking the entrance exams, I made good on my promise to him by resuming my morning runs, and he made good on his promise to me by supplying me with a training and diet plan. It was a lot harsher than I expected. Although he denies it, I think this was his revenge against me for not mentioning my heart problems to him sooner during examination hell. Still, despite his tendency to crack stupid jokes, he's been a very reliable source of support over the year, and in the end I'm thankful that he's always been so serious about keeping me healthy.

Mutou... I remember when I met Lilly, she said that my homeroom teacher was quite a character, but that I'd probably come to like him. She turned out to be pretty much spot on. I never imagined Mutou to become an inspirational figure to me when I first met him, yet that's exactly what eventually ended up happening, and I think that my plans for the future about studying to teach science one day are for a large part due to his influence. Seeing that a lot of students seem to think his lectures are incomprehensible, I'll probably have to aim higher than his standard as far as teaching the subject is concerned, but when it comes to being a highly regarded homeroom teacher, I think the example of my mentor will definitely end up sticking in my mind. I hope to return here for a reunion one day with a teaching degree to show him.

Nobuyuki, Eiji, Wataru, Takahiro, Okahito and Naozumi... The science club - our science club - ended up having a total of eight members, myself and Kenji included. Eiji, Naozumi, Okahito and Takahiro initially joined up because they were getting low grades in science class. They admitted that much to me privately. But they stuck around because they enjoyed the activities. Even though Mutou and Lilly were the ones who brought up the idea of teaching as a career, the junior club members I helped with their homework were the ones who made me realize I'd probably enjoy doing that sort of thing for a living. Being stuck in the position of club president has also made me a little less reluctant to take initiatives. I've always been more a follower than a leader, and that's unlikely to ever completely change, but I'm a little less reluctant to take charge when the situation calls for it now. In a way, they've helped me as much as I've helped them. A few days ago I transferred the title of president to Nobuyuki, who is one of the few 2nd years in the club and also the one with the biggest knack for the subject. I hope the club will continue to fare well under his guidance. He may even become Mutou's new star pupil.

Kenji... He remains a wildcard to me even today. There have been times when we were discussing stuff like the law of gravity, and he'd suddenly throw a random conspiracy theory into the conversation completely out of the blue. There have been other times when he'd approach me and just when I started bracing myself for the latest update on the machinations of the feminist movement, he'd simply

ask me for my notes on one subject or another. I used to hold out hope that Kenji's membership in the science club would strengthen his link to reality in general, but it seems that Kenji's perfectly capable of appearing normal in public while still checking the roofs of the nearby buildings for snipers every time he enters his dorm room. I ended up coping with his antics by dismissing anything related to the feminist movement and simply focussing on whatever he said that did make sense.

Shizune and Misha... These two didn't exactly make the best first impression in the world. When I first came to this school there was a lot on my mind that needed to be sorted out, and Lilly's easy-going coaxing strategy worked a lot better at making me feel at home here than Shizune's aggressive recruitment tactics for the student council. It took me a little while to realize that both cousins had been trying to achieve the exact same thing with different methods. Despite having been put off by Shizune's confrontational personality at first, I ended up warming up to her and Misha rather quickly, and by the time I started dating Hanako, I considered the student council duo to be genuine friends.

While I've considered Shizune and Misha to be literally inseperable from the moment I met them, it turned out that they will still be going their separate ways after tomorrow. Through a lot of hard work and supplementary lessons, Misha's managed to do well enough to get herself a recommendation letter from the school, and she's set to transfer to a university in the United States later this year. Shizune, on the other hand, will be spending the upcoming years earning her business degree at a prestigious national university. I think they've been struggling a bit with the prospect of their roads splitting up after graduation, especially Misha. I hope they'll stay in contact with one another. Seeing how close they've been for as long as I've known them, it'd be a shame for them to completely drop out of each other's life.

Emi... I think I owe the fact that I've been in relatively good shape throughout my time at Yamaku (examination hell notwithstanding) largely to Emi's efforts. My motivation to go through with my daily morning runs has had its ups and downs over the months, but Emi's been there every morning which in turn pushed me to keep going, too. The few times I've skipped practice consistently left me feeling guilty throughout the day, which is probably something Emi'd take as a huge compliment.

I also learned that Emi likes playful arguments, and I enjoyed my bantering with her, but unfortunately I never learned all that much else about her despite seeing her nearly every day. Our interactions were pleasant, usually half-joking and perfect to fill the silences between the end of practice and the checkups with the nurse, but I've realized lately that they've also always been a bit superficial. Around the time preparations for the mock exams were starting, I remember inviting Emi to come and study together with Hanako, Lilly and me, but she politely declined the offer. I guess just being running buddies with me was enough for her. At least I've made some good memories together with her, and I hope she feels the same way. According to the nurse, Emi's applied to a junior college in the nearby city with the intention of being a PE instructor. I think she'd be a good one, albeit a bit scary sometimes. Apparently the college has a track team of its own. I'm sure she'll do well.

Lilly... I think it's hard to overestimate the impact that Lilly has had on my life since I transferred here. From the moment I first came to this school, Lilly's been there looking out for me. I don't think I would have gotten into a relationship with Hanako if it hadn't been for Lilly's matchmaking efforts and emotional support. For a long time, I really looked up to her. She always seemed to be so confident, so level-headed and so in control of things. Due to certain events, I came to learn that Lilly's just as prone to screw-ups as everyone else, but despite the fact that she fell off that pedestal I put her on, I think part of me will always keep seeing her as a kind and reliable older-sister figure to turn to whenever I'm in need of advice or a listening ear.

Lilly's been directly involved in several major events in my life. Me getting a girlfriend, that big vacation in Scotland and finally the decision to study science and aim for getting a teaching degree. I wonder how things will play out between us after we all graduate. If everything goes well, Lilly, Hanako and I will all be attending the same university, but since we'll be studying at different faculties

there won't be any more shared lunch breaks from now on. At least we'd be able to hang out at Lilly's place in the evening if we wanted to. It'd allow us to continue spending time together. If everything goes well, that is...

Hanako... In retrospect, things went really fast between us. During our first meeting, I managed to make her so uncomfortable that she ended up fleeing the scene in a panic. Six weeks later, we got together in the park, letting out that anguished confession that was the start of our relationship. Despite our rocky start, I've been really happy with Hanako, and from what I could tell, she's been really happy with me as well. It's been truly a sight, seeing Hanako slowly coming out of her shell, first merely in front of me but then in front of the rest of the world as well. There are plenty of wonderful memories I have from the first few months of our relationship, but the thing that stands out most among all of those is Hanako's smile. Even though she's started showing it more and more as time went on, it's never lost its charm. That sweet, child-like smile always manages to brighten my day and make me feel good no matter how often I see it.

02

I just hope I'll ever get to see it again...

Part of me probably never believed that Hanako's been secluding herself to such an extreme degree merely because she needed to study for her entrance exams. But for the sake of doing well on my own tests, I blocked Hanako from my mind to the best of my ability. Then the entrance exams came and went. Life slowly returned to normal as we started the process of waiting for the results and graduation day to come around. Students who had been cramming non-stop over the last months had a long night's rest and started resuming their daily activities from before exam season. Natsume returned to Naomi's side at the newspaper club, eager to bring out the next issue. I started my morning runs again, returned to the science club where I started my preparations of passing the presidential torch to my successor and spent the rest of my free time helping out Shizune finishing up the student council's duties in time for the swearing in of the new council. Business as usual everywhere, with one exception.

Hanako didn't come out of her room.

Ever since the entrance exams ended, I've made it a habit of dropping by at the girls' dorm twice a day. I'd knock on Hanako's door and ask if she needed anything. The answer would usually be a soft 'No, but thanks.' muttered through the door. She'd rarely open it, and the few times she did, she was always wearing her nightgown, no matter what time of day it was.

I recently asked Miss Takawa about it, and she merely said that I should continue what I was doing without trying to force anything. She told me that she's had several talks with Hanako over the last two weeks and that the dormkeeper was keeping an eye on her as well.

She had already predicted during my previous visit that Hanako would probably get worse as graduation day drew closer. This time she said that that day would bring the whole thing to an end.

What she didn't say was how she thought things were going to end.

One more day.

There isn't much I can do in my room right now. Nearly all of my possessions have already been packed, and I've already returned all of my borrowed books to the library.

I guess I should go and see Hanako. See how much progress she's made with packing her stuff.

"Hanako?"

I knock gently on the door to Hanako's room, putting my ear to the door in an attempt to better pick up a reaction, any reaction, from inside. There is none, however. That could mean two things. Either Hanako's in there and she simply doesn't feel like replying, or she's not in her room right now. I notice that the nearby bathroom door is locked, but standing around waiting for the person inside to come out might get me in trouble with the dormkeeper. I knock again, calling Hanako's name once more and prepare myself to return to the boys' dorm. I was going to offer to help her pack, but seeing that she still doesn't have a lot of possessions stored in her room, it's not unlikely she already finished up long ago.

"Hisao?"

Hearing a familiar voice, I turn around and see Lilly standing there.

"Hi Lilly. Do you know where Hanako is right now?"

"If she isn't in her room then I'm afraid I have no idea. I've just returned from a get-together with friends in the common room downstairs, so if she's gone I didn't hear her leave."

"Oh well, maybe I'll come back later. Unless you can use some help with packing things."

Lilly smiles sadly and shakes her head.

"I've already packed most of my possessions myself, and my family will probably help me with the rest when they get here. But..."

She walks up to her own door, opens it and makes a beckoning gesture inside.

"...perhaps you'd like to join me for a little while? For one final cup of tea in here?"

"Okay."

An actual tea party in that room with just the two of us would feel sacrilegious, but I sense that Lilly's offer isn't merely a polite request, so I follow her into her room without further ado. As I enter, I notice that the room is indeed largely empty already with the exception of the tea set, which is still standing on her dresser. I close the door behind me and sit down at the table. Lilly takes the teapot and fills two of the cups before handing one to me. We silently drink, neither of us feeling like saying much. We eventually finish our cups and as Lilly puts hers down, she has a wistful look on her face.

"This... feels wrong without Hanako here with us, doesn't it?"

"We could have waited until she got back, although... I'm not sure if she'd have accepted the invitation. She doesn't really seem to feel like doing much of anything these days. I was kind of surprised she wasn't in her room just now. Unless she was and she simply didn't react to my knocks."

"I've heard that she's still meeting with Miss Takawa on occasion."

"I spoke to Miss Takawa not too long ago. I asked her for some clarity on Hanako. She was evasive as usual. The gist was that Hanako seemed to be perking up right after the center test, only for her to

start relapsing some time later. That's all she would tell me. She assured me she was still making use of every minute she had with Hanako, but I don't know..."

"You don't think she's serious? She gave us her word she'd do whatever she could to help Hanako."

"It's not that. I'm sure she's trying. I just don't think her therapy is helping anymore. She's just applying bandaids now. And why not? It's not like Hanako will still be her responsibility after tomorrow."

"Hisao..."

"Tomorrow we'll know more, Lilly. But..."

A mutual sigh. We're both thinking the same thing. Unlike Lilly and me, Hanako's taken part in two entrance exams, although I wonder if she'd truly have considered attending that second university in a town where she doesn't know a single person. It's possible she merely took that particular entrance exam because it was given before the exam that would let her into her first choice, meaning she'd be able to get a feeling for what the other exam would be like. The results of her 'plan B' exam came back three days ago already and she didn't do well enough to make it in. It left me with a very uneasy sensation and judging from the look on Lilly's face, she's thinking the same.

"Hisao, I've been thinking. It's possible that she didn't give that second exam everything she had."

"Yeah. It's even possible she passed her exam and I failed mine. We'll know tomorrow."

"The last time I asked how you thought you did, you said you were 'cautiously optimistic'."

True. My own exam wasn't easy - far from it. But all that cramming I went through did pay off, and there were no questions on the exam that were about things I never heard of before.

"Yeah, if I do end up failing tomorrow, I'll be genuinely disappointed."

"I asked Hanako about her exams too, but... She just said she didn't know."

Cautiously optimistic is obviously not a good way to describe Hanako's attitude towards her results.

"I wonder if she really doesn't know or if she simply wants us not to worry about her."

When Hanako passed the National Center Test, I was relieved and convinced she'd easily be able to pass her entrance exams too, but after she failed to get a passing grade on that second exam, the possibility of her not being able to attend university with us suddenly became very real again.

"I don't think it's just us. Earlier this evening, I ran into Naomi, and she asked if I knew where Hanako is going to go after tomorrow..."

"That will depend on whether she's passed her entrance exam or not, I suppose."

"Will it? No matter what results are posted on the board tomorrow, she'll need a place to stay, won't she?"

"...yeah."

Lilly absentmindedly fumbles with her hair.

"Naomi said... that if there are no alternatives, she was willing to talk to her parents about letting Hanako stay over for a little while."

"It's nice to hear that she's trying to help, but I'm not sure if that's a good idea. I don't think that Naomi's parents ever even met Hanako. Who knows how they'd react."

"I... agree."

"Lilly?"

"Yes?"

A short pause. We've done a remarkable job of avoiding this subject for quite some time, but I feel not bringing it up now would be irrational.

"That... um... offer your parents made Hanako during our Christmas visit..."

A pained expression appears on Lilly's face. When her parents gave that adoption form to Hanako and we all got over the shock, I was initially exhilarated. I used to worry a little that Hanako might not have a place to go to after graduating here, and this seemed a really good solution.

Except after that day, Hanako never brought the subject up again, and now I'm not sure what to think of the whole situation. Judging from Lilly's expression, she's not exactly comfortable with the subject matter either. Still, after some hesitation, she starts speaking.

"I visited her room a few days after the Center Test and brought the subject up. I asked her what... what she thought about my parents' offer and if she had given it any consideration. Maybe I shouldn't have done that. She immediately clammed up and I... ended up leaving when the silence became too much to bear. I wonder if I oversimplified certain things. I..."

I wonder for a moment if she's going to say it, but then Lilly sadly shakes her head and falls silent. I don't think she'd ever be able bring herself to wonder out loud if the whole thing may have been a mistake from the beginning.

"Was that the last time you spoke about it."

Lilly nods.

"Interaction between us became very awkward afterwards. Almost as if I confessed to her and she didn't have the heart to reject me despite not being interested. I... created distance between us at the very time she needed my support the most."

Lilly's depressed look is painful to see. So it wasn't just me whose interaction with Hanako was put on the backburner.

"I... wonder if having her accompany me to my parents' home and having her move in with me is even feasible at this point. I would really like it to be, but... Will Hanako still want to? I... haven't really had the courage to ask her."

"Even if she doesn't, there's still another option. I've been talking to my parents this week and I've... been trying to gauge how open they'd be to the idea of taking Hanako in themselves. It would be a

pretty big change, suddenly having an extra person in the household. It's not like Hanako and I have been there all that often. They said they wanted to take some time to think about it, but they seem to like Hanako, so I don't think they'll refuse in the end."

Of course, my parents aren't millionaires with a big house like the Satous, so we'd have to make do from time to time, but there's no way Mom and Dad would leave their son's girlfriend out in the cold like that.

"That... is a relief. I've been thinking of asking the school if there were additional options they could think of in case they were needed, but perhaps that won't be necessary now."

"We'll get something worked out somehow, Lilly. Surely Yamaku must have... you know... protocols in place or something. Don't you think?"

"I don't know about that, Hisao. But I have no intention of leaving here without..."

"Hmmm?"

I wait for Lilly to continue, but she merely frowns as if deep in thought. Before I can ask her what's wrong, she gets on her feet and takes a few light steps towards the door. She feels out the location of the door handle and gently swings the door open, revealing...

03

"Aah!"

I recognize the voice even before Lilly steps aside to reveal its owner.

"Hanako..."

Lilly calls the name of her friend in a tone that's barely above a whisper. I feel my heart skip a beat as I look at my girlfriend. Hanako's dressed in her nightgown, as usual. It's always been a little bit too large for her, but it seems larger than ever now. Or rather, Hanako looks a lot thinner than I remember her. There are thick bags under her eyes. Has she been eating or sleeping at all these days? She looks almost like a ghost. My eyes meet hers, and I can see that they're moist, as if she's fighting back tears and barely holding them back. Her fists are clenched and shaking slightly, and in her eyes I can see a look of sorrow mixed with just a subtle hint of anger. Her breathing must have reflected her current mood, for Lilly softly whispers Hanako's name again, this time sounding more unsure of herself than before.

"Hanako, I..."

How long has she been listening on the other side of the door? How much of our conversation has she picked up?

Hanako's eyes and jaw squeeze shut for a moment as Lilly repeats her name. She's still shaking a bit, and for a moment I think she's going to say something or cry, but then she suddenly exhales loudly, causing Lilly to take a startled step back, shakes her head a few times and runs down the hallway. The next moment, we hear the door of her room slam shut. The sound makes Lilly flinch as if someone just slapped her across the face.

For a moment, time seems to stand still.

Then, like a sleep walker, she starts moving towards Hanako's bedroom door. Before she can reach for the handle, though, I walk over to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Lilly, I... don't think that's a good idea right now."

Lilly raises her hand towards the handle, but then lowers it again and nods.

"You're probably right. I just..."

"I know how you feel. I feel the same. We'll talk to Hanako first thing in the morning, okay?"

Another sullen nod. Then, still a little unsteadily, Lilly walks back to her own room. I follow her to the door, but decide not to go back inside.

"I'd best be going now. We'll talk again tomorrow."

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"I feel that, no matter what I do, I'm only making things worse... I just wanted to..."

"I know, Lilly. I think even Hanako knows, deep down."

04

It sure is bright in my room.

Blinking a few times against the sun, I yawn and open my eyes and look around the room; the room that'll only be my dorm room for a few more hours. Tonight, I'll sleep in my parental home again, far away from here. It'll be weird waking up there again.

I already packed my alarm clock yesterday and decided to leave the curtains open so I wouldn't oversleep.

Graduation ceremony will start around noon. I know from the days before that the exam results aren't posted until shortly before that time. That's still at least 2 hours from now. I'm not going to put myself through the agonizing process of going there early and sitting there doing nothing. I'd rather do something to keep my mind off my test. Something like cleaning this room and packing the few things that are still lying around.

I get a quick bite in the kitchen downstairs, grab some cleaning supplies and start the process of cleaning this place. It's not something I usually enjoy doing, but this time I welcome the opportunity to keep my mind off things.

Things like my exam results. Within a few hours I'll know what my upcoming year will be like. As well as Lilly's year. And...

...Hanako's year.

Dusting my desk only does a moderately successful job at keeping my thoughts away from what happened last night. I still feel bad about it, and it took a long time before I managed to fall asleep.

I'm still not sure when the best time will be to talk to Hanako. Probably before we go to see our test results. Assuming Hanako's willing to come out of her room this time.

My thoughts are still on Hanako when I'm suddenly startled by a loud knock on the door, which flies open a second later.

05

Damn, this is one thing I'm not going to miss.

"What's up, man!"

"Kenji, do you remember that night when you knocked on my door so loudly that I nearly died? I think that knocking back then sounded suspiciously like the knocking just now."

"Huh, you seem fine now, man. You don't look like a man ready to drop dead. Don't they, like, always clutch their heart and let out some guttural moan or something before falling to the floor?"

As if trying to stress his point, he presses a hand to his chest and lets out a loud 'HNNNNNNNG' while gritting his teeth.

"I don't think that's quite how it goes."

"Whatever, man. Anyway, today's the big day. I showed them, didn't I? I've lived here rent free for more than long enough. If you take into account the rising cost of land, I think you could say I've won in the end."

A cheerful smile suddenly appears on his face.

"No, you know what? I did win. History will acknowledge me as the victor."

"The victor of what?"

"I managed to stay out of sight and slip through the cracks. I beat the system."

"If you put it that way, it sounds like you just ran away from the system."

"Sometimes, running is the greatest form of victory; like in the Olympics."

I'm not in the mood to argue that point with him. Who's he kidding? Everyone knows the shot put is the best Olympic event, in any case.

"So, what you're basically saying is, you won't miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"School, dummy."

"No, I told you, this place is too filled with feminists. It's beyond saving. But at least I'll be able to get out before it reaches critical mass."

"You're not going to miss the science club either? It was a nice group, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but a small resistance group isn't really gonna make a difference when we're this vastly outnumbered. I'm gonna focus on mobilizing the troops somewhere else."

I sigh in resignation.

"Well, good luck fighting the good fight."

"I could send you updates on my status. What's your home address?"

"You want to swap home addresses?"

"Sorry, man. Can't give you mine. With that tracking device of yours, they could follow you right to me. Can't go and give up my position that easily."

If I give this guy my home address, I could see my parents filing a restraining order against him at some point or another.

"Maybe we should simply swap phone numbers instead."

"I don't have a phone. Not gonna get one either. I'm kinda scared of them. Not sure why. Maybe I was beaten with one in the past and can't remember."

Right. I think I've heard that story before.

"E-mail addresses then?"

"I don't trust the internet. You shouldn't either, man. They're monitoring that shit. Every mail you've ever typed up is backed up and stored on one of their servers somewhere."

"Why would anybody want to watch me? For associating with you? Are you on some secret service's black list?"

"They don't need an excuse, man. They do it because they can. Privacy is on life support. Nobody believes me, but you'll see... someday. Don't say I didn't warn you when the truth comes out."

"Uh... Yeah... Right. I won't. So no internet. Maybe you can just give me a status report the next time we meet. They do the ten year later reunion thing here, don't they?"

"How would I know that? Probably. Anyway, I have to start packing now. Take care of yourself, man."

He gives me a saluting gesture and walks out, slamming the door shut behind him.

'Take care of myself.' It's the first time I've heard him end a conversation like that. Usually, he parts ways with something like 'seeya.' 'I'll pay you back later, man.' I wonder if him saying goodbye here means he's not gonna attend the graduation ceremony. He might be more uncomfortable in crowds than Hanako. I could see myself ending up missing this guy even though he was a little annoying at times.

06

With Kenji gone, I resume my chores and finish cleaning and packing without further interruptions. There's probably no reason to carry all my stuff downstairs yet. Dad can probably help me with that when he and Mom arrive. Realizing I still have a bit of time to spare, I decide to drop by the girls' dorm before going to check the notice board. When I reach the hallway leading to Hanako's and Lilly's rooms,

I briefly consider knocking on Hanako's door before deciding to check up on Lilly first. When I knock on her door, I'm greeted by a face I haven't seen in a long time.

"Yo, graduate boy. Have you come to share some good news with us?"

"Hi Akira. It's been a long time since I've seen you. You're certainly here early."

Lilly's sister flashes me her typical jovial grin. Her expression is familiar, but her outfit is not. This is the first time I've seen Akira wear a fancy blouse and a long skirt. It's a big difference from the business suit or sporty jeans I've seen her wear in the past. It kinda makes sense that Akira would put on something relatively fancy for her sister's graduation, but it still takes some getting used to. Akira notices my staring and rolls her eyes.

"I still prefer my jeans, but if I wore those during an occasion like this, Dad would probably first kill me and then himself. Anyway, my little sister here was commenting on my timing as well. I think my arrival actually woke her up."

She steps aside, and I walk into the room. Lilly's no longer wearing her pajamas, but she still looks rather sleepy. It appears I'm not the only one who had trouble falling asleep last night.

"Good morning, Lilly. How are you feeling?"

"Good morning, Hisao. I'm okay. Still a little tired and just a little nervous."

Akira snickers.

"If it turns out you've flunked your test, Sis, I don't think Mom and Dad will be speaking another word of Japanese to you for a whole year."

Lilly smiles weakly.

"At least it would be good practice."

I turn to Akira.

"Speaking of which, are your parents here as well right now?"

Akira shakes her head.

"They're probably on their way. I didn't sleep at their place last night, so we've been travelling separately. I figured I'd be here a little earlier and help my sis pack her things."

Lilly gives her older sister a grateful smile.

"Your help was greatly appreciated."

"So Hisao, have you already heard the results?"

"Not yet, Akira. The notice board is probably being updated as we speak. I just wanted to go and fetch you guys before heading over there."

"Well, my curiosity is ready to be satisfied. You want me to read the results to you when we get there, Sis?"

"That won't be necessary, Akira. The results will also be posted in Braille."

Lilly gets up from the bed and picks up her bag, taking her retractable cane out of it.

"But before we go, there's still one thing we have to do, isn't there Hisao?"

"...yeah."

I look at Akira, but the lack of confusion on her face tells me that Lilly has already let her in on what happened last night. Her smile drops for a moment before suddenly returning.

"Hey, I was thinking... She might still feel awkward talking to you two, but maybe I could talk to her and ease the tension a bit."

Lilly's expression clears up upon hearing her sister's suggestion.

"That's a good idea, Akira. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you again."

Akira nods, opens the door and walks down the hallway while Lilly and I remain at a comfortable distance. As she reaches Hanako's door, Akira gives a few sharp raps on it.

"Yo Hanako! It's me. Are you up already?"

Lilly and I both hold our breath, and I can see Lilly listening intently. But there doesn't seem to be a reaction. Akira briefly presses her ear to the door and then knocks again.

"Hanako, you in there?"

Again there's no response. Akira shrugs and takes out her cell phone. She presses a few keys and then holds it to her ear. After a few seconds she sighs and snaps her phone back shut. Then she walks back to us.

"No dice. She's got her phone switched off. I can't tell if she's in there or not."

"Lilly, have you already heard her this morning?"

"I'm afraid not, Hisao. I only woke up a little while ago. If she's not in her room right now, she must have left before I woke up."

"That's a shame. Now what?"

Akira scratches her head.

"Maybe we should just go and check the exam results. Some good news might lure her out there - assuming she's even inside."

"Yeah."

"Hey, ditch the gloomy face. She did fine on the Center Test, didn't she?"

"You're right. Let's head for the notice board."

We leave the girls' dorm and start making our way to the school building, making sure our pace matches Lilly's. As we walk down the path to the building, Akira gives me a curious glance.

"Hey Hisao, I suppose your parents will be here too today, won't they?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of expecting them to be here any moment."

She grins.

"I think I'd like to meet them. You know... to see if there are any similarities."

"Heh, I had exactly the same train of thought when we met your parents."

"Uh... I think I can do without having to hear your conclusions there."

"I doubt it'd be something you haven't already heard before."

Akira gives a mock-indignant huff, but then switches her stare from me to the school building ahead.

"Wow, quite a few people there. Looks like we're not the only ones who are eager to see the test results."

"Seriously."

Akira's right. There's quite a crowd of people standing in front of the notice board right now. As we approach, Akira gives me a little poke with her elbow.

"Have you guys considered that maybe Hanako's already here to check the results herself?"

"You're right, it's a possibility. I don't think she'd be very comfortable with this many people around, but I bet she's still very curious about the results."

"Let's keep an eye out for her."

We join the chaotic mass in front of us and I struggle to catch a glimpse of the notifications hanging on the board. I notice that my heart's pounding in my throat right now. The moment of truth is probably mere seconds away. If only I can get a little closer.

"Hey Nakai!"

While I'm still in the process of making my way through the crowd of students and parents, I'm suddenly greeted by a voice coming from somewhere in front of me. I look in the direction of the voice and find myself face to face with a rather large guy whom I recognize as Taro Arai, the guy normally sitting behind me in class. Taro seems to have seen the results already as he's making his way through the crowd in the opposite direction with one hand, the other one hanging by his side. He has an excited smile on his face.

"Hi Arai. You seem to be in a good mood. Did you make it in?"

"I totally did! Against all expectations. Man, spring break's gonna be soawesome now. I think I deserved it after all the cramming. I must have lost ten kilos over the last few months from all the stress. Heck, I barely ate this morning because I was so nervous."

If that's true, it isn't very noticeable. Then again, he has plenty of reserves.

"Congratulations. Really good work. I hope I can join in the celebrations soon. I'm on my way to see how I did."

"Would you like me to tell you?"

"Huh?"

07

He flashes me a broad grin.

"I noticed your name on there while I was checking my results. Congratulations man. You'll be a university student after today."

"W-Wha...?"

"You passed. Saw it myself just now."

"W-W-Whoa..."

Time seems to slow down around me as the realization hits me.

A university student.

Me.

Wow.

After all the stress and the short nights. After all the cramming and nearly killing myself. After everything that's happened... I've made it. It's all been worth it.

I've made it.

Taro's enthusiastic pat on my shoulder brings me back to reality.

"How's it feel, man? Wait, don't answer. I already know."

"I... hahaha... Wow, I can barely believe it... It's just..."

"Hehe, I know how it feels. Kinda surreal, doesn't it?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Go ahead and see for yourself. I'm out of here. See you!"

He makes his way past me, and I slowly become aware of my surroundings again. I look around for my blonde companions and from the look of it, Lilly's been spoiled by a classmate as well as they haven't made it to the board yet, but Akira is already sharing a loving hug with her sister and Lilly's laughing in a much more enthusiastic manner than she would usually do. With some effort, I manage to make my way over to them.

"Lilly?"

"Hisao. Did you...?"

"I've made it in. At least, a classmate just told me he saw my name. It's... still kind of hard to believe."

Lilly smiles.

"The same happened to me. It's wonderful, isn't it? I can't wait for my parents to arrive. I want to hear their reaction when I tell them."

"I'm sure they'll be proud of you, Lilly. Any parent would be."

"I hope so. We should probably still go and check the board for ourselves. Just to make sure this isn't just some wonderful dream."

"Not needed, Sis. I've just checked and you're on there. Congratulations. Congratulations to both of you."

"Thanks, Akira. There's still one thing we need to check though."

"About that... I... umm... haven't seen Hanako."

"You mean she's not among the people here?"

"That's not exactly what I mean. What I mean is that... uh..."

I look at Akira and see a pained expression on her face.

08

"What I mean is... that I haven't seen Hanako's name on the list. She's not on there. Looks like she... didn't pass after all."

"Hanako..."

"N-No..."

In one moment the rush, the happiness and euphoria I felt - all of them collapse as Akira's words sink in. What was the greatest achievement of my life just seconds ago now feels like a hollow victory. Lilly's expression has changed to one of horror, and she's slowly shaking her head as if she's unable to accept what she just heard.

"Akira... D-did you check thoroughly?"

"I did. I'm really sorry, Sis. This is a real shock to me too. I..."

"No..."

With a look of despair on her face, Lilly starts pushing her way through the crowd, not even caring about the surprised reactions from those in front of her. Akira and I do our best to follow as closely behind her as we can, with Akira muttering a few apologies to people nearby. As she reaches the announcement board, Lilly presses her shaking hands on the sheets of Braille paper hanging there and skims the list of names...

...again...

...and again...

...and again.

I'm close enough to read the list myself now and confirm that Akira didn't misread it. Lilly's and my names are on it, but Hanako's isn't. Despite the fact that the possibility was there all along, it still feels like an excruciatingly painful slap in the face. For a moment, I feel extremely frustrated. Hanako's already been through so much and deserved so much better than this. Then Akira gets my attention with a quick nudge.

"There ain't much for us to do here anymore. Let's find ourselves a quiet spot to let this sink in."

She beckons me to come along and gives Lilly, who only barely seems to be hanging onto her composure, a forceful tug on her sleeve. Walking slightly faster than she usually would while walking with her sister, Akira guides the two of us away from the crowd and to a secluded spot in the school's gardens. All along, Lilly is walking alongside us in what almost seems to be a daze. When we reach a spot where nobody else is near, Akira lets go of her sister's sleeve and sighs deeply.

"I feel really bad for her. After she passed the Center Test, I seriously thought she'd clear this one no problem."

"T-This..."

Lilly looks completely crushed at this latest development. She's squeezing her eyes shut in a futile attempt to hold back her tears.

"This w-wasn't supposed to happen, Akira. S-She did so w-well before. B-Before..."

Akira steps forward and gently takes Lilly in her arms. Unlike the savage hug she gave Lilly after she heard about her successfully passing the entrance exams, this embrace is tender, almost motherly. Even though I know that Lilly and her sister are very close, it still feels a bit strange seeing the usually unrefined Akira comfort her sister in this way.

"A-Akira..."

"Yes, Lilly?"

"W-When I made that p-phone call to Mother, telling her that I was s-staying here in Japan, Hanako was there with me... g-giving me her support. W-We promised then and there that we would graduate together. We were going to f-face the challenges of university together too. And now... *sniff* Now what?"

Akira gives her sister a comforting pat on the back and then lets go.

"Now what? Good question. That's probably up to Hanako. As rotten as this news is, at least the uncertainty is gone now. Now we can determine what to do next. Hanako will have to do the same. Maybe we can help her make a decision... If she's going to let us. Only one way to find out."

"I wonder if I can even face her after this. If it hadn't been for me..."

"This is no time to be thinking about that, Sis. Let's go back to the dorms. If she's in there, we'll find a way to get her out of her room. We'll have to hurry though. The graduation ceremony will be starting soon, and we'd better be there."

Lilly gives a weak nod and takes a hold of her sister's sleeve as a sign that she's ready to go. Just as we reach the entrance to the girls' dorm, Lilly's phone suddenly starts ringing. With an unsure look, she shows the display to Akira.

"Akira, is that...?"

"Nope, just Mom and Dad. They're probably wondering where the hell we are, what with the ceremony and all."

"What should I tell them?"

"You don't have to tell them anything. Just let me talk to them, Sis. I'll explain the situation. You'd better go inside. Maybe you should visit the bathroom really quick and clean yourself a bit. Your eyes are all red, and Dad's probably gonna give you a scolding if you attend the ceremony looking like that."

"...alright then."

We hurry inside, and while Lilly enters one of the bathrooms to make herself more presentable, I move along to the hallway leading to Lilly's and Hanako's room. I give a loud knock on the door and press my ear to it, hoping to pick up a sound on the other side. A surprised cry, shuffling or any other sign of life.

Nothing.

I'm getting kind of worried.

I wonder if Hanako has been expecting this. If she had a blackout or something during the entrance exams, she must have known all along how this was going to turn out ever since exam season ended.

Is that why she's been secluding herself like this? Because she didn't think she'd be able to keep up appearances all day long in front of us and she didn't want to worry us either?

How awful that must have been.

"Hisao? Is she...?"

I see Lilly carefully navigating her way towards me. She's looking a little better now, although that elated smile she showed earlier today probably isn't going to make a reappearance anytime soon.

"I haven't heard anything. Maybe we should simply ask the dormkeeper for help. This room's officially supposed to be cleaned out, isn't it?"

"Mister Nakai! Miss Satou! You still haven't left for the gymnasium yet? Certainly you're not planning on being late for the ceremony, are you?"

We turn around and notice a familiar figure walking down the hallway.

"Miss Takawa."

Lilly and I do a quick bow in unison. The old lady gives us a careful look-over.

"I have the impression you've already heard today's results. Am I correct?"

"Yes, we have."

"Could I have a little talk with the two of you? It will not take long."

"Uh... Sure?"

"I'd rather not talk here. Let's go to the common room downstairs."

A bit puzzled, Lilly and I follow Miss Takawa downstairs where we take a seat at one of the tables. The old therapist folds her hands and gives us a sympathizing look.

"The last time the three of us sat together like this, I expressed the hope that our next talk would be under more uplifting circumstances. It appears that fate decided otherwise. I still hope you don't mind if I extend my well-wishes to the two of you. You have done very well. Congratulations."

"T-Thank you. But Hanako..."

Miss Takawa lets out a weary sigh.

"Yes, I know. I suppose you are here to talk to her, aren't you?"

"That's the idea. But the door is locked, and we don't even know if she's inside. We haven't seen her around the school grounds today. We were about to ask the dormkeeper for a spare key."

"That won't be necessary."

The old lady reaches into her bag and takes something out of it. When she shows me her hand, a small key is lying in its palm.

"A key. A key to Hanako's room? Looks like you beat us to it. Great. Let's get going."

Miss Takawa slowly shakes her head, closes her hand and puts the key back in her bag.

"I believe that there is a right time for everything, but now is not the right time for you to visit Miss Ikezawa."

"E-Excuse me?"

"Miss Satou, the graduation ceremony is set to start in 15 minutes, and the two of you will need some time to get there. You would have only little more than five minutes to deal with Miss Ikezawa, even if you'd be able to talk to her right now. Do you think that would be enough?"

"But Hanako's school grades have still been high enough for her to have earned her diploma. We can't just let her miss her own graduation ceremony, can we?"

"The same is true for the two of you. You can't afford to miss your own graduation ceremony either. You really can't."

I scratch my head.

"Don't you think that we should be here for Hanako right now?"

"Out there in the gymnasium are a father and a mother waiting for their son to take part in the ceremony and take his diploma. I imagine your parents to be here as well, Miss Satou. And your sister too if that young lady standing near the building's entrance is related to you. These people came here to see you stand there and participate in the ceremony that marks the end of your high school days. If your chairs were to remain empty, how do you think they would feel? They'd feel terrible, I'd imagine. Please take that into consideration."

Yeah, Mom and Dad will be expecting me to be there. They came all this way for that specific purpose, but...

I grit my teeth as a realization hits me.

"Do you realize how horrible that sounds? You make it sound like it's okay for Hanako to miss the ceremony because there are no people coming here today specifically for her. She doesn't have a father and mother sitting there to watch her graduate, so she has less priority? Are you saying that she can be missed?"

Hanako's therapist shakes her head and lets out a tired sigh.

"Calm down, Mister Nakai. All I'm saying is that a child's graduation is one of the most important events in a parent's life. Don't dismiss it so easily. Miss Ikezawa would not want you to miss the ceremony on her behalf."

"But..."

"I think she's right, you know."

We turn around, and I see Akira standing in the doorway.

"Akira, y-you too...?"

Lilly seems a bit flustered by Akira's sudden intervention.

"You know that Mom and Dad would be crushed if you stayed away, Lilly. They've really been looking forward to this. Just like I have. Dad would be very upset with you too. Shizune's folks are probably in the audience already and your absence would surely be noticed. I don't think Hanako would want to create trouble for you."

Lilly opens her mouth to speak, but then stops herself and just nods as Akira continues.

"You remember New Year's Day, right? When we went to visit that shrine and had to return because Hanako felt suffocated there. How do you think she'd react when she had to stand there in front of a big crowd, unable to just walk out without disrupting the ceremony, faced with a whole audience of other students' proud parents sitting there? You think she'd enjoy being there?"

"I... I know what you're saying, Akira. But... it just seems so unfair. Hanako's worked as hard as everyone else, maybe even harder. To not even get to attend the ceremony, to not even have people acknowledge all her hard work and just have her pick up her diploma at the administration building, out of sight of everyone... It just seems so wrong."

Hanako's therapist gives a grave nod.

"Your sister makes a good point, Miss Satou. It may seem anticlimactic not to have a memory of the ceremony, but no memory is arguably still better than a bad one. She already has more than enough of those."

She gets up and looks at us with a slightly forceful look.

"Please go now and attend the ceremony. Try to feel proud of your achievements, and know that Miss Ikezawa is proud of you too. Say goodbye to the people you wish to say goodbye to, and then please come back here. Hmm, if you meet Miss Inoue there, please ask her to accompany you. I'll be here when you get back. That's a promise."

"...okay then."

We get up as well, and Lilly takes hold of Akira's sleeve.

"Until after the ceremony then, Miss Takawa."

"Yes. Until then."

As Lilly and Akira hurry along towards the exit, I take one glance back. I notice Miss Takawa is staring at the staircase leading to the upper floor with a strange look on her face. I rush to catch up with the Satou sisters, but as we walk towards the gymnasium as fast as Lilly can manage, I think back on Miss Takawa again.

Something about the look in her eyes gave me a really uneasy feeling.

Let's hope the ceremony isn't going to be drawn out for too long.

Chapter 51 (???)

01

"The ceremony should be over by now."

Having checked my watch, I walk up to the room's door and open it, so when Mister Nakai and Miss Satou return here, they'll know that it's okay to enter. Hopefully they've been able to find Miss Inoue as well. That would be convenient.

My gaze once again wanders around the room. I've worked here for nearly two years now, and I've been Miss Hanako's therapist for equally as long, but this is the first time I've actually been in her room. The

one time she was in such a bad shape that I deemed it best to accompany her here, the day Mister Nakai got hospitalized, we parted ways at the door.

This was her own little sanctum, and she had the habit of locking herself up here whenever she felt distressed. That was sometimes a little frustrating since it also sometimes caused her to miss appointments, but I've never considered asking the dormkeeper to let me in here. For a person who had no place to call home except for this little room, violating its sanctity would have been a fatal breach of trust.

Despite this place having been the closest thing she's had to a place to call her own, I don't think she ever really decorated it accordingly. From what I've heard, it's always remained very bare bones. Miss Satou's room may actually have been easier on the eyes, ironically enough. I've always been curious why. It's not due to the lack of preferences. During one session, I gave her a few catalogues and asked her to come up with decorating advice for a girl around her age. She knew it was a test of some sort, but still went along with it, and the result might have been one of the girliest rooms one could imagine. She obviously had very specific tastes, yet when I asked if she'd consider dressing up her own room a little, she said she wasn't interested.

Maybe she saw no reason to make a place homey that she knew she was going to lose when her time here ran out.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of voices coming from the hallway.

"Hisao, do you see her anywhere?"

"Not yet, Lilly, but she said she'd be here."

"Didn't you guys say that Hanako wasn't out of her room yet when you left?"

I recognize two of the voices as the ones belonging to Mister Nakai and Miss Satou. The third one is unfamiliar to me. It must mean that Miss Inoue is tagging along too. That's good.

"That's right. Why?"

"Because I can see that her door's open."

"That's strange. There have been times when Hanako has kept her door unlocked, but she's never kept it open as far as I remember. Let's go see."

Well, I suppose this is it. I get up from the desk chair I was sitting on and turn towards the door.

"Hey Hanako, are you th...?"

A girl with distinctive bleached hair comes walking into the room and lets out a shocked gasp.

"WHAT THE HECK?"

"Naomi, what's wrong? Is something... HUH?"

Next is Mister Nakai, who seems as surprised as Miss Inoue.

"Hisao, what is it? Is she there? What do you see?"

And finally Miss Satou enters the room, a worried look on her face.

"Umm... Miss Takawa is here, Lilly. But Hanako isn't. And neither is anything else."

"Neither is anything else? What do you mean?"

"The room's completely empty except for the furniture. It's like... like..."

I nod gravely.

"Like she has already left? Yes, I'm afraid so."

Miss Satou's worried look becomes pained.

"Already left? But... When? Why? And... Where?"

"Please take a seat on the bed."

I sit down on the desk chair again, and the three graduates hesitantly sit down across from me. Mister Nakai has a scolding expression on his face.

"Miss Takawa, have you been here all this time? Did you see Hanako walk out of here and simply let her?"

I shake my head.

"Miss Ikezawa already left the school early this morning. When the three of us spoke earlier today, she was already gone."

I apologetically bow my head.

"I apologize for not telling you this sooner, but I felt that you probably had enough on your mind already and didn't want to make you more worried than you already were while attending the ceremony."

Miss Satou makes an uncharacteristically impatient gesture as if to urge me not to waste time talking about trivial matters such as a ceremony.

"Miss Takawa, we appreciate your concern, but please tell us what you know about Hanako. Why would she just up and leave like this? Is it... something we did?"

There's a guilty look on her face that catches my attention. Miss Hanako will have to excuse me for inquiring about this.

"Miss Satou, has something happened between Miss Ikezawa and you over the last few days?"

Miss Satou seems a bit put off by my question. Was it an inappropriate question or is she simply impatient to hear about her best friend?

"Miss Takawa, please..."

"I will tell you all I can afterwards."

Miss Satou hesitates for a moment, but then tells me about how she and Mister Nakai were discussing what to do about Miss Hanako last night, only to discover she was actually listening in. Mister Nakai added that Miss Hanako seemed upset, maybe even a bit angry.

"Hmmm... That might have played a role. Thank you, Miss Satou. And you too, Mister Nakai."

"Played a role?"

"I ran into Miss Ikezawa when I arrived here early this morning. She was waiting for me near the school gate. She was carrying her backpack, and there were two suitcases standing nearby, undoubtedly belonging to her. When I asked her what she was doing here this early, she told me she was planning to leave."

"Did she tell you why she was leaving or where she was headed?"

"She wouldn't tell me where she was planning to go, if she even knew herself. She did tell me about her motivation, which was along the lines of... hmmm... No longer wanting to be a burden on others."

The hurt look on their faces is particularly excruciating to watch. Miss Satou in particular looks crushed. When she answers, I have to strain to hear it.

"But... she... isn't. Why did she have to do this?"

"I wasn't very fond of her plan myself and spent some time trying to talk her out of it. Unfortunately without much success. I did make a quick phone call to the school administration in order to ask about your exam results, and she seemed relieved when I told her that both of you passed. It didn't convince her to remain on the school grounds for today, but I think you nevertheless took a load off her shoulders."

Mister Nakai gives me an inquisitive look.

"So you have no idea where she could be headed?"

"I might. I urged her to go somewhere where I could get in touch with her."

"Somewhere?"

"That's the tricky part. I could tell you, but that would involve me breaking my client confidentiality with her and I'm afraid I can't afford to let that happen."

"Even though after today she won't be a client of yours any longer?"

"That doesn't really make a difference. I wouldn't be able to do my job any longer if the rest of my clients were to believe that my confidentiality only lasts until graduation."

Miss Inoue makes a face.

"You've gotta be kidding me. So you have an idea where she is, but you won't tell us? What are we supposed to do? Just wait until she comes floating to the surface, as it were? Why even tell us all this at all?"

"I had a reason for calling you here. Please take a moment to reach under the bed you're sitting on. Be careful not to damage them."

"Huh? Hey, she's right. There's something under here."

Mister Nakai and Miss Inoue get on their hands and knees and reach under the bed. Moments later, they pull out what was hidden there. Three beautiful flower arrangements, each of them with a small card attached. The one with the card printed in Braille looks rather odd, the flowers' colors not really complementing each other well like the other two do. When Miss Hanako was making that one, I wondered what her reasoning behind it was. But when taking it to her room, I noticed that it was much more fragrant than the others. It must have been made specifically with Miss Satou's blindness in mind.

Miss Hanako's friends look confused for a second as they each take the arrangement that was meant for them. Miss Satou runs her hand through the flowers and takes in their scent. Then she gives me an unsure look.

"Are these...?"

"These are Miss Ikezawa's graduation gifts to you. She asked me to give them to you. Please accept them."

Their expressions slowly change from puzzlement to awe, though still with a clear hint of sadness.

"Wow, these are really pretty. But where did they come from?"

"She made them herself. Miss Ikezawa and I usually play board games during our sessions. They help her relax. She wasn't in the mood for games over the last few weeks, so I suggested an alternative. I had her work on these little gifts for you instead. She picked out the flowers and materials and we had them delivered at my office. She has spent the last few sessions putting them together. Just between you and me, I think she has a knack for this. Perhaps not so surprising for someone whose first name means 'flower girl'."

"They're beautiful."

"She also prepared two sets of cards. One set with a congratulatory message and another one with a consolation. I attached the right cards to the pieces just before hiding them here."

I smile sheepishly at Miss Satou.

"I'm afraid I don't read Braille, so I really hope I didn't accidentally attach the wrong note to your arrangement."

"Don't worry, it's the right one. Did... Hanako really make these?"

"She did. I'm afraid that Miss Ikezawa has known what her own exam results were going to be long before this day arrived. She might even have known that she wasn't going to make it in before she even started those entrance exams. They weren't particularly easy, and one would need complete focus in order to do well. In the end, there were probably far too many things tugging at her and holding her

back for her to have a realistic chance of success. I'm sure you'll understand that she was not looking forward to this day. These presents were her attempt at... hmmm... lightening the mood, so to speak. She was quite worried about how her exam results were going to affect you today. Although to be honest, I think just working on these also provided her with a limited means of distraction. It made the last few days here more bearable for her."

I smile sadly at Miss Hanako's friends.

"Please consider these the smile and well-wishes she wanted to have for you today, yet could not give you in person due to her own circumstances. I hope that despite Miss Ikezawa's situation, you will still be able to feel pride and a measure of happiness today."

A conflicted expression appears on their faces. I find myself wondering once more whether I shouldn't have taken the risk of pushing Miss Hanako to stay here today just a little bit harder. Her friends are touched by her gesture, that much is obvious. If Miss Hanako had been the one to give them these gifts personally, I'm sure she would have been looking at three huge smiles right now. It's obvious that the main thing on their mind right now is still worry about their friend. Eventually, Miss Satou speaks up.

"Miss Takawa, you said something about getting in touch with Hanako. Are you planning to do so?"

"I am, Miss Satou. As I'm sure Miss Inoue here can attest, whenever a student here fails his entrance exams, it is customary for that person's homeroom teacher to have a talk with him or her and discuss the options available to them."

"Yeah, I had that talk with Mutou and Hoshino after I screwed up on the Center Test. They told me that if my parents could afford it, my best option was to attend a cram school for a year and try again next January. Hoshino felt that I had enough academic ability to succeed the next time, assuming I'd be less reckless with my condition. We found a cram school in my hometown that has someone with a first aid diploma on duty, and the people here are now in contact with him to instruct him on how to deal with me if I have a fit."

"We had a meeting about today's exam results this morning, and Miss Ikezawa was brought up as well. I volunteered to take the task of having this talk with Miss Ikezawa off Mister Mutou's hands. I intend to get in touch with her later today. But... I cannot have this kind of talk with her if she does not trust me. So..."

"You... Don't want us to try and find her?"

"Miss Ikezawa has had a few very rough months and is probably still not really sure what she wants to do now and where she wants to go. She might need a little bit of time to sort things out for herself. I might be able to help her a bit, but in the end she'll have to make the final call herself."

"A little bit of time?"

"A few days maybe. When I talk to her, I'll try to convince her to contact you. If you haven't heard anything from her in... say... three days, feel free to give me a call."

I reach into my pocket and give a card with my phone number to each of the three graduates sitting in front of me. Mister Nakai looks a bit doubtful as he takes the card.

"Days?"

"There is no need to worry about her safety."

There's a short silence, but then Miss Hanako's friends give a resigned nod.

"Miss Takawa?"

"Yes, Miss Satou?"

"If you talk to her, please tell her that... I'm sorry."

I study the expression on Miss Satou's face for a second and sigh.

"I think you've already apologized enough as it is for your part in this whole situation, Miss Satou. I doubt Miss Ikezawa even holds you responsible to begin with, so try not to blame yourself too badly for what happened. In the end, neither you nor Miss Ikezawa were truly responsible. If I had to point fingers, I would say that the real culprits are Miss Ikezawa's anxieties or the things that created them, not Miss Ikezawa herself."

The half-hearted nod I get in response isn't really the answer I was hoping for, but it'll have to do.

"I think I've pretty much said all I came here to say. If none of you have any further questions, then perhaps it is better to take our leave here. I'm sure your parents are wondering what's keeping you."

Mister Nakai and Miss Inoue warily get up, but Miss Satou remains seated. For a moment, she appears deep in thought, but then nods and turns to me.

"Miss Takawa, I have one more request to make of you if it's not a problem."

02

"Hmmm. Still nothing."

I shrug and put my cell phone away. As expected, Miss Hanako still has her own phone turned off. I had been hoping to get lucky and be able to inform her how her friends reacted to her gifts, but I suppose that'll have to wait.

After leaving the dorm building, Miss Hanako's friends were greeted by their parents who had been waiting for them outside. They're standing outside of earshot range - well, *my* earshot range at least, which has admittedly been decreasing a bit over the last few years, but from the looks of it they're currently trying to explain the situation to their parents to the best of their ability. Eventually I see Miss Inoue walk up to Mister Nakai and Miss Satou and take out her phone. I don't need to hear their words to comprehend what's going on. They're probably exchanging phone numbers in order to make sure that they're all kept in the loop when one of them hears more about Miss Hanako. Upon finishing, Miss Inoue exchanges polite bows with Mrs. Satou and then waves goodbye to Mister Nakai and Miss Satou before walking off together with her parents. Mister Nakai and Miss Satou merely stand there for a bit until Mister Nakai's mother pats her son's shoulder and gives what appears to be an indication that they'll be leaving soon, too. Before they can part though, I see Miss Satou's older sister suddenly gesture in my direction, and her parents turn their heads to look my way as well. I approach them and bow politely.

"Good afternoon and congratulations on your son's and daughter's successful graduation. I hope this day will be a special one to you despite the fact that Miss Ikezawa couldn't attend."

Nobody really seems sure how to react at first, but eventually they return my bow, and we exchange introductions. Miss Satou's father, a tall and stern-looking man, gives me a long look-over.

"Miss Takawa, our daughter has just explained the situation to us, but there is still one thing I am rather curious about. You mentioned making contact with Hanako and discussing the available options with her. Exactly what options are you going to bring up? And... What option are you planning to recommend? Are you... aware of all the options she has?"

"To be honest, I would like to discuss the options and my recommendation with Miss Ikezawa herself before discussing them with anyone else. But if there's a specific suggestion you have in mind then this would probably be a good opportunity to discuss it with me."

Truth be told, I've been wanting to have a talk with Mister and Mrs. Satou for quite some time, so I hope they'll accept. I see them exchange a short glance and then nodding.

"Very well. We are at your disposal."

"I'm glad to hear that. My office is on the upper floor of the nurses' building. It's not very far from here."

Mister and Mrs Satou turn to Mister Nakai's parents and say their goodbyes, congratulating them once more on their son successfully passing the exams. Then they turn to Mister Nakai himself.

"Mister Nakai, I am certain we will meet again in the future sometime, so please stay well until then."

"Yes, please take good care of yourself."

"You too, sir, madam."

He briefly turns to me.

"Thank you for all your efforts on Hanako's behalf, Miss Takawa."

"My efforts were not any more important than your own, Mister Nakai. Perhaps we will speak again soon. Until then."

I bow and then head off with Miss Satou's parents following me. I look back one more time and see Miss Satou and Mister Nakai sharing an embrace. A parting like this, even though it's most likely temporary, must be difficult for both of them.

"Please enjoy."

I hand Mister and Mrs Satou their bowl of tea, and we all take a careful sip. Mister Satou gives an appreciative nod at the taste and then proceeds to sweep the room with his gaze.

"You have quite an impressive and unique work environment, if I may say so. Is this a common practice for people in your profession?"

I chuckle. It's far from the first time I've heard that question.

"In a way it is, I think. Creating a calming and non-threatening atmosphere is an essential part of our jobs. If a client cannot relax, they usually cannot work with us. Although... hmm... I've been told that I have taken the principle a little farther than most. But I believe it to be important to ensure this place does not resemble a doctor's office in any way or form. There are already enough of those kinds of rooms in this building."

"Is it that important?"

"I think so. A doctor's office can help but look somewhat clinical. You visit a doctor when there's something wrong with you. That's not something you want in the back of your mind when seeing a mental health professional. That is one of the two reasons."

"And the other?"

"This school is not a mental hospital, and we do not accept students whose condition isn't physical. But the truth is that even physical disabilities sometimes need more than mere physical treatment. Especially when a person's condition came later in life. Accidents have the tendency to also leave marks on a person that are more subtle than missing limbs. We have students in here each year whose conditions are the result of such events and who went through a long period of hospitalization. An office that reminds students of a hospital room would merely rile them up."

Mrs. Satou, who has remained silent until now softly speaks up.

"So your job is to help students suffering from post-traumatic stress?"

"That's correct. All treatment here is voluntary, though our suggestions to them to accept treatment are more persistent with some than they are with others. The treatment is somewhat unofficial, too, so students can have therapy sessions here without having to worry about the social stigma that society usually places on visits to mental health officials."

"What exactly does unofficial treatment mean?"

"I may have worded that a little poorly. The students' visits are unofficial, meaning we try to remain somewhat low-key about them. The treatment itself is a recognized therapy form. Its name is cognitive behavioral therapy. I was hired by this school because I have received official training in it. It has proven to be quite beneficial to people suffering from various anxiety and stress disorders, including post-traumatic stress."

Mister Satou raises an eyebrow.

"I may be mistaken, but is that not a western therapy form? I was not even aware it was practiced in Japan."

That's a surprise. Most people simply nod whenever I mention my specialty.

"You've heard of it?"

"I've read an article about it once while my wife and I were living in Scotland."

"I see. It's not practiced here much. I've actually received my own training abroad. There's still official research going on that's trying to prove that the therapy is... compatible with our country's culture and mindset. I myself have already reached my own conclusions about that, as has the school, but

unfortunately my own findings do not qualify as peer-reviewed research. Still, the therapy has a proven track record. *sigh* Just not an official local one."

Mister Satou smirks slightly.

"It must be frustrating to have a specialty that's not widely in demand here."

"To be very honest, I believe our mental healthcare system has a lot of room for growth. I'm not merely talking about getting rid of the extremely strong social stigma associated with psychological conditions, but also about the way we treat them. Most mental hospitals are located about as far from 'proper society' as possible, so it's easier for the rest of the world to pretend that they're not there, and when people are admitted there, they're often being kept there for as long as possible, under as much medication as possible to keep them docile. It's not a system I agree with, but changing it isn't easy. There are quite a few economic interests involved for some to keep the beds filled for as long as possible and the medicine cabinet filled to the brim. Thankfully this school is different."

"I can imagine that you would want to keep students' medication as limited as possible because 'docile' students may not do well on their exams."

I smile.

"Exactly. We're trying to keep our students' lives as normal as possible and go out of our way to prepare them for life as a productive part of society. Hence the school's desire for... hmm... less intrusive methods of mental health treatment. To be honest, I'm quite fond of this job. I've always loved working with children. They are our country's future, after all."

Maybe I'm rambling on a bit. I take another sip and look at my guests.

"But forgive me. You did not come here to listen to an old therapist vent about the problems in her profession. Let us talk about the reason you are here... Miss Ikezawa."

Mrs. Satou gives me a curious glance.

"Has Hanako had... therapy of any kind before she came here?"

Now there's a question. I strongly suspect she hasn't. Part of me resents that fact. Heaven knows she would have benefitted from it if she'd been properly counseled from the very beginning. The orphanage staff must have known that she wasn't functioning well. Of course, having her committed to a psychiatric hospital, even for a little while, would have had its own issues if word got out somehow. A 'mental patient' label would have been a bigger stigma than even the burns on her face. A stigma that would make it hard for her to get a job or even a place to live. Do you risk placing that kind of alienating label on a child who is already lacking a real home or family?

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss that subject without her permission. I don't think it's very important right now anyway."

Mrs. Satou gives an apologetic nod.

"I apologize. Please forget what I just asked."

03

"Very well. Getting back to the subject at hand; a few months ago I had a conversation with Mister Nakai and your daughter about Miss Ikezawa. I remember urging them to do what they could to make it through their own exams successfully. The idea was for the two of them to become sources of stability

in Miss Ikezawa's life. From what I've seen, your daughter has taken that advice to... far greater lengths than I could ever have anticipated. It's... quite the permanent solution to a temporary problem."

Mister Satou gives me a frown.

"That has to be the first time I have heard those words in that particular context. Miss Takawa, if I may... I think all of us are aware of the fact that Hanako's situation is on Lilly's mind a lot. But I hope you are not seriously suggesting that our daughter is responsible for the offer that I have made Hanako. I am still the head of this family, not Lilly, and as such the final responsibility for that decision lies with me. If you deem the decision an unwise one, I would like you to take that up with me as well and leave our daughter out of it."

"Of course. To be honest, it's probably a little early to make a final judgment on whether the offer itself was wise or not."

"Has she ever told you how she feels about it? Or does that also fall under patient confidentiality?"

"Client confidentiality, Mister Satou, and I'm afraid it does. That said, your offer came during an extremely stressful time for her, so I think it's too early to make a call on it."

"You believe the timing could have been better?"

"Rather than suddenly confronting her with it, you could have consulted me about it first. Your daughter and I somewhat know each other, and she knows how to contact me. I would have been happy to... ahem... subtly test the waters for you without arousing her suspicion. But said water is under the bridge right now, so there's no point in dwelling on that. That said, I'm curious what moved you to undertake such a... unique course of action."

"Unique? Adoptions of adults are extremely common in this country, Miss Takawa. Hanako would be one of many, I assure you. Why, my own brother, who now runs the head office of our company, is an adoptee."

That's not really the answer I was looking for. In fact it almost feels like a deflection.

"Oh yes, adoption of promising male business heirs is quite common here, but Miss Ikezawa is neither male nor a promising heir for your family business. Mister Satou, the adoption of a female adult would be unique enough to make the local news. I do not think you have made the offer for her to join your family because you're hoping to bequeath her your business assets."

He chuckles briefly and then shakes his head.

"No, the family business has nothing to do with this. It is a more personal perspective. As you are no doubt aware, Hanako has done a great deal for our family in its time of need. I believe that it is only appropriate that, now that she is going through a difficult time herself, we make an effort to return the favor. I consider it a matter of honor."

"Yes, I've heard of your hospitalization, and I'm glad you are doing better now. I imagine you are quite grateful to her. Maybe even grateful enough to take on a life-long responsibility such as this. Speaking of which... May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What... do you think about marriage?"

"W-What does that have to do with Hanako?"

I'm a little surprised at how defensive Mister Satou suddenly seems. I wonder if I touched a sensitive spot. Still, I'll have to make my point now. At least Mrs. Satou seems willing to humor me and gives me a curious smile.

"Could you elaborate a bit, Miss Takawa?"

"It is a life-long responsibility, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, it is."

"Just like a child."

"Yes... just... like a child..."

For just a second I see a profound sadness in her eyes.

"For what reasons would you marry someone?"

"That's quite an embarrassing question."

From the sound of her playful chuckle, I suspect she was merely being polite.

"Hmph, with all due respect, Miss Takawa, I believe you are out of line here."

Mister Satou looks extremely uncomfortable, but his wife doesn't look embarrassed at all. She merely gives me a tender smile.

"There's only one reason I could think of. For myself, at least. I'd have to feel a strong affection for a person in order to marry him."

She throws a quick side glance to her husband and smiles warmly. Her husband sighs, but doesn't respond. I nod.

"What if a person came along for whom you didn't feel this kind of affection, but who did you a favor too great to just ignore. What if, when asked if there was anything you could do in return, that person asked you to marry him. Would you do it? Would you accept that life-long commitment purely out of gratitude? Out of a sense of honor?"

"I..."

Mrs. Satou opens her mouth to answer, but then realization dawns on her face, on both their faces, and there's a long painful silence.

I give the two of them an earnest look.

"I realize you are very grateful to her, but gratitude or obligation alone cannot carry a family. If you merely did this because you felt that you had an obligation to settle, she'll eventually feel that her

presence is merely being tolerated and not truly accepted. In fact, I would be surprised if this isn't something that she has already thought of. A lot."

Mister Satou acknowledges my words with a short nod and a pensive look on his face. His wife, on the other hand, looks completely crushed - not completely unlike her youngest daughter when she found out that Miss Hanako had already left the school grounds. She gives me a pleading look, and her words are little more than a whisper.

"Is that... how Hanako feels? Is that how she thinks?"

There's probably a lot more to it than that, but I'm almost convinced that this is one of the reasons Miss Hanako hasn't accepted their proposal.

"Miss Ikezawa has lived a very hard life, and she is still struggling to regain her faith in other people. Especially when she's feeling down, her resolve to regain it tends to falter from time to time."

"But, this is not how it is... She's... mistaken about us..."

I give her a probing stare.

"Do you love Miss Ikezawa then?"

Mrs. Satou doesn't answer. Her husband, however, gives me defensive look.

"To be honest, we do not know her that well. But I believe you are being a bit unfair. Can couples who visit an orphanage in order to adopt one of the children there say for sure that they know the child? Or love the child? Would you discourage that practice as well?"

I shake my head.

"I wouldn't, but Miss Ikezawa is no ordinary orphan. She's..."

I pause for a moment while searching for the right words.

"...a special needs child, I suppose. It's not all she is. She's a person with her own talents, hopes, dreams and tastes. But she *is* carrying a lot of baggage around. Very heavy baggage. It's not something that should ever be ignored or dismissed. We are a school here, and common school etiquette says pupils can't be late for class or leave early or ignore the teacher's request to form groups and work together. Yet we make exceptions because we know that Miss Ikezawa's behavior isn't due to a refusal to conform, but due to an inability to. You are right in that it's impossible to really love a person whom you do not truly know yet, but it is possible to accept a person you do not truly know yet. Unconditional acceptance would be required from the very beginning. Imagine..."

I think for a moment before continuing.

"Imagine being at an event - a family reunion or something similar - together with her. All seems fine at first, but at some point something suddenly happens. Something that triggers her anxieties. She panics and runs off. There is an awkward silence around you. People look at her go. Then those people turn their gazes onto you. They say nothing, but you can see the judgment in their eyes. What will you do? Scold Miss Ikezawa for disrupting the harmony and making you lose face in front of your peers? Or go after her to see if she's alright? There's no need to answer this question, but think about it. More than

the financial security, she needs the emotional security. A place to feel accepted regardless of what the rest of the world thinks of her. And people..."

I fold my hands and give my guests a solemn stare.

"...who are not merely willing to share her joy and her sorrow, but also - if necessary - her loneliness."

The people in front of me merely nod and for a moment I feel like a school teacher. Then Mister Satou scrapes his throat.

"We will think about what you have told us."

"Thank you. There is one other thing I am a little curious about."

"And what would that be?"

"Now that Miss Ikezawa has failed her entrance exams, what will your daughter do? I recall that she and Miss Ikezawa were set to become roommates if they both passed their exams."

"That is correct. However, I have told Lilly that I would only arrange an apartment for her if she took a roommate. If I know my daughter a little bit, I think she will want to hold out for Hanako, rather than simply pick someone else as her roommate. That would mean she will be spending her first year in the dorms, and we can give the apartment another try next year."

"I can imagine she will be quite disappointed."

"Yes, it is very unfortunate, but it cannot be helped."

"I was wondering... hmm... if you wouldn't reconsider, for Miss Ikezawa's sake."

It sounds crazy, asking people to reconsider getting an apartment just like that. Especially with the high costs of living space these days. But from what Miss Hanako has told me about their accommodations during their stay in Scotland, I'm fairly confident that money isn't the problem here.

"What does Hanako have to do with this?"

"Your offer to let Miss Ikezawa move in with your daughter was most generous and well-meant, but at the same time it also put a lot of pressure on her. She knew how much your daughter was looking forward to having her own little place, and that that prospect is now gone because of her. There's no doubt that the feeling of having failed your daughter was one of the reasons Miss Ikezawa chose to leave here early. If you were to reconsider, you'd surely spare Miss Ikezawa a tremendous burden this year."

Mister Satou huffs.

"I understand what you are saying, but surely you see potential problems with leaving a blind girl on her own in a town she does not know."

"There will be challenges, sure, but we have blind students graduating here every year and several of them go on to live relatively independent lives. Your daughter has had 19 years to adapt to her lack of eyesight, and people like her tend to have more coping strategies than we can even imagine. From

what I have heard, your daughter is one of the most self-reliant students of her class. She may need a month - maybe two, but she'll adapt eventually."

"That still leaves us with one or two months of her needing oversight."

"Perhaps one of you could be her temporary roommate - until she's grown accustomed to her new place."

"Hmmmm..."

A short pause and then Mrs. Satou turns to her husband.

"Maybe... I could be that roommate? For a little while. You already started your new job after all. The two of us would be living separately for a little while, but... I kind of owe Lilly something, don't I?"

"Karla, let us speak about this at home."

"Alright. Just remember that sometimes you have to endure some short-term hardships in order to make a positive difference in the long run."

For a split-second I see Mister Satou smile as if enjoying some private joke.

I open my notebook, thumb through a few pages and then write a phone number from one of the pages onto my business card.

"If you intend to follow through with this, please call this number. It's the number of our mobility instructors' office. They're the ones helping our blind students navigate the campus when they first get here, among other things. Surely one of them knows your daughter. They can tell you everything you need to know about helping your daughter adapt as quickly as possible."

"Thank you for all your help."

"Perhaps you should return to your daughters and do what you can to celebrate your youngest daughter's exam results."

"We will."

We get up, and I start putting the bowls that used to hold the tea away. Mister Satou is already preparing to leave the room, but his wife seems to hesitate. When he gives her a quizzical look, she merely smiles.

"I'll be right with you."

"Very well."

As her husband leaves the office, Mrs. Satou walks up to me and gives me an unsure smile.

"I've... been thinking a little bit about what you said. My husband's... usually pretty sensitive about what others think of him."

I nod.

"I think most of us are. We are very much a group-based society. Peer pressure and avoiding loss of face are some of the cornerstones of our culture."

"But I don't think he'd scold her, even if her anxieties caused trouble. That night he came home after that train wreck of an open house day, he seemed genuinely troubled by what happened to Hanako. It usually takes a lot to rattle him. I think... his first reaction might be to apologize to others if she accidentally caused a scene, but I'm sure he'd also go and see if she's alright afterwards. He has to."

"You seem quite certain."

She smiles sadly at me.

"Our daughters would never forgive us if we messed something like this up. We might lose them permanently."

"I suppose the principle can work both ways."

"I'm not sure what you're planning to recommend to Hanako, but... she can come to us if she ever needs a place to stay. We could even arrange for her to have her own little place if she needs some extra space. The costs are not a problem. Our family has done pretty well... financially."

"I think the best thing to do would be to leave this matter in her hands from now on. If she were to decide to rely on you or accept your offer at some point, she'll probably do so when she feels the time is right. If she decides not to, there's no need to ever bring it up again."

"Alright. I'll tell my husband and our daughters."

She gives me a thorough look-over, almost as if analyzing me.

"I was impressed by how passionate you were about the situation with Hanako just now. You... really seem to care about her."

I chuckle.

"Aside from being a therapist, I also play the role of counselor from time to time here. I'm merely looking out for the best interests of those placed under my supervision. But I care a lot about the work I do."

"You said before that you loved working with children."

I smile warmly.

"I do. I hope I can keep doing this job for a long time."

"Do you have any children?"

"I've had many over the years."

"I mean... Do you have any children of your own?"

I shake my head.

"If you were faced with the decision - between being able to play an important role in the lives of many, or merely in the lives of a few... What would your choice be, Mrs. Satou?"

"I wish this sort of thing wouldn't have to be a choice to begin with."

The woman in front of me gives me a long look, and her gaze sends an uncomfortable shiver down my spine. I struggle for a moment to maintain my smile. There's a hint of sadness and quiet understanding in her eyes, but most of all there's... pity. I give a short cough.

"Is there anything else you wish to know?"

Mrs. Satou shakes her head.

"I'd better get back. Lilly's probably wondering what's keeping me."

"Please give my regards to your daughter."

"I will. Goodbye Miss Takawa. And good luck with Hanako."

04

"Hmmm... Again nothing."

I put my cell phone away and open the door of my car. Looks like Miss Hanako's phone is still turned off. I consider trying the landline, but then conclude there's no chance she'll pick that one up. Oh well, I'll just have to wait a little while longer. Before I drive away from the parking lot, I take a look back at the school. When I look at this place, I merely see the school where I work as a counselor and therapist. But quite a few students must have left this place today and looked back only to realize that they will never return here, save for perhaps a reunion someday. I wonder what that feels like. Several people I've spoken to today must know by now.

While driving back home, I think back on what happened today. It's certainly been an eventful day. First my encounter with Miss Hanako at the school gate this morning, followed by a rather intense meeting about the graduates. Then there was the talk with Miss Hanako's friends, both before and after the graduation ceremony and the conversation with Miss Satou's parents. I've been filling up the rest of my time writing and filing reports. Graduation day is always a bit busy for me. I'm still a bit behind on my reports, but I want to be home rather early today, so I convinced myself to shelf the workload that didn't have to be done today. In a way, I'll be working this evening as well.

As I arrive at the parking lot near my apartment building, I experience a slight feeling of pride. That meeting today went very well - much better than I had anticipated. The school administration turned out to be impressed by my preparations and gave me the cooperation I asked for. Better late than never. Now the only thing that's left to do is to speak with Miss Hanako.

As I take out my key to the front door, I realize I've made quite an exception myself in allowing my guest to stay here today. I was a more than a little bit uncomfortable with it, realizing this is not something I ought to make a habit of, but drastic circumstances call for drastic measures and I think I owed it to her. Still, it'd be good if we could sort things out this evening, and she can sleep somewhere else. I've already been skirting the line of what's appropriate.

I open the door to my apartment and smile as I'm being greeted by a soft meow from my companion.

"Hello, Yuki-dear. Have you been a good kitten today?"

I kneel down and let the young Japanese Bobtail sniff my hand before gently stroking its chin and behind its ears. I take a mouse-shaped cat toy from my bag and toss it towards the far wall of the entryway area. Yuki immediately turns her head and dashes after it, awkwardly pouncing on it as if it's a real-life prey. I chuckle at the endearing sight of her taking the toy in her mouth and walking back to me, dropping it in front of me as if it's a present. If what I read is correct, playing fetch is only a fraction of the tricks this breed can learn. I just hope it'll still take a little while before she starts dragging formerly living animals in here as presents.

"Good kitty. Have you kept an eye on Miss Hanako as I asked you to?"

In response, the young cat merely takes the toy in its mouth again and drops it on the floor once more, this time a little closer to me, as if wanting to remind me that this is the part where I take the toy and throw it away again.

"I'll play fetch with you later, dear. Mommy's got some things to take care of first."

I get up and raise my voice a bit to announce my arrival.

"Miss Hanako? I'm back. Would you like me to make you some tea?"

No response. That's a bit odd. I expected her to at least come out here and say hello. Is she still in a gloomy mood? Well, probably, but...

As I look around, I suddenly realize that there's something missing here. Something that was here when I left again this morning.

"Miss Hanako!"

05

Her shoes aren't in the place where she left them. Or anywhere else for that matter.

Completely forgetting to take off my own shoes, I hurry into my living room.

There's no one here.

How can this be?

"Miss Hanako?"

No answer.

What's going on?

I told her to stay here this morning. Take some time to calm down and play with Yuki. Yet she's nowhere in sight.

I quickly search the other rooms of my home. Miss Hanako is nowhere to be found. What's more - her suitcases are gone too. That means she's not taking a little stroll around the block. She didn't seem to be in the mood for one anyway.

I don't understand this.

I quickly take out my cell phone and call Miss Hanako's number. The phone's turned off just like before. Starting to get a little worried, I quickly call the school.

"Good evening. Yamaku Academy administrative office, Mariko Harada speaking."

"Good evening Miss Harada. This is Yumi Takawa speaking."

"Miss Takawa, what can I do for you?"

"Miss Harada, I would like to make a request of you if it's not a problem."

"Of course, what is it you want me to do?"

"I would like you to ask a few members of the nursing staff to go and look around a bit for a certain student. I would like to find out whether she's on campus or not."

"That's not a problem. And what if they find her?"

"I'd just like to be notified. The girl's name is Hanako Ikezawa. She's a 3rd year, relatively tall, long dark hair, shy demeanor, wears a denim jacket and a dark hat... and she's a burn victim. Most of the nurses are probably familiar with her, seeing that she's lived on campus for three years."

"Ahm... Miss Takawa... If she's a 3rd year then doesn't that mean she's graduated today? Why would she still be on campus?"

"The situation is a bit complicated, Miss Harada. You'll have to excuse me for leaving it at that."

"Alright then. I'll ask a few people. Do you have any suggestions on where to start?"

She can't be in her own dorm room, since she gave me the key this morning, and I left it at the administration office before leaving the school grounds.

"Hmmm... Start with the library if it's still open, the roof and the classrooms. Ask the dorm keeper to drop by Miss Yamazaki's room. She's the only friend of Miss Ikezawa who's still living in the dorms. If she's not there, have a look around the running track, perhaps."

"Alright, we'll do our best."

"Thank you, Miss Harada. I'm looking forward to hearing from you."

I hang up, give Yuki some of her favorite cat food and absentmindedly get started on making dinner. It shouldn't take the nurses too long to search the spots I indicated. Deep down I don't even believe she's gone back to Yamaku at all. She can't use her dorm room anymore, so where would she stay? But I want to rule out the possibility. Of course, if she's not at school, then where could she have gone?

I'm almost finished eating dinner when the phone rings. Could they have found her? I hurriedly pick up the phone.

"Good evening, Yumi Takawa speaking."

"Good evening, Takawa."

"Miss principal! This is an unexpected surprise."

"I'm merely returning the favor."

I don't like the tone in her voice. She sounds upset about something. I wonder what this is about.

"How can I be of help?"

"I would really like to know what is going on here, Takawa. During the meeting this morning you volunteered to have a follow-up talk with Ikezawa in Mutou's place. We gave you the green light on that, as well as on your other proposals. And now, while I stopped by the administration office, I heard that you requested the patrolling nurses to search for this girl. What on earth is going on?"

"I apologize, madam."

"You didn't have that talk with Ikezawa after all?"

"Please allow me to explain. Miss Ikezawa was actually waiting for me at the school gate when I arrived at work early this morning. She was set on leaving the school, and she asked me to present her friends with the graduation gifts she made for them."

"She was leaving? Without picking up her diploma or attending the ceremony? Why was she so eager to leave?"

"A minor misunderstanding with her friends combined with guilt and shame about not having passed her entrance exams. She's been under heavy emotional pressure lately, as I've mentioned this morning."

"So you let her leave?"

"I voiced my misgivings about it myself and tried to dissuade her from leaving, but I couldn't convince her to stay on the premises. So I... drove her to my apartment and told her to stay there until I returned. We could then take our time and have a talk together about her future. That was my condition for me doing her the favor with the presents to her friends."

"So that was why you were late at the meeting this morning?"

"My apologies again for my tardiness, madam."

I really hope this morning didn't earn me any speeding tickets on top of the scolding I'm taking now.

"Isn't taking a client home an inappropriate action for a therapist? Aren't you supposed to maintain - what do they call it - professional distance? You've literally taken your work home with you today."

"It's not something I intend to make a habit out of, madam, but I had to think quickly this morning. I couldn't convince her to stay on the school grounds, but I couldn't just let her wander off either. I thought that giving her a bit of space would be beneficial and buy me the time I needed."

Though I suspect that easing my own conscience played a very large role as well. I felt I partially responsible for her state and may have gone too far in trying to make that up to her. Not to mention the fact that the very idea of her walking away from Yamaku in a worse mental state than when she

came, despite all the time and effort I put into her therapy, felt like the ultimate slap in the face. I've accepted the fact that she'll still have baggage to sort out even after her graduation, but the thought of her leaving school in the condition she was in was something that my personal pride resisted with all its might.

"But something happened?"

"When I came home an hour ago, I couldn't find her here. She appears to have left, but I have no idea when and where to."

"Why would she do that?"

"It's mostly guesswork on my part, but I think it's connected to her trust issues. She has difficulty trusting other people on a deeper level. She has to make a bigger effort than most to maintain her trust in others, and she's prone to lapses of faith during times of extreme stress. It's a defense mechanism that developed during her elementary and middle school years."

"But you still thought it was a good idea to leave her alone? I suppose you didn't anticipate this?"

That hurts. It's true, though. I should have anticipated the possibility of this happening, but I didn't. I suppose I deemed myself exempt because I was her therapist, rather than her friend. But then again, didn't I cross that line today by sheltering her? Did I cause her to become suspicious of me? Did I try so hard to convince her that I was on her side, that she started doubting my sincerity? I really messed up this time.

"I... have no excuse, madam."

"Does the fact that she left mean that your proposal this morning is now moot?"

"Not at all, madam! Let's not take any rash action! We should take a bit of time to wait things out."

"According to the nurses you sent out to search the campus, she's not anywhere around here. They'll keep an eye out for her, but we can probably discount the possibility. Do you have any other idea where she could be?"

"She might have contacted one of her friends after all."

"Also people from school?"

"Mister Nakai and Miss Inoue from class 3-3 and the Satou family. Their youngest daughter was class representative of class 3-2. The problem is that if we call them and she's not there, we might cause them quite a bit of distress."

"I'm sorry, but did you mention the Satou family? *That* Satou family?"

"If you are talking about the parents of Miss Lilly Satou of class 3-2 then yes, madam. They seem to have taken great interest in Miss Ikezawa's well-being lately."

"This is a big problem, Takawa. Are you aware of Satou Medical Technology?"

"They manufacture some of the equipment we use, don't they?"

"Yes, which they provide us with for quite a low price too. They're actually also one of the school's financial benefactors. Do you realize what would happen if we upset them and they pull part of the school's funding? That would be very bad. For all of us. This is quite a mess you've gotten us into, Takawa!"

Am I being thrown under the bus here? No, this is ridiculous. This whole situation is ridiculous. I'm getting a bit frustrated here. This isn't just my fault.

"Miss Principal, I will not deny my part in all of this, but this situation could have been avoided if I had been given the guarantee I've been asking for. It was frustrating having to settle for pep talks that were barely registering anymore. We could have spared that girl some truly dreadful weeks."

My superior responds with a dismissive sigh.

"You said before that you understood the school administration's policy and decision."

That doesn't mean I don't vehemently disagree with it.

"I'm afraid I still can't agree with it."

"That isn't important right now, Takawa. Do you have any idea where Ikezawa could be?"

"I... need to think about that. If I can figure out her train of thought, I might be able to come up with something."

"I hope you'll do a better job at this than you did earlier today then. Don't make us lose face in front of our benefactors, Takawa."

"No, madam. I'm sorry, madam. I'll keep you updated."

"Please do. Good evening."

As I put down the receiver, I feel exhausted. Exhausted and irritated. I can't help but feel that this issue is being politicized. Well, it's the principal's job to worry about our relations with our donors, but I still feel put off by the idea of Miss Hanako's situation suddenly being a matter of school-wide importance, just because a rich family took an interest in her. As if her well-being wasn't important before.

And then the matter of Miss Hanako's sudden disappearance. To be honest, I feel a bit betrayed. I've put so much effort into this. And now it's threatening to blow up in my face.

I rub my forehead to dull the throbbing sensation that started during my conversation with the principal. No point in getting angry. I must think. Suddenly, my attention is drawn by something sticking out from under the couch. I cleaned this place yesterday, so it's something that ended up there today. I kneel down, pull on it and find out it's a piece of paper. A piece of paper with tears and little bite marks in several places. I give my feline companion a scolding stare.

"Bad kitten. This wasn't meant for you."

I reach into my bag to retrieve my reading glasses, but even without them I can tell that it's a letter, probably left on the low table near the couch before Yuki got hold of it.

As I start reading, I immediately see that it's a letter of thanks. The letter is longer than I thought, but its message can be summarized in a mere four words.

Goodbye and thank you.

I shake my head and pound the nearby table with my hand in frustration, startling my furry roommate.

"Miss Hanako, you foolish girl."

At least this rules out the possibility that she returned to the school. Could she have contacted one of her friends after all? I'm a bit afraid to approach them. What other possibilities are there?

Think like Miss Hanako. Think like Miss Hanako.

She's a girl, not particularly strong, carrying a backpack and two heavy suitcases. She wouldn't just randomly start walking off, unless I'm really off the mark about her emotional situation.

There's a bus stop in front of the apartment building. She probably took a bus out of here.

Think like Miss Hanako. Think like Miss Hanako.

I leave my apartment and take a look at the bus stop. There's one on each side of the street. I look back at my apartment and notice that the caretaker's office is still occupied.

"Hmmm..."

That man knows each of the tenants, and he might remember an unfamiliar person, particularly if said person was lugging a lot of baggage around.

I make my way to the office and gently knock on the window. The middle-aged caretaker opens the door and bows politely.

"Good evening, Miss Takawa."

I do my best to put on my most convincing smile.

"Good evening, Mister Kondo. May I ask you a question please?"

"Of course."

"Have you been here all day?"

"Most of the day. Did something happen?"

"I was wondering if you've seen a girl leave the building today. She's 18 years old, has long dark hair and was carrying a backpack and two suitcases."

"Oh yes, I remember her. I greeted her, but she kind of shied away. Seemed a bit nervous. She was heading for the bus stop."

"Do you remember when exactly you saw her and where she was headed?"

"It was during my lunch break, so it had to be close to one o' clock, give or take a few minutes. I saw her get on the bus at the bus stop on this side of the road."

"Thank you, Mister Kondo. You've been of great help to me."

"Anytime, Miss Takawa."

I walk back towards the bus stop, wondering if this information is really going to be of use to me. I can probably pinpoint where she's headed now, but I still won't know where she got off. Maybe I could call the bus company and ask who the driver of that particular bus was. Would he even remember her, let alone remember where she got off the bus? Probably not.

I take a look at the schedule on the bus stop in search of the bus that stopped here at one. I sigh loudly when I see what bus she must have taken.

That line only makes one more stop and then it goes directly to the train station.

I could check out that last stop, but I doubt it'll do me much good.

Goodbye and thank you indeed.

"Miss Hanako, you foolish, foolish girl..."

06

Chapter 52 (Hanako)

01

I wonder what time it is now.

Having just awakened from my restless state of semi-slumber, I try to fight off the disorientation that's the result of waking up in a strange place.

Even though the room's almost completely dark, I know instinctively that this room is not my own. The atmosphere is... different. Of course, was my own room at Yamaku ever really my own or was it just temporary too, like the rest of my high school life? A short reprieve from the rest of my life?

The drowsiness I feel slowly starts subsiding, but I still feel tired, exhausted even. My mind is clear enough to remember where I am, but I still wonder how long I've been in this state that might have passed for sleep. I think I retired to this room around nine o' clock. There wasn't any more work for me to do, and I wanted to be alone. I don't think I've slept much though. I haven't really slept much at all over the last few weeks, despite occasionally taking one of the sleeping pills that Miss Yumi prescribed. And when I closed my eyes, the nightmares would usually come. During the last two nights they've been different, but not any less horrifying.

My eyes have now adapted enough to vaguely make out the interior of the room I'm in. The fact that there's so little light getting past the curtains probably means it's still night. Should I try to get some more sleep? I wish there was an alarm clock in this room. There isn't, though, and I never got around to replacing the alarm clock that Naomi broke during one of her epileptic seizures. I've been using my cell phone as an alarm clock ever since.

My cell phone...

I could turn it on for a second.

I wearily get out of bed and feel my way over to the chair my clothes are draped over. I take the phone out of my pants' pocket, but before I can flip it open, a thought enters my mind that completely paralyzes my fingers.

If I turn it on, will it ring?

That's crazy and I know it. How coincidental would that be?

Still, it's not completely impossible, is it?

Just for a second. I'll turn it on, check the time and then turn it off again.

My fingers still won't move.

I carefully move the curtain in front of the window aside and peer through. It's either still night or extremely early in the morning. Nobody's up but me right now.

Just for a second then. Just to check the time.

Finally getting a hold of my anxiety, I fold out my phone and turn it on. Preparing to turn it off immediately again, I look at the small lit screen.

- 5:45 a.m. -

- 16 missed calls. -

02

I let out a tortured whimper and abruptly drop my phone, fortunately into the pile of clothes on the chair.

16 missed calls...

A normal person would have checked her phone sooner. A normal person would have responded.

But how should I respond? What would I say to them?

And...

What would they say to me?

I wonder for a moment if there are voicemails too, but I know in advance that I won't have the nerve to listen to those.

What would they say to me?

That question keeps bouncing around in my head, and I'm unable to get it out. What's worse, a little nagging voice in the back of my mind starts answering it.

What do you think they'll say?

Hanako, where are you? We're worried sick about you.

I'm sorry...

What were you thinking, running off without telling us? After everything we've already done for you.

I'm sorry...

I'm so disappointed, Hanako. Don't you remember our promise after I decided to stay in Japan? Didn't we promise to graduate together? I've kept it. Why couldn't you? Why couldn't you pass as well?

I'm sorry...

I know you're smart enough to have passed your entrance exams. You did well on the Center Test after all. Why couldn't you graduate with us? Why did you throw the fight?

I'm sorry...

Yes, why couldn't you pass as well? We could have celebrated going to the same university together. Now you've ruined the most important day of our lives. You only graduate high school once. Some memory that's turned out to be.

I'm sorry!

I was so excited about being able to have our own little place where we could live, study and spend time together. All we needed to do was to both pass our exams. I did my part. Why couldn't you do yours? Didn't you want this too? Didn't this prospect motivate you as well? Now I'll be stuck in the dorms there for a year, thanks to you.

I'm so sorry!

How are we even supposed to continue our relationship now? We probably won't be able to keep a long-distance relationship going, will we? Have you ever thought about that? Shouldn't that have been motivation enough?

I'm sorry!

At least our sex life isn't going to get any worse.

I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Beads of sweat start appearing on my forehead, and my breathing gets more frantic by the second. I struggle to regain control of myself, but my legs nevertheless give out and I collapse in a heap on the floor. My lungs are screaming for air, but they're barely getting any, no matter how hard I try to breathe.

Keep it together.

My chest is hurting really badly, and for a moment I wonder if my heart is going to give out. I feel like I'm suffocating, yet I can't pass out.

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

My heart's pounding like a jackhammer, but I'm suddenly hit by a flash of insight. Using every bit of strength I have, I pick myself up a bit and manage to reach into the pile of clothes on the chair and retrieve my phone. I can keep my shaking hands steady for just long enough to reach the power button and press it.

Breathe in, breathe out...

The sensation slowly starts ebbing away, but I can still barely breathe in here. I shuffle towards the door. I need to get some fresh air.

I open the door and stagger into the hallway. Everyone else still appears to be asleep.

I can breathe a little easier here, but I don't want to be caught here looking like I just had a heart attack, so I make my way to the nearby bathroom.

I soak one of the washing cloths lying near the sink and use it to wipe the sweat off my forehead. As the cool cloth soothes my throbbing head, the adrenaline rush from the experience back in my room makes way for an overwhelming tiredness, so I sit down on the edge of the bath and wait for my mind to get its bearings back. Eventually, the exhaustion starts fading and is replaced with a feeling that's not much better.

03

A feeling of depression.

I just had a debilitating panic attack. And it didn't happen because my boyfriend was dying in front of me or because I was trapped in an auditorium filled with people who were all looking in my direction. I had a panic attack because I looked at a cell phone.

I looked at a cell phone.

How pathetic can a girl get?

Have I really become this weak?

Seems like it.

My mind floats back to five months ago. We were going to try and get into the same university. Lilly, Hisao, even Naomi. And... me. I remember feeling a little uneasy about it even then, but... I had to leave Yamaku eventually. And I'd be able to share an apartment with Lilly. What more could I wish for?

But then, that panic attack happened. Lilly blamed herself and went really far to try and make amends for it, but this was never her fault to begin with, nor was it her responsibility to fix. A normal person would have turned that phone off after it went off, would have felt a bit awkward and then would have moved on. It was a painful reminder of how feeble I still am and how a single bad moment can immediately turn me back into a quivering semi-catatonic mess. Suddenly the future didn't look bright anymore. It started to terrify me.

Lilly must have been really happy when her father agreed to let her live on her own as long as she took a roommate. But I was secretly mortified, because I was thrust into that role. Now I had no choice but to pass. I'd never be able to forgive myself if Lilly became the victim of my weakness.

And yet that's what happened. My weakness eventually won out. I did surprisingly well on the Center Test. Perhaps part of the reason was Naomi. I knew I had to spare her the burden I was carrying. Then the entrance exams came. I had been struggling to keep studying despite my nightmares becoming more and more frequent. Maybe the little nagging voice in my head was right. I simply lacked the motivation to pass. I probably could have gotten in if only I had been a little more determined and a little less weak. The questions on the exam weren't easy, but they didn't make my head spin either. What made my head spin were my thoughts of what could happen if I answered them correctly.

And thus I failed not just my exams, but also Lilly and Hisao.

I managed to keep it hidden afterwards by hiding in my room, only sneaking out ever so often because I had to visit Miss Yumi in order to get a note that'd allow me to get my medication replenished. I didn't even think those antidepressants were helping anymore as graduation day came closer and closer. They were going to find out eventually and then what?

And here I am now. A nervous wreck, hiding away in a place far from the place that was like a home to me.

I think back on the thoughts that were just whirling around in my head. Thoughts about Lilly and Hisao. Bad thoughts about Lilly and Hisao. As if my downer mood wasn't enough already, a sense of shame now rears its head as well.

Miss Yumi's words from one of my sessions come back to mind. Psychological projection. Attributing one's own negative thoughts to other people. A defense mechanism against feelings such as guilt or inadequacy during times of heavy stress.

They wouldn't think such thoughts about me.

But I would think such thoughts about me.

I'm such a horrible person.

I wearily get up and prepare to return to the room I spent the night in, but before I walk out, I take a long look in the mirror.

I look even more terrible than usual. My face has grown skinny. In fact, I probably lost quite a bit of weight due to stress ever since examination hell began. The bags under my eyes can be seen from all the way across a large room. And my scars...

I carefully move the lock of hair that partially obscures the right side of my face. Is it just my imagination or are the scars... covering a larger area of my face than they were before?

No, that's crazy. That has to be my imagination. And yet... That was the first thought that came up when I looked at the blight on my face.

I can't sleep this way. I need to find a way to distract myself.

Maybe I could... continue my chores. Yes, that'd get my mind off of things.

I'll wash myself and get dressed. And then I'll get to work.

It's a little too early to prepare breakfast and vacuuming will be too loud. I could clean this room though. Maybe there's some more laundry to iron.

Yes, I'll go and make myself...

...useful...

04

"Ummm... Miss... uh..."

I cringe as I enter the kitchen and approach the woman who's busy cutting pieces of chicken meat while watching over a pan containing fried rice, judging from the smell.

What was her name again?

"...Ah... madam?"

She turns around.

"Ah... Ikezawa, wasn't it?"

"Y-Yes. I... umm... c-came to say that I'm f-finished with the laundry."

"Oh. That's... uh... good to hear. Thank you for getting it done so quickly."

"M-Maybe I could... do some vacuuming next?"

"Have you already eaten? I didn't see you around at breakfast."

"I... wanted to finish up f-first."

"It's almost noon already and you haven't eaten yet?"

"I'm... not very hungry right now."

It doesn't look like that's what she wanted to hear. I fidget nervously under the woman's stare.

"You have to eat something or you're going to faint at some point. I think you can afford to take it easy for a little while. It's not like we're understaffed here."

I'd actually rather keep busy for more than one reason.

"..."

My silence is met with a resigned sigh.

"If you want to help out more, you can sweep the backyard. But please take these leftovers from breakfast with you. Have a bite or two to eat, and just give the pieces of meat you don't want to the dog."

"Okay..."

I take a paper bag filled with leftovers from the kitchen table and make my way to the backyard where I sit down on the ground with my back against the wall. The fresh air clears my head a bit, but it still doesn't take away the unease I felt when the woman working in the kitchen tried to reassure me.

It's not like we're understaffed here.

I let out a depressed sigh. Then I absentmindedly take some of the pieces of bread from the paper bag lying next to me and start nibbling on them. Suddenly, I catch some movement in the corner of my eye and turn my head to see a friendly-looking Golden Retriever lazily approaching me. I wonder if he's just curious about this person sitting here or if he's smelled the pieces of meat in my bag.

"H-Hey..."

He sniffs into the air and gives me a curious look as if trying to determine if I'd be willing to share my food with him or not. I decide to take away his doubt by taking a piece of chicken from my bag and putting it next to me on the ground. The dog immediately walks up to me, sniffs the piece of meat and then quickly devours it. After swallowing his treat, he looks at me again as if begging for more.

"Umm... D-down?"

He obediently lies down, putting his chin on my upper leg. For the first time in a long time, I smile a bit. They trained him pretty well, it seems. I take another piece of meat from the bag, and this time I hold it in the palm of my hand, extending it towards him. He sniffs my hand and then eagerly takes the piece of chicken. I tenderly stroke his back as he gorges himself on the food. As I keep feeding my canine companion, my thoughts return to my current situation.

I figured I'd stay here until I figured out what to do next, but I'm still as lost as to what to do and where to go as when I came here. Lilly and Hisao are probably angry at me right now, and I don't want to be a burden on them. But... I wonder if I'm not a burden here either, despite my attempts to be useful here.

Maybe I'm just fooling myself when I'm telling myself that I'm here because I need some space to think of what to do next. Maybe I'm really just here because I'm afraid of everyone's reactions, and this is the one place where I don't think anyone's going to find me.

I probably can't stay here, can I?

I suddenly become aware of the voices of two people talking somewhere nearby. The dog has probably picked it up as well as his ears perk up for a moment before deciding that the possibility of me maybe having some more food is of greater importance to him. I present him with the last piece of meat in the bag. As he takes it from me, I put my hand on his head and gently stroke it. He settles down, clearly enjoying the attention.

I think I've always liked animals more than people. As I keep stroking the dog's head, I sadly smile at him.

"H-Hey... Niji. I... umm... d-don't think we really know each other well, do we?"

His ears perk up again briefly at the sound of his name.

"We... never really interacted much, b-but I'm h-happy to see you again. I've always liked you."

"My... ummm... n-name is Hanako and.... I used to live here. D-Do you... remember me?"

I'm not sure if his soft whimper is a confirmation or not, but it still makes me smile a bit.

My nerves soothed a bit, I sit back and try to empty my head. As I do so, I once again become aware of the conversation nearby, this time fragments of it reaching me.

"...not too much of an inconvenience?"

"...change of pace, actually. It was..."

"...not quite sure... a phone call myself..."

"... you did what was best. Besides. I've always wondered about this place."

"Let me see where she is."

The gate leading outside the yard suddenly opens, and I see the orphanage director walk in. She gives me a friendly nod when she notices me.

"Ah, there you are, Hanako."

I quickly spring to my feet, wondering what she wants with me.

"M-Matron... I'll g-get started on the yard right away!"

She rolls her eyes at my reaction and shakes her head.

"That won't be necessary. Someone else can do that later. But I was wondering if we could have a moment of your time."

"O-Okay. You w-want to t-talk to me about s-something?"

"Not me, actually. There's somebody here to see you."

"Miss Ikezawa! Fancy meeting you here."

05

Just as my brain makes the connection between 'somebody being here to see me' and 'somebody knowing that I'm here', the gate opens a bit further, and the owner of the second voice steps forward. I reel in shock as I recognize who it is, and panic promptly takes my heart in a suffocating grip.

"M-M-Miss Yumi!"

How did she find me? Why is she here? Did the orphanage staff call the school? What's going on? Is she here to scold me? What should I do? Should I run? Can I even run? But where to?

Niji, who was peacefully lying down just earlier seems to sense my fear and starts barking loudly. After exchanging a glance with the matron, Miss Yumi slowly walks forward and holds out her hand. After sniffing for a moment, the dog relaxes and licks her hand a few times, deeming the situation a false alarm. Miss Yumi smiles at him.

"Aren't you a good dog?"

The matron smiles.

"He is. All the children are very fond of him."

She then sharply whistles, and Niji quickly walks up to her. She points towards the door.

"Inside, boy. Come on."

As the dog casually walks off to its dog bed inside the common room, the matron turns to me. I eye her with an unsure look.

"D-Did you c-call the school?"

She shakes her head.

"I received a phone call from Miss Takawa this morning, asking me if you were here. I confirmed to her that you came here two days ago, offering to help out the staff in return for shelter."

Miss Yumi nods in order to confirm the matron's words.

"I had a bright moment last night, and the contact information of this orphanage was still in the school's records, so I gave it a try. I'm happy I decided to do so. There's... still some paperwork that has to be tied up that we didn't get around to."

The matron gives me a puzzled look.

06

"Why didn't anybody at the school know that you were planning to go here?"

I feel a sense of dread as I start racking my brain for an excuse, but Miss Yumi merely shrugs her shoulders.

"Graduation day and the days leading up to it are always rather hectic at school. I'm sure there's merely been a miscommunication in our administration."

"I see. It must have been a rather long trip for you. Would you like some tea?"

Miss Yumi smiles at the matron.

"If it's not too much trouble for you then I would be honored."

"Not at all. Please have a seat in the common room."

The matron turns around and walks inside, but Miss Yumi doesn't immediately follow her, merely gesturing me to come along.

"After you, Miss Ikezawa."

I silently enter the building and follow the matron to the common room. On the way, I feel Miss Yumi's eyes on my back, and it makes me feel extremely nervous. The way she's following close behind me almost feels like she's a prison guard escorting an inmate to his cell. Or a police officer escorting a suspect to the interrogation room. I don't think the matron noticed anything, but I immediately picked up the fact that Miss Yumi isn't addressing me as 'Miss Hanako' right now, and that's something she's been doing for over 1.5 years. There was an amiable smile on her face just now, but somehow that smile felt really fake.

She's probably upset at me for unexpectedly walking out on her, and I'm starting to feel really scared. It might be weird for me to feel scared of an old lady who's about a head shorter than I am, but Miss Yumi probably knows more about my various emotional landmines than anyone else at Yamaku, and if she was truly angry and willing to turn me into a quivering catatonic mess, she'd probably need less than a minute to blow up most of those landmines and achieve exactly that result. After last night, I don't think I'd need more than just a little push anyway.

We reach the common room, and Miss Yumi sits at one of the tables, gesturing me to sit down opposite her. As the matron heads towards the kitchen, Miss Yumi shoots a glance at Niji, who is lying on his dog bed in one of the corners and who's happily chewing away on an old slipper.

"He seems like a good dog. Personally, I'm more fond of cats than dogs. Yuki, whom you've met two days ago, actually knows several tricks that are usually associated with dogs."

I don't think she just came all the way over here to talk to me about cats and dogs.

"To be honest, I used to distrust dogs when I was younger. As a child, I tried to pet a dog in the park once and got bitten. Perhaps I came onto him a little bit too strongly, or perhaps the dog was in a bad mood or not properly trained. I never found out. It wasn't that big a deal. My mother cleaned and bandaged the wound, which was completely healed after two weeks."

Why is she here?

"Still, the saying goes: Once bitten, twice shy. That certainly applied to me too. I don't think it was abnormal for me to be on my guard around dogs from that point on. It's a defense mechanism that most humans possess and those that lack it don't tend to live long and successful lives."

Why is she here? Why did she come here?

"That discomfort diminished when I reached my teens, though I still wouldn't take a dog for a pet."

I'm starting to feel aggravated by her small talk. If she's here to scold me, why doesn't she do so?

"Taking a deep breath and thinking about the situation often helps too. Not always, but most of the time. Back there in the yard, for example, I told myself that an orphanage wouldn't keep a dog around if he was prone to biting people. He'd have to be extremely comfortable with human contact. Ah.... Thank you."

The matron returns with two cups of tea for us. She smiles at Miss Yumi.

"Not a problem. I... do have a few things I have to tend to though. Is there anything else I can do for you before I get back to work?"

"Hmmm... This room is nice, but I assume everybody living here is free to come in at will. I'm terribly sorry to impose on you, but is there a place here where we can have a little bit more privacy?"

"You can use the room that Hanako has spent the night in if you wish. Nobody else is using it right now."

Oh no...

"Thank you, I greatly appreciate it."

The matron makes a polite bow and then walks out. Miss Yumi takes a few careful sips from her tea before returning to the topic at hand.

"In the end, it might have been okay if I had remained uncomfortable around dogs. It's quite possible to live a productive and relatively carefree life without one's distrust of dogs ever becoming a real burden on one's life."

She takes another sip and then, for the first time since she came here, her eyes look straight at me.

"Unfortunately, the same can't be said about a distrust of people."

I cringe. I knew where this was going, but the punchline still feels like an actual punch. I look away from Miss Yumi and try to steady my shaking hands. Miss Yumi finishes her cup and slowly gets up.

"Miss Ikezawa, I think it's best if we continue our conversation elsewhere. Please lead the way."

I don't have the courage to refuse her request, and with a slightly unsteady pace, I walk through the hallway towards the room where I've slept the past two nights, with Miss Yumi following close behind. When I reach the room, I sit down on the bed and I expect Miss Yumi to sit down on the chair nearby. She does so, but not before picking it up and putting it down in front of the door. When she looks at me, the smile she was wearing earlier has completely vanished, and she has a scolding expression on her face. I really feel scared now. Scared and trapped.

"Now then..."

Please don't hurt me.

"Back there in the yard, I didn't merely tell that little white lie to the director in order to avoid an awkward situation, but also because it would have looked silly if I had told her that we weren't merely in the dark about where you were, but also why you left without saying anything. Perhaps you can explain that?"

"I'm... S-sorry."

I reflexively let out an apology, but Miss Yumi doesn't respond, obviously still waiting for me to elaborate. When the silence becomes too pressing, I start stammering an answer.

"Y-You r-really wanted me to s-stay on the school g-grounds that morning, so when you s-suddenly changed your m-mind and took me to... your place, I s-started wondering..."

I was a little surprised that Miss Yumi didn't simply order me to stay at school, but when she drove me to her apartment and told me to wait there and think about my plans for the future, I didn't think much of it... at first.

But then, about an hour later, a thought suddenly popped up in my head.

What if this was merely a stalling tactic to keep me occupied?

What if she's telling Hisao, Lilly and Naomi that she's left me at her place and they're welcome to pick me up there?

I tried to dismiss the thought and that worked at first, but as the time the graduation ceremony was set to end drew closer and closer, a little nagging voice in the back of my mind kept bringing it up, until that thought was replaced with another more distressing one.

What if they're on their way here as we speak? I've ruined their big day. What will they say to me?

Eventually, I completely lost my nerve, and, after penning a letter to Miss Yumi to thank her for all she's done for me over the years (it was the least I could do for her), I fled the apartment and took the next bus to the train station where I took a train to the city where I spent most of my childhood.

"What is it that you started wondering?"

"M-maybe... y-you were just p-playing along... I'm s-sorry."

Miss Yumi sighs. She doesn't look shocked. Judging by her earlier story, she must have suspected this already. She still looks put off though.

"I must admit I had to make an effort to refrain from telling your friends about your location. As touched as they were by your gifts, it was easy to tell that you were still the only thing on their mind. But in the end, I didn't tell them anything because I was afraid that breaking my promise to you would destroy our bond of trust. Little did I know that bond was either already destroyed or never existed in the first place."

"I'm... r-really sorry."

Miss Yumi gives a quick nod, but she shows no signs of getting up.

"Ummm... Isn't... t-this why you're here?"

"I'm here because I kept my promise to you, but you failed to keep your promise to me. So now I'm here to give you an additional chance to fulfill it."

"Oh..."

"How about you, Miss Ikezawa? Why are *you* here? You haven't been here in years."

"I..."

"Yes?"

07

"I... didn't know what else to do. The night...before g-graduation, I overheard H-Hisao and Lilly... t-talking about me. About what... what to do with me. I... know they m-meant well, but... it... really hurt."

"Go on."

It feels like a flood is welling up inside me, and I'm too tired to try and stop it. Besides, what point is there to try and hold it in? Miss Yumi's obviously not planning on leaving until she heard whatever it is she wants to hear, and I doubt anything I say is going to lower her opinion of me even more.

"I'm... I'm so tired of being a burden to other p-people. B-But, no matter what I d-do or where I g-go, it's what I... end up b-being. H-Hisao and Naomi were going to... ask their p-parents to give me shelter, but... H-Hisao's parents are already paying for his university. They... shouldn't have to f-feed yet another mouth f-for a whole year. And Naomi's p-parents don't even know me. They'd get t-tired of me before the year is over."

"What about the Satou family? They seem affluent enough to support you for life. In fact... that's exactly what they offered you."

"I'm... a burden to them too. I was... with them on New Year's Day, but... my fear of crowds only made things d-difficult for them and I'd... p-probably continue to h-hold them back."

"Did they tell you that they were inconvenienced by you?"

"They wouldn't do that, but... why would they w-want me around if n-not m-merely out of obligation? They already h-have two daughters who are... pretty and c-confident and s-successful. Unlike m-me. I'd j-just spend m-my entire life l-living in their shadow."

Not to mention their shared past. Despite the fact that Lilly has been estranged from her parents for nearly six years and has only been getting herself reacquainted with them for just over half a year and despite the fact that Akira is still distant from her mother and father, I was the one who ended up feeling like a fifth wheel during the times whenever the rest would bring up amusing memories from years back. It was a painful reminder of both my status as an outsider and an orphan.

"You said earlier that you listened in on Mister Nakai and Miss Satou and that their words hurt you. Why? You didn't think they were merely being concerned?"

"It felt like... everything was g-going back to the way things used to b-be, with Hisao and Lilly s-seeing me as a ward... instead of as a f-friend. I... don't want t-things to g-go back to b-being that way, but... it s-seems inevitable."

Miss Yumi sighs loudly.

"Of course the timing and circumstances of their conversation could have been better and that kind of talk should have taken place with you being present, but..."

She suddenly gives me a stern glare that has just a tinge of anger in it.

"...don't you think it should have been up to you to instigate that talk to begin with and preferably a bit sooner than the night before graduation?"

"..."

"When was the last time you spoke with them at length? From what I remember, you spent most of the last few weeks hiding away in your room. What did you expect them to do? Leave Yamaku while pretending that you don't exist? You're their friend. They care about you."

"I...know, b-but..."

"I know you used to worry about your friends merely spending time with you out of pity, but people with that mindset wouldn't have stuck around during the more pleasant months of the summer and autumn. They would have drifted away, pleased that their job was done, and would have moved on to other people for whom they could feel sorry. Instead, they seemed happy to spend time with you and share in your moments of joy. Friendship isn't just about supporting others in times of hardship, but also about sharing moments of happiness with one another. If your friends were making efforts to help you out, that wasn't because they needed something to distract themselves from their own problems or because fixing you would make them feel better about themselves, but because they, too, wanted the good times between you and them to return. And as soon as possible. And yet here you are, claiming that it's inevitable that you'll return to being like a ward to them. Don't you think they deserve the benefit of the doubt by now? And if not, what could they possibly do to receive it after all this time? Have you thought about how they must have felt? Surely they must have wondered about that as well."

Her eyes narrow a bit more as she continues.

"They should treat you as an equal, but you should also remember to act like one."

Those last words sound familiar. Miss Yumi's frequently spoken them to me. I know I have to act like an equal to Hisao and Lilly, but what I know and what I feel are sometimes two different things. They've been two different things for weeks. I want to be their equal and I know I have to act like one, but how can I act like one if I don't feel like one? It's a contradiction that's been driving me crazy.

"It's fine to demand a bit of space to sort things out for yourself every now and again, but that's not what you've been doing. You've been shutting people out, placing unnecessary stress on your friendships. Friendship isn't just about supporting others, but also about allowing others to support you. Like Miss Satou has been doing."

"L-Lilly?"

"I remember Miss Satou went through a rather difficult time herself after the hospitalization of her father. And who was it she turned to in those difficult times?"

"M-Me..."

"Yes. There are various ways to handle a personal crisis, but some ways are less healthy than others. How would you have felt if, instead of accepting your support at that time, she'd have shut herself in her room 24/7, refusing to eat or talk to anyone? How would you have felt if she had unexpectedly walked off without telling anyone where she went?"

I'd be beside myself with worry.

"I'd f-feel b-bad, I think..."

"The same is probably true for them."

"I..."

"Relying on you for emotional support must have been tough for Miss Satou as well. She came across to me as someone who has quite a bit of pride, and I doubt she likes showing her vulnerabilities to other people. The reason she was comfortable with temporarily using you as an emotional crutch was probably because she had faith that, once everything was sorted out, you'd dispose of that crutch role

and resume the friendship on equal footing again. Why can't you bring yourself to have that kind of faith as well, Miss Ikezawa?"

"It's... different. L-Lilly only r-relied on me f-for a few weeks. I've b-been a wreck for m-months on end already."

"I don't think there's a difference. There's no time limit to these sorts of things. Or are you implying that you would have only supported Miss Satou emotionally for a few weeks and then had left her to her own devices, regardless of how she'd be doing at the time."

I wildly shake my head in order to deny Miss Yumi's suggestion as vehemently as possible. She smirks a bit in response.

"I didn't think so either. I think the same applies to them as well."

She gets up from her chair and gives me a long look.

"Do you remember what I said when we met at the school gates that morning and what I urged you to think about?"

I nod my head.

"What did I say then?"

"I..."

I sigh. Miss Yumi had been talking during the entire car ride from Yamaku to her place, but not a lot of that registered at the time. My mind was just too occupied by other things.

"It didn't really stick back then, did it? I reminded you that just like you'd be worried if Miss Satou would disappear without a trace during a bout of distress, the same is also true for her and your other friends. When you've lived a life of isolation, it's easy to forget that almost all of your actions still have an impact on others. You would do well to pay more heed to how your actions affect those around you, even during times such as these. You spend a lot of your time worrying about burdening others and yet your attempts to avoid doing so end up burdening others all the more. Whenever you lock yourself in your room for an extended period of time, you burden them. Whenever you suddenly vanish without telling anyone, you burden them. Don't you understand that your absence will always be a bigger burden on them than your presence could ever be? That's what having other people in your life is all about. Still..."

08

She takes her handbag from the nearby dresser and reaches into it. As she does so, her scornful expression softens a bit.

"...despite everything, your friends are still rooting for you. Even now. Have a look. This is what they wanted me to give you. They said you'd understand."

She takes something out of her bag, and I reel in shock as I recognize it.

It's the plush puppy I gave to Lilly some time before the summer break. The one-eyed puppy we got out of the crane game whom I named after the dog with whom I shared my breakfast earlier today.

"N-Niji!!"

I remember giving him to Lilly when she was struggling with her parents' summoning. I didn't know for sure what was bothering her, so this gift was my way of telling her: 'even if you won't entrust me with your burden, I'm still thinking of you and rooting for you.'

Even if you won't entrust me with your burden...

...still thinking of you and rooting for you...

A lump appears in my throat.

"L-Lilly... Hisao... Naomi..."

I'm not sure what it was that set me off. The kindness of my friends' gesture where there should have been indignation? The slightly sad stare of plush-Niji's single eye? Or the realization of the meaning behind this gift? Maybe a combination. But as I finish reading the words of my friends, it feels as if a pressure valve bursts inside my head, and a steady stream of tears starts flowing. My breathing becomes uneven, and my shoulders shake as I start sobbing uncontrollably. So many feelings have started bouncing around inside me that there's simply no other way to let them all out. I feel moved, ashamed, relieved, confused, happy and sad all at the same time. For a long time, the only sound in the room is the sound of my ragged breaths.

Eventually, Miss Yumi reaches into her handbag again and hands me a neatly embroidered handkerchief, which I use to dry my tears.

"Feeling better now, Miss Ikezawa?"

"I'm n-not sure."

As stress-relieving as that crying fit has been, it's also left me feeling extremely tired and a bit empty inside. I'm not really sure how to feel now. I'm not even sure if it's an improvement. All I know is that I feel different from before.

"You look rather tired. Have you slept at all since you came here?"

"A bit... but not much."

"Perhaps you should get a few hours of rest right now. There's no point in continuing our conversation if you're too tired to think clearly. Here..."

As I give her back her handkerchief, she gets a small sleeping pill out of a pocket in her bag and removes the wrap.

"One of these should be okay. Take it with a glass of water and get some sleep. We can have our talk after you've woken up. There's no need to rush it."

"Ummm... T-talk?"

"About your future. It's why I came here, and I have no intention of leaving here until we've had this discussion. I feel you owe me at least this much. Besides, I happen to have a vested interest in getting this situation properly resolved as well, but I won't bore you with politics."

"O-Okay then."

"Good. If possible, try to think about what I just said. And more importantly, try to have an answer to one thing in particular."

"One thing?"

"Think about whether you're willing to continue pursuing your dream in spite of this setback."

"M-My dream...?"

Miss Yumi nods as she moves the chair back to its original place and opens the door.

"Yes, regardless of whether you believe you're up to it or not. This is about what you want, not about what you currently think you can achieve."

I give a meek nod and walk to the bathroom to get a glass of water. As I exit the bathroom, Miss Yumi is waiting for me outside.

"I will see you in a few hours, Miss Ikezawa. Then we can exchange apologies."

Then she walks off without further explaining herself.

09

I wake up feeling drowsy, but still oddly refreshed. My watch indicates that I must have slept for four whole hours, and the fact that I can't remember whether I've dreamt or not is probably a good thing. I rub the sleep out of my eyes and get out of bed.

Miss Yumi's probably still here.

I tried thinking about what she said after getting to bed, but I started feeling woozy after a few minutes already and fell asleep soon afterwards.

I try to recall what I said to Miss Yumi during a previous therapy session when she asked me about my dream. I believe that session was a day after a very good date with Hisao during one of my better months. I was in a very good mood during that session and may have been way more optimistic than I should have been.

What exactly did I say back then?

I think I said I wanted to get into a good university and get a writing degree. I had been hesitating between picking copy writer or content writer as my goal to shoot for and settled on the latter. I think informing readers or getting them to contemplate something fits my personality better than writing sales pitches meant to convince readers to buy a certain product. It's also closer to the journalism end of the writing spectrum, which is always a plus. My ultimate dream would be to do creative writing, maybe publish a novel or something, but I wanted to aim for something stable first and do a novel on the side someday.

In the heat of the moment, I may have also said something about marrying Hisao and starting a family.

I really hope she's not going to bring that one up.

I've already failed the 'get into a good university'-part though, and that makes the rest a lot harder as well. I'm not sure what options I have. There might still be universities I could enroll in that don't use entrance exams. But I still remember what Mutou told me about aiming for the best academic credentials I could go for.

Should I try again next year? That's what Naomi's going to do.

Naomi's going to attend a cram school to prepare for the examination season next year though, and that's where my first hurdle is already. As things currently are, I'd probably have to spend so much energy on merely functioning on a basic level in such a place that I might be unable to actually study. And it's not like those cram schools are cheap. Wouldn't it be a waste of my parents' money?

Also, where would I study? Where would I even live?

I wonder if Miss Yumi has any recommendations. Am I the first orphan who attends the school and fails to get into his or her school of choice?

I suppose I'll have to apologize first. I did inconvenience her two days ago, and instead of writing me off, she took the time to look me up here. I don't even want to know what she meant with her words about vested interest and politics. I probably created trouble for her with the school administration. I do wonder what she meant with exchanging apologies though. What does she have to apologize for?

I walk out of the room, planning to visit the bathroom and wash my face (both in order to feel more awake and in order to erase the traces of my crying fit from a few hours back), and am somewhat taken off guard when I find Miss Yumi waiting outside my room.

"Ah, Miss Ikezawa. Have you slept well?"

I give a confused nod. Has she been sitting here outside my room all the time? I notice a deck of cards on the sidetable nearby. Can someone really play solitaire for four hours straight and not get bored out of her mind? Why didn't she simply wait in the common room? It almost feels like she's been standing guard out here.

Or...

Maybe that was the idea. Maybe she didn't quite trust me not to try slipping away when she wasn't looking. Or... Maybe the idea was to give me the idea she was standing guard, just to make the point that it's not fun when someone can't bring herself to trust you. Or maybe...

Ugh, maybe I should stop thinking altogether.

I enter the bathroom, quickly wash the traces of my tears away, return to Miss Yumi and make an awkward bow.

"Umm... M-Miss Yumi, uh... I mean... Miss Takawa?"

"Yes?"

"I'm... uh... r-r-really sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"F-For b-breaking m-my p-p-promise."

"Hmmm..."

She gives me a skeptical look.

"How can I be so sure that it won't happen again?"

"..."

I really don't know. I can't force her to trust me...

I wonder if this is what others think of me sometimes.

Miss Yumi sighs and then nods her head.

"Very well, Miss Hanako, I accept your apology this time. Just make certain that this doesn't happen again."

"O-Okay. T-Thank you, Miss Yumi."

She gets up from her seat, puts her deck of cards away and gestures towards the exit.

"Now then, would you like to get some fresh air? I could use some myself."

I nod, and we make our way to the backyard where we sit on a bench near the gate leading outside. We stay silent for quite some time, just enjoying the breeze a bit. Then Miss Yumi speaks up.

10

"I remember asking you about your dreams for the future near the end of last October, and you had some pretty specific plans. I spoke to your Japanese teacher about the... ah... academic aspect of your plans, and he said that he felt you had the academic ability to succeed as long as you did your best. The school would have been happy to give you a letter of recommendation."

"Dreams... M-Maybe that's all they w-were."

"Have you already given up on those dreams, Miss Hanako?"

"I'm... n-not sure. I would have l-liked it if they could b-become reality, but..."

"Your confidence has suffered a rather major blow in the last few months, but there's no reason to believe it will stay that way. A recovery process of this kind is never smooth sailing. Most of the times, it involves two steps forward, followed by one step back. The last months were a painful step back, maybe even more than one step back, but let's remember where you were exactly one year ago. Would you have believed a year ago that you'd become a member of a club? That you'd go on a vacation abroad together with Miss Satou and a classmate? That you'd end up in a relationship with that classmate?"

I shake my head.

"Those were some pretty impressive steps forward. I see no reason why this little relapse should be considered permanent."

"I... don't know."

"If I told you that I knew of a suitable place for you to study without too much discomfort, would you be willing to give things another try?"

"A suitable place?"

"Would you?"

"M-Maybe. "

"In that case, I suppose you are what they call a ronin, aren't you? As in... a student spending a year preparing to try and get into their university of choice?"

"P-Probably. But..."

Miss Yumi gestures me to be silent and gets up from the bench. Then she turns around and looks straight at me.

"Yamaku is not a cram school. We don't really have the teaching staff to cover a 4th year for students who fail their entrance exams. What we usually do is help students look for suitable cram schools in their home area that have a school nurse or staff with some basic medical knowledge and who are willing to supervise our alumni. Our head nurse then writes a treatment plan with instructions on how to deal with our students' condition, whether that student makes it into a university or spends a year at a cram school. Of course, that's not always enough. Some conditions are more severe than others."

"Like H-Hisao's?"

"It was actually a heart patient who was the reason for the creation of a small-scale ronin program at Yamaku. That happened many years ago. He was a very gifted student, and his teachers had high hopes for him, but during the examination season he suffered a rather severe episode and was hospitalized until after the exams were already over. After he was released from the hospital, he expressed a desire to try again next year, but cram schools near his home didn't want to take responsibility for him. They deemed his condition too volatile. It was at that point that the school administration decided to set up a ronin program themselves in order to give that student one more year to prepare for his entrance examinations under the supervision of our nursing staff. From that point on, there have been years where the school has made exceptions and allowed a promising student whose condition required more oversight than the average school nurse could reasonably provide to stay at Yamaku for one more year in order to prove themselves. Two days ago, after all the results were in, the school gave one student in your year permission to enter its ronin program."

She gives me a solemn look.

"You are that student, Miss Hanako."

I gasp in shock at this unexpected news. Is it really okay for me to return to Yamaku? But... Why was I never told about this?

"M-M-Me? But..."

"I've been trying to convince the school to grant you admission to our ronin program in case your exams went badly, but it hasn't been easy. Until now, all exceptions that were made were made strictly on medical grounds. You'd be the first one to gain admittance for psychological reasons with a therapist making the request, rather than a teacher or the head nurse. The fact that this was uncharted territory for the people who had to make the decision resulted in a lot of reluctance."

Miss Yumi closes her eyes.

"I've made attempts to get you an official guarantee that you could enter the program, but that request was outright refused. The school didn't want to make a decision until all exam results were in. When the decision was made, a mere two hours after I dropped you off at my apartment that day, it was made due to a combination of three things: the testimony of your Japanese teacher that you had the academic abilities to make it in next year, the positive outcome of the National Center Test and, most importantly, me having prepared a detailed full-year treatment plan for them to inspect. I put a lot of time and work into it, but it ultimately paid off."

She permits herself a proud smile for a second, but then an apologetic expression appears on her face.

"Go ahead and ask."

"F-For how long have y-you been planning this?"

"For a few weeks. At first, I was hoping ordinary therapy would be enough. You gave me some hope when you passed the Center Test and your mood improved for a while. But then it started regressing faster than ever, and I started realizing that what I said was barely even going through to you. I kept trying of course. That's what I'm paid for, after all. But I also started looking for a plan B. I was unaware of the existence of the ronin program at first, since I haven't been employed at Yamaku for that long and the last time a 4th year was admitted was four years ago. The head nurse brought it up during one of my talks with him, and I started looking into it. It was a long shot, but I'm happy I took the chance. I only wish I could have told you about it sooner, but the school wouldn't allow it. Students being admitted to the program before the results are even in would have created quite a stir among the student body. The last thing we want as a school are accusations of nepotism from our students or their parents."

She makes a graceful bow.

"These must have been some truly awful weeks for you. I'm truly sorry, Hanako."

"It's... o-okay..."

She modestly shakes her head.

"The sessions the last few weeks were difficult for me as well. I've been biting my tongue for longer than I thought I'd be able to. I think me giving you shelter, rather than letting you leave, two days ago was because I felt guilty and tried to make it up to you. In retrospect, that was the wrong thing to do. Therapists are supposed to be neutral. In the end, I probably should have recognized that I was merely complicating matters. I apologize for that as well."

I know how she must have felt. I've been biting my tongue around Lilly and Hisao for much longer than a few weeks and it's been horrible.

It's funny though. A long time ago I offered Miss Yumi my friendship and asked if I could come over. When she said I couldn't, I was deeply hurt. Yet when she left me at her place two days ago, it merely

confused me and caused me to start questioning her motives. I suppose she had a reason to reject me back then.

"Everybody...m-makes mistakes."

She gives me a gentle, grateful smile and makes an inviting gesture with her hand.

"So... will you come back to Yamaku with me? We made sure not to assign your room to anyone else yet."

"I..."

"You know, I gave Miss Satou's parents the number of our mobility instructors. There's a possibility of them reconsidering giving her a place of her own to live. When you make a decision, keep only yourself in mind. That is what your friends would want as well."

That a relief to hear. I've always felt very guilty about the impact of my failed exam on Lilly. I think she'd get used to a new place rather quickly. She probably wouldn't need me for longer than a month or two.

Miss Yumi's offer does sound very tempting right now. I wouldn't have to worry about a place to live, and I could study in peace. It would mean I'd spend a year far away from my friends though. But maybe me returning to Yamaku would allow them to concentrate on their own lives without having to worry about me all the time. That would be good. I'd probably feel extremely awkward facing them right now anyway. I think I'll need some time to sort things out.

Still, there's one thing I wonder about. Will I not be merely postponing the inevitable? Will I really be in a better position to try the exams next year?

"M-Miss Yumi, w-would I really have a chance next year?"

"I think you would. You've grown a lot over the last year. There will be things that will give you difficulty, even in a year. But you will be stronger, there's no doubt about that. All you need is time, therapy and support. You'll have time. A whole year, starting now. You'll have therapy. I intend to step up our sessions, and I've planned some very specific goals. And you'll have support, as you've seen for yourself just a few hours ago."

I smile a bit as I remember the plush puppy.

"I... guess I do."

"Miss Hanako...?"

Miss Yumi gives me an expectant smile and then holds out her hand.

"...if we hurry, we can probably avoid the worst of rush hour."

Another year... another chance...

I take a deep breath and then take Miss Yumi's outstretched hand.

11

I stare through the window of our passenger car as the last buildings of the city pass by. After gathering my possessions and thanking the matron, Miss Yumi and I left for the train station where we took a train heading for the station closest to Yamaku. It feels strange leaving this city again. Through the reflection of the glass, I notice that Miss Yumi's watching me.

"This is the city where you were born, isn't it? How does it feel to leave it again?"

"S-Strange. A bit... déjà vu. We w-went to visit Hisao's hometown d-during summer break and Christmas, but... I've never been back here."

"Brings back memories?"

"I... liked the orphanage, but... there are more p-painful memories than good ones here."

"Then maybe it's a good thing you've decided to come back. As pleasant as this orphanage was, it's part of your past. This year, it's the present and then the future we'll be concentrating on, starting today."

"T-Today?"

"We're going to be intensifying therapy for a while. I have daily sessions planned for you for the upcoming month. The first session will be tomorrow. The month after, we'll slow down to 3 visits a week. Every now and then, I'll be presenting challenges to you, intended to push against your boundaries a bit. We'll also be working on your faith."

"Faith?"

"In yourself and other people. Confidence is largely a subconscious process, but to have faith is a conscious choice. We're going to try and learn how to keep believing in yourself and those around you even during the more difficult times against all evidence to the contrary."

"I'm n-not sure if..."

"Hmmm, hmmm... And it sounds like we have our work cut out for us."

I sigh. I really don't have an answer to that kind of attitude. Miss Yumi takes a small agenda and scribbles something in it.

"I'll also have to remember to tell the school administration that you've accepted and will be staying for another year. I think I located you just in time. I don't think they would have waited for another week. After all the preparation that went into it, it would have been most upsetting if the school had called off your admission because they didn't know where you were."

Something tells me that if the school had really retracted my second chance because I wasn't around to accept it, Miss Yumi would have cursed my very existence. I really dodged a bullet here. From the way she looks at me, I think she can read my thoughts.

"This is not a stunt you can afford yourself a second time, Miss Hanako. Not with me and despite that gesture of support, not with your friends either. Not now, not ever. In a way you're lucky that two of the people you left hanging there had some minor involvement in the incident that kicked off this mess and probably extended you the courtesy of leaving part of the blame at their own feet. Next time you won't have that luxury. Remind yourself of today the next time you feel like leaving everything behind."

If you're too insecure to rely on those around you during times of stress, those people will certainly draw their own conclusions. Do you understand?"

I cringe.

"S-Sorry..."

"Do you understand?"

I nod slowly and make an effort to look into her eyes.

"It...It w-won't happen again. I p-promise."

"Good. Can I have your cell phone, please?"

"Uh?"

A bit puzzled, I take out my phone and give it to Miss Yumi who promptly turns it on and gives it back to me.

"Since it'll take a while for us to reach our destination, I suppose a useful way to pass the time would be to let your friends know where you are and that you're alright. What do you say?"

"Uhh...."

I suddenly feel a sense of panic. After the way I left, I have no idea what I'd say to them. The crushing shame I'm feeling right now would probably shut me down before I could form a single coherent sentence.

"If you don't think you're up for an actual conversation, then a simple text message will suffice for now, even for Miss Satou. I'll call them myself afterwards to explain the situation in detail. But you have to be the one to initiate the first contact. That's your first official challenge."

After a moment of hesitation, I slowly nod my head.

"O-Okay."

I reluctantly start typing my first message, promising myself to include a sincere apology in each of them. Miss Yumi gives me an encouraging smile.

"Good. Miss Hanako... Let's get started on those steps forward!"

12

Chapter Alpha (???)

01

As I enter the lobby of the hotel where we agreed to spend the night, I'm approached by a young staff member who bows deeply before making a welcoming gesture and tells me I'm being expected.

"Hello. Were you asked to look out for me?"

He takes a careful look at me and grins for a moment before bowing again and nodding. I allow myself an amused smile. The lack of a completely shocked expression on his face tells me that he was

informed of the fact that I speak the language, but is still a little awed to hear me speak without tripping over my words. It's a reaction I still get on an almost daily basis. An 'American' speaking Japanese fluently never fails to get jaws dropped around here. I think the baffled stares are kind of funny nowadays, though there are times when I wish people would just realize that being able to speak a foreign language and being able to use chopsticks correctly don't make someone the 8th wonder of the world.

"He didn't want you to go through the hassle of waiting in line at the reception desk, so he asked me to look out for you and give you his room key once you arrived."

I take a quick look at the reception desk further down the lobby. It does seem to be very crowded there. I smile appreciatingly.

"Ever the gentleman. Did he tell you to look out for a foreign person?"

"I had to look out for a tall, blond and beautiful woman."

I chuckle playfully.

"How bold."

It's probably partially practicality too. I know that my last name isn't particularly easy for the Japanese to pronounce. I wonder if this person even knows or remembers it. There's one way to find out. I give him a playful wink.

"Just between you and me, I think I saw another blonde woman hanging out just outside the front entrance. Am I ever lucky to have gotten here before her."

His face briefly shows an expression of almost comical terror as he realizes that he just addressed the first foreign-looking woman he saw without even confirming if I really was the person he was supposed to look out for. I chuckle briefly and make a reassuring gesture before the avalanche of apologies can be let loose.

"I guess Mister Satou would have had pleasant company either way."

He visibly relaxes upon realizing I know the name of the person who addressed him earlier and then beckons towards the elevator.

"Eighth floor, Lady."

We ride the elevator to our destination, and upon being given the room key I bow to him and thank him. When he walks down the hall back to the elevator, I open the door of our hotel room.

02

As I enter the room I notice he's casually sitting in one of the chairs with a book, my book, in his lap. When he spots me he gives me that sweet and slightly shy smile of his, walks up to me and shares a gentle kiss with me.

"Good evening, Karla. I am glad you could make it on such a short notice."

"Hey there, Hiro. Missed me?"

Hiroyuki Satou... currently employed at the finances department of Satou Medical Technology, oldest child and heir of its current CEO, graduate of Tokyo University and my boyfriend. The first three things are known to everyone who knows him. The last part is known only to the two people in this room.

"I apologize for not having had the opportunity to spend time with you lately. Hopefully this evening will make up for that."

For a moment I'm startled by a sudden knock on the door. Hiro walks up to the door, opens it and two waiters come in. Each of them is pushing a food cart filled with several delicious-looking dishes. After bowing to me they start putting the food on the nearby table. After guaranteeing my boyfriend that he'll just need to call if he needs anything they walk out, leaving me to appraise the meal before me. Just the smell makes my mouth water.

"Tonight we will be having a pleasant dinner in private. To celebrate Valentine's Day."

"Sounds good."

The food looks delicious, and I'm kind of looking forward to spending a nice evening alone with Hiro, but I still wonder if this is all there is to it. Are we having a private dinner because it's romantic or is he wary of being seen in public with me? We are rather close to his offices, but that usually hasn't been a problem in the past.

He chuckles as he suddenly seems to remember something.

"And if you are still hungry after our meal I am more than willing to share some of my Valentine chocolate with you - give or take a dozen."

"A dozen chocolates?"

"A dozen boxes of chocolates."

I know all about that. I ended up buying my boss and my male Japanese coworkers some Valentine chocolate too today. Not because I have the hots for them, but simply because it's expected here.

"You're getting to be quite the ladies' man, Hiro."

I give him a short stare, but I get no reaction other than a playful chuckle. I didn't think it was going to be this easy anyway.

"A mere formality and gesture of politeness. If the office ladies in my department were to start sending me the romantic chocolate variety, *then* I would consider your statement to be true. Although to be frank..."

He looks briefly at the book he was reading before I came in.

"Even lovers' chocolate would pale in comparison to this. When I said previously that you picked up our language very quickly, that turned out to be such an understatement that it feels like an insult to me in hindsight."

It's true that I seem to have a knack for languages. Even while I was still living in the UK, I was able to adequately interact with French and German colleagues with a modest amount of effort. By now I have no doubt that my Japanese is a lot better than my French or German ever was. Before migrating to

Japan I took some basic courses, but in the end it was everyday life in this country that gave me enough daily practice to get a fairly solid grasp of the language in a mere two years, though I never managed to completely lose my accent.

The book he's holding is my Valentine's gift to him. A book seemed a fitting present for an avid reader like him. Last year he went all out on his gift and he gave me a pair of beautiful origami swans whose necks formed a small heart. I already knew he was good with origami - he has the tendency to start folding nearby pieces of paper into figures if he has nothing else to do, and there's no book for him nearby to read. Still, that must have taken a long time, so I was inspired to make at least a similar effort. I've been reading a whole slew of Japanese poetry books over the last two months, and I copied the poems I liked best into the notebook I sent him today. (writing down my sources on the last page of course) In addition, a handful of pages contain poems I wrote myself. Most of them were rather simple haikus, but it's the thought that counts. From what I know, Hiro's more into fiction than poetry, but I still had faith he'd be able to appreciate a gift such as this one. In addition, this little project had been very educational for me as a non-native speaker as well.

"I guess that means you like it?"

"It is beautiful, and I will treasure it. Matching a gift as personal as this will be very difficult for me, however. It must have taken you months to create it."

He looks sincerely troubled for a moment. I'm pretty sure I know what he's thinking right now and it makes me frown a bit.

"Hey, don't be like that. Attaching obligations to this kind of thing ruins the fun of giving to each other. Consider this an obligation-free gift on my part."

Hiro has always come across to me as more open-minded than his traditional upbringing would have one suspect, but in some areas his mindset has always been - and I believe will always be - unquestionably traditional Japanese. This is one of those areas, I suppose.

The Japanese call it 'giri'. I don't think the Scottish have a term that comes close to completely describing it although 'social obligation' is probably rather accurate. One of the facets of 'giri' is unquestionable loyalty towards one's superiors. Another one is always keeping one's obligations in mind and meticulously repaying any gifts or favors bestowed upon you in order to set the balance straight again. Some go pretty far in that regard. Hiro once told me that when his grandfather died, his family kept a list of all the gifts they were given at the funeral as well as their appraised value so that his grandmother would know exactly to which people she still owed how much. Gifts that don't have an easily appraisable value are sometimes frowned upon for that reason. I can't exactly call myself an extremely devout catholic, but I nevertheless remember being taught that you can never give too much to others. That lesson clashes pretty harshly with the mindset that giving someone too large a gift is equal to placing an unbearably heavy burden of obligation on him. The principle isn't adhered to as rigidly among very close friends, but I've definitely seen it sneak into my boyfriend's thought process now and then. This appears to be one of those times.

"...very well then."

We both take our time enjoying the delicious meal that was prepared for us without really talking any more. After a filling dessert, we open some of the bags of chocolates my boyfriend was given today and feed each other some pieces of chocolate.

"I hope my gift didn't end up causing office gossip."

He chuckles as he shakes his head.

"Fortunately it did not. It is not customary to unwrap gifts in front of the giver here, so while my colleagues could see it might not have been a bag of chocolate, they did not find out what exactly was inside it. For all they knew it was yet another gift from a coworker. You were very clever in sending it to my office instead of my home address. That certainly would cause certain people to take notice."

I sometimes rue the fact that our relationship is still a secret around here. While Hiro insisted that he isn't ashamed of me being his girlfriend, he wasn't quite sure how his parents would react, and since he works at his family's company that also meant our relationship had to be hidden from his colleagues who form pretty much his entire circle of friends. Like many unmarried oldest sons in this country, he still lives at home. (along with his parents and paternal grandmother) Fortunately I managed to get my own apartment (courtesy of my employer's connections) when I moved here so we can still spend time together in privacy whenever he has time to stop by after work. Still, one wouldn't call our relationship normal, and my mind once again dwells on what I've been struggling with the last few days.

"Hiro... I... am wondering..."

"Yes, Karla?"

"What exactly am I to you?"

He looks a bit puzzled at this sudden question.

"You are my girlfriend, Karla. You have been for two years. I am afraid I do not understand why you are asking me this question now."

Yeah, I'm his girlfriend. Hiro and I met three and a half years ago at a business conference in Inverness. He, a businessman, was there to attend it. I, at that time a business and finances reporter, was there to write an article on it. We briefly spoke there and exchanged business cards. We met again by coincidence that evening in a small pub near the place where the conference was held. His two colleagues, who accompanied him to Inverness, wasted little time in sampling the Scotch and getting hammered on it. Hiro himself seemed reluctant to empty his glass, merely taking a sip whenever one of the others shot him a glance so I decided to keep him company. I've always had a fascination for all things related to the far East and Hiro's gentlemanly demeanor made him a very pleasant conversation partner even though I probably did way more talking than he did.

Eventually Hiro's colleagues started getting seriously slammed, probably having underestimated the whiskey's potency, so I offered to take them to their hotel in my car. He seemed very hesitant at first but gave in when I pointed out it'd be troublesome if one of them were to throw up while inside a cab and the police might mistake them for vagrants if they took a nap in a public place. It turned out that unlike his colleagues, he actually knew that public drunkenness was an offense in the UK and seemed to dread the idea of one of his colleagues being forced to sober up in a police cell, but he didn't feel like it was his place to tell them to tone it down since they were both his seniors, so the only thing he could do was try and keep a clear head himself.

When I dropped them off at their hotel, Hiro stayed behind for a little while and insisted to repay my efforts in some way or another and we ultimately settled on them buying me dinner before they'd leave the country the upcoming Saturday. When I arrived at our agreed upon meeting point that Friday evening however, expecting all three of them to be there, it turned out that it was just Hiro waiting for me. Thinking back on the whole thing, it wouldn't surprise me if Hiro simply never told his colleagues that they were also invited.

In the end it turned out to be for the best since it allowed us to get to know each other slightly better. After dinner in a charming restaurant (which I picked since he didn't know the neighborhood) I drove us to the ruins of Urquhart Castle where we climbed the tower and spent the evening enjoying the breeze, watching Loch Ness under the starry sky and swapping stories about our respective homelands. (or at least trying to - he sometimes had difficulty understanding me despite me having largely ditched my Highlands accent during my work over the years) At the end of the evening, just before I drove us back, we agreed to stay in touch with one another through written correspondence.

I was already playing with the thought at the time to quit my job as a business reporter and become a foreign correspondent. By that time my job had already taken me all over the UK, and I had seen most of what there was to see. I was eager to expand my horizons and after an old college friend at the BBC told me that some positions in China, Hong Kong and Japan had opened up, I was quick to file my application. Hiro wrote that he'd be honored to help me acclimatize if needed, and since the apartments I ended up living in and the Satou offices were located in the same town, he was able to drop by after work on a fairly regular basis.

Eventually, our friendship turned into something else. All in all we're a rather strange couple. I'm a rather care-free and extroverted person who loves a good conversation, having a beer with buddies, riding my bike around the countryside, and I'm known to be a bit of a tease with the people I care about - and sometimes with people I've just met, though I've tried to cut down on that habit a bit. Hiro's a reserved and rather quiet man, more curious than most people I've met here but still rarely willing to express too much interest out of fear of appearing impolite. He's both a bookworm and a gentleman, his behavior always impeccable and always mindful of how others perceive him. I often wondered at first what exactly he saw in me. As far as I know, the general concept of beauty here involves being short, quiet and 'cute'. With my height of 173 cm and up-beat and playful personality, I couldn't be further from that ideal. It wasn't until I started learning more about his life and family situation that I started believing that part of his attraction to me must have been based on the fact that I was a bit of a wildcard in his otherwise tightly structured and regulated life and that being with me allowed him to be less restrained and more open than he could usually afford himself to be, if only a little, since I didn't care whether he was acting like a person in his position was expected to or not.

"I once heard about a guy who dated a Japanese girl for a while and after a short affair she ended up dumping him. It turned out she was mostly dating him out of curiosity regarding what it was like to be with someone 'exotic'."

He lets out an amused chuckle.

"We have been together for two years now. If you truly believe I am still merely dating you out of a sense of curiosity, you are giving my attention span far more credit than it deserves."

"So you're dating me because I'm me and you're happy with me?"

He gives me an analyzing look.

"Karla, you surprise me. It is not like you to display such a sudden lack of confidence."

03

I sigh and reach into my handbag. This might not be pretty but this has been eating away at me for days, and I've been hoping to be able to settle this tonight. Without saying a word I hand him the photo I took last weekend. A photo of him and another woman exiting a hotel. I hope he's not going to try and tell me it was a business meeting. The world of business here is still very much male-dominated in many regards, and she wasn't even dressed as a company representative. He takes a look at the picture and closes his eyes for a second but his facial expression remains unreadable. After taking a moment to contemplate his answer, he opens his mouth to speak.

"Was it a coincidence that you were there? With a camera on hand no less?"

I can sense an aggravated tone in his voice. Privacy is a pretty sacred thing here, and I realize that he feels I crossed a line, but I have no intention of letting this conversation get derailed.

"It's up to you to believe me or not, but it was. The hotel you picked was only two streets away from your office, and I was on my way there to ask you to come over to my place after work when I saw you leaving the lobby with her. I snapped a picture so I could talk to you about it later. I figured it was better than confronting you on the spot. As for the camera; I'm a journalist, Hiro. I barely ever leave my apartment without my camera and notepad. It's like a second nature. That shouldn't surprise you about me."

I can see him weighing my words carefully but after a long pause he seems to relax a little bit. It looks like he appreciated the fact that I at least refrained from confronting him in public and waited until it was just the two of us.

"I was actually not the one to pick the hotel, but... please go on."

"That's all there is to it. Would you please tell me who that woman is? Given the way you said goodbye to her, I doubt she's a family member or coworker."

"You are correct. She is neither of those. But she is not what you assume she is either."

He gives a sigh of resignation.

"I was planning to tell you this - after I sorted things out for myself. But you do deserve to know."

"Please explain."

"I have told you that I am up for promotion in the near future, did I not?"

"Yeah, you told me about that. And I'm sure you'll do a very good job. But I don't really see the relevance here."

"My new position will come with additional responsibilities. And my father indicated to me it might help if I take steps to improve my credibility towards the rest of the department."

"Steps?"

"He advised me to get married."

What the hell? What does that even have to do with credibility?

"Married? But..."

"In this country, marriage comes with social status, Karla. A man who remains unmarried past a certain age, an age I am rapidly approaching, is considered to lack a sense of responsibility here and his coworkers may look upon him as untrustworthy. Not the kind of person one would want to put in charge of others. This is something that is expected of me."

I notice with some wry amusement that he's taken that familiar school teacher-like tone as he puts forth his explanation to me. Over the past two years he's often taken time to explain various aspects of

Japanese culture to me, and I have to admit he's pretty good at talking about these matters in a relatively objective and detached way, at least compared to a lot of people around here who have the tendency to clam up whenever I highlight something about this country that strikes me as odd or who blow me off with the typical 'It's simply a Japanese thing. It cannot be explained.' It is my personal belief that Hiro might have been a very good school teacher if he hadn't been born as heir to the head of a corporation.

"My father approached a friend who was willing to act as go-between during the introductions. You can see him behind us in that picture you've taken."

Well dammit! I can't believe I missed the fact that there was a third person leaving the hotel together with them. So much for my sharp observation skills.

"So, that woman who was with you was..."

"Yes, she was one of the bridal candidates my parents picked out."

"So you're being pushed into an arranged marriage - like the one your parents have?"

"It is not quite the same. My father's spouse was picked for him. I am being introduced to potential partners, but in the end they are not forcing me to marry a person I do not approve of."

It's still not exactly a day and night difference in my eyes.

"It's still a marriage you're being pressured into, Hiro."

I look at him, wondering if I'm ready for a breakup if I pry any deeper, but I have to know how this is going to end.

"So... Hiro... after two years... Is this the end for us?"

He doesn't respond immediately, avoiding eye contact while absentmindedly folding the pages of a brochure that was lying on the nearby table.

"My parents really want me to..."

I sigh softly. When I graduated high school my parents were content to let me move out of the house, get my own place while attending college and they encouraged me to live independently from that moment on. I can't say I have an extremely close bond with my parents anymore, but I value what they taught me, and have good memories of my childhood. I personally consider independence to be a strong Scottish trait.

When I came to Japan, I learned that the people here value interdependence much more than independence. Many people live with their parents until they get married. Oldest sons often remain at their parental home even afterwards, eventually taking care of the parents when they grow old. As a result of this and as a result of the concept that the gifts of life and upbringing are considered gifts that warrant a life-long debt, parental word is practically law to people like Hiro. For the most part I'm no longer astonished about the degree to which he still allows them to dictate nearly every aspect of his life for him even at his age. But tonight is different. Before Hiro can finish his sentence, I stop him with a sharp gesture.

"I know what your parents want, Hiro. But this is about *your* life, not theirs. What is it that *you* want?"

"I..."

"And don't tell me that's not important because it is. Your happiness matters to me, and it should matter to them as well."

"..."

"I want to know how *you* feel about this. I want your opinion and not theirs."

"..."

"You do have an opinion of your own about this, don't you?"

"Karla!"

His eyes narrow, and he gives me a scolding stare that stops my verbal barrage dead in its tracks. Hiro doesn't raise his voice very often, but the effect is that much greater the few times that he does.

"I will not have you talk to me as if I am a child."

He takes the phone on the nightstand, calls the reception desk and exchanges a few words with them. A minute later two waiters enter the room and start removing the leftovers of our dinner. During the entire time they're busy cleaning up neither of us says a word. The silence is the most painful one I've ever endured around Hiro. When the waiters finally leave, my anxiety has subsided a bit, and now I just feel exhausted. My boyfriend's still not saying a word. I suppose it's up to me to restart the conversation.

"Hiro... I'm... sorry. I... shouldn't have said what I just said. I got carried away."

I can see him relax a little upon hearing my apology. That's good. For a moment I was afraid he was going to walk out of here.

"I didn't mean to talk down to you. I get that this is hard for you, too."

"Karla, we have come this far together because we were able to respect each other's cultural differences. I do not fault you for having different views on certain things, but I still need you to respect mine."

He has a point. I've had my share of social faux-pas over the last two years in my attempts to become part of Japanese society, and Hiro has always been patient and understanding with me. The least thing I can do is keep that respect mutual. While I'm still contemplating this, Hiro sighs deeply, and for a moment he looks even more exhausted than I'm currently feeling.

"As for what you wanted to know - the girl you saw in the picture was actually the fourth candidate I was introduced to. All four of them were fine young women from upstanding and respected families in our neighborhood who had all the qualities to be excellent wives, and I had very little reason to reject them. They all put sincere effort into their introductions, as did their families when they accompanied them. I decided to avoid loss of face on their family's part by not turning them down immediately and go through the obligatory three meetings before telling the go-between that I would not pursue a marriage with them. I felt like a con artist during every single meeting, but in the end I still turned them all down, only because..."

He seems to struggle a bit with the last part of his sentence.

04

"...because ultimately they were not you. Does that answer your question?"

It does, and upon hearing these few words my anxiety ebbs away, and a strong sense of relief washes over me. I walk up to him and wrap my arms around him.

"Hiro... Thank you."

We share an embrace and stay like this for a long time without saying a word. Hiro's announcement that his parents want him to marry has shaken me, but I nevertheless retain a feeling of hope. He still loves me like I love him. Now that I know this I'm sure we'll find a way somehow. It may sound corny, but I sincerely believe that love conquers all.

"Hiro?"

"Yes?"

"You've been stalling things for now, but if you accept none of the candidates your parents picked for you will they leave it at that? Or will they...?"

"They will at best be openly questioning my good taste and sanity. *mumble* And at worst Father will take me to our company's development labs, hook me up to one of the EKG devices we make and show me pictures of naked men while praying to his ancestors that there will not be any sudden... rises in the resulting printed graph."

Before I can prevent it, his words have created a mental image in my mind that is so comically absurd that I burst into uncontrollable laughter. It must have been a release of the stress and anxiety I've built up this evening. Hiro for his part merely chuckles along with me. After I finally catch my breath, I give my boyfriend a mischievous wink.

"I could reassure your father on that particular front if you like."

He smiles shyly for a moment before shaking his head. Neither of us really knows what more to say, so I embrace him once more and give him a light kiss before looking into his eyes.

"Hiro?"

"Yes, Karla?"

"Let's... forget about all of this for just a little while. Let me... help you forget, even if it's just for a few moments."

I shoot a brief glance at the bed on the other side of the room to stress my words. He gives a wordless nod, takes my hand and gently leads me to the bed.

05

As the blissful feeling of our lovemaking session slowly subsides, my mind once again drifts back to what I discovered today. I came here prepared to deal with an affair and part of me is relieved to know that he hasn't been unfaithful, but now that I think about it an affair might have been easier to handle

than a marriage forced upon him by his parents. The thought of him spending the rest of his life with a wife he doesn't love feels depressing to me. I realize that arranged marriages aren't necessarily loveless, and love eventually could grow, but it still feels unsettling to me. And the thought of him... doing what we just did with some relative stranger makes me sick to the bottom of my stomach and makes me more determined than ever to do what I can to prevent that.

"Hiro?"

I snuggle up to him. He doesn't react immediately, making me wonder if he has fallen asleep already, but eventually I hear his voice; weary but still awake.

"Yes?"

"I guess... eloping is out of the question?"

"I... cannot... do that. I could never bear to bring shame of that magnitude onto my family. After all that my father has invested in me... running out on him like that would disgrace him for life. I... do not know how he would react to that, and I would prefer not to find out. In addition to that, I would permanently burn literally every bridge I have built in my life... except this one."

My first urge is to tell him he's exaggerating, but I don't think that's entirely the case. I have found that Japanese are extremely sensitive to what others think of them... or rather what they think others think of them. It's what makes social pressure such a strong influence here. And the bigger your reputation, the more spectacularly it can crash. To me, the thought of Hiro's father taking his own life due to the shame of his carefully sired chosen son walking out on him would feel extremely melodramatic. But during my stay in this country I've heard several stories of important people who were publically shamed - deservedly or otherwise - and ended up stepping out of life. It's a cultural aspect that you can't ignore as a journalist in Japan.

My thoughts briefly switch to Hiro's parents and what I know of them. At some point, as our relationship became more serious, Hiro said that he wanted me to meet his father. Aside from my activities on behalf of the BBC I made some additional money by occasionally submitting freelance work for a local magazine. Hiro introduced me as a reporter writing for that magazine who was working on a piece about local companies working in the technology sector and who wanted to include Satou Medical Technology in the article, and I briefly got to speak to his father. I was told that the company was honored to be included and I was treated like an important guest there. I ended up taking full advantage of the offer when he said I could come back anytime I needed more information. That was a good time as I was finally given a peek into Hiro's life that I formerly only knew from his stories. I could finally be seen together with him. Thanks to my previous experience as a business reporter the magazine ended up approving and publishing my article, and as a thanks for the exposure the management allowed me to attend one of the company's receptions for business partners later that year where I spoke briefly with Mister Satou senior again.

Hiro's father was extremely polite and friendly to me and was quick to heap a mountain of praise on me for speaking the language so well and for submitting such a well-written article that featured the company, for being so well-versed in the customs of Japan etcetera, etcetera. It probably helped that Hiro and I practiced my introduction to him several times in advance. However, he became evasive when I asked him a few questions about his family, and I wasn't surprised when Hiro revealed that his parents hardly ever saw each other except on Sundays. I suspect that in those few years working as an employee for his father, Hiro has already gotten to know him better than his mother ever did over the course of their marriage.

"I hope this isn't just about your father, is it?"

"It is also partially about me, Karla. I made the decision many years ago that I would not walk away from the responsibilities I inherited. I cannot simply throw away everything I have studied and worked so hard for since I entered elementary school."

I can't really blame him for that. His education and job up to this point were all geared towards his future position as head of the company, and I get that he doesn't want to throw away something he's already invested so much in. It's very much become part of who he is by now. But we've also invested a lot into our relationship, and now our options are severely limited.

I'm relieved to at least know Hiro doesn't think of me as a temporary love interest to toss aside once it gets inconvenient. I very much feel the same way about him.

Despite that, I don't think we ever made any long-term plans since our relationship was a secret to those who were part of Hiro's life.

Still, I think me visiting the company as a reporter and meeting and talking to Hiro's father was our way of gently testing the waters. Hiro, ever the supporter of the slow-and-steady approach, believed that gradually sneaking me into his parents' life was the best way to improve the chances of them approving our relationship. In the end that approach was brutally cut short by this whole marriage business, but it did show we were both hoping for more.

I guess... since the stakes suddenly went up, we can stop playing it carefully. I feel the combative mood I was in earlier returning. Our relationship may be doomed, but I'll be damned if I let it go down without putting up a fight.

"Hiro... I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"If it's okay with you I would...really like to talk to your parents. Just them and me. To explain the situation to them."

"Do you want to try and change their minds about encouraging me to get married?"

"That would only delay things. I was wondering if... ummm... well... we should... err..."

"I would... I think I would... very much... enjoy having you... as my wife..."

This is a truly wonderful moment. I give him a sweet kiss on the lips and giggle.

"Did we just propose to each other?"

"We did not. If it is okay with you, I would still like to be the one doing those honors under more fitting circumstances... assuming we can facilitate them."

"Hehehe, sure."

"Karla... with all respects, I believe that you confronting my parents would merely make things worse. I know you. You would do your best to convince my parents that you would be a good wife for me by stating all your good points and my parents would most likely merely conclude that you lack humility

and reject you immediately. Besides...*sigh* approaching my parents about this should be my task, not yours."

"Yeah, I guess it'd be best if you talked to them. Though if there's anything I can do to help, just tell me."

"It is not uncommon for future in-laws here to hire a private investigator to do a background check on a possible addition to the family. Since the rest of your family lives abroad, they might decide not to bother with that, but I trust there are no scandals in your family?"

"None that I know of. Just some speeding tickets I got from time to time, but I always properly paid them. I doubt a Japanese investigator could dig that deep anyway."

"Other than that, it would be best not to get your hopes up too high."

"When I met your father he praised me to high heaven in all sorts of ways. Was he just being polite?"

"I believe his praise was completely genuine. He was truly impressed by your quick mastery of the language and your politeness towards him. It must sound like a contradiction to you... if I tell you that he can be completely sincere in his praise and admiration of you as a person and yet be adamantly against you marrying his son - against you becoming part of his inner circle."

"I think I've lived here long enough to know there's not necessarily a contradiction."

As polite and friendly as this society is, I've also learned that it's an extremely closed one that's at times very much on its guard against outside influences, and while it's relatively tolerant of outsiders on the surface, it's also very resistant to the practice of fully embracing them.

"I can't really change where and to whom I was born Hiro, nor do feel the need to apologize for who I am and where I'm from. But I'm a pretty worldly and adaptable person. I would be glad to make an effort to be a good wife to you if they're willing to give me a chance. A chance to prove myself is all I really ask for."

"My family is more traditional than most, Karla. And I wonder if its traditions would not clash with the way you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Traditionally, a married woman has three duties here. Serve and support her husband. Run the finances and the household. And finally give birth to and raise the children."

"I've been running my own household since I graduated high school, and I know enough about finances to make a living writing about the subject. And I'll do whatever I can to support you. I'll even pretend to serve you in front of others as long as you don't forget who the person you fell in love with really is."

"I have trouble envisioning you changing yourself that way. Not to mention the fact that you love your job. I have difficulty believing that this would really make you happy."

"Being with you makes me happy too. Nobody's changing herself. I'll merely be keeping up appearances. I'll always be the person you know me as. Besides, I've always known that I'd probably have to stop doing what I do when I have children. I can't go waltzing around the area chasing news stories when there's a child who might need me back home."

The truth is also that I would really like to have children. I'd like to have 3, maybe 4. And I'd very much like Hiro to be their father.

"It might be very hard to me at first, but if it helps your parents in opening up to me over time, I think I can take it. Sometimes you have to endure some short-term hardships in order to make a positive difference in the long run."

"That sounds familiar."

I chuckle. That last part is one of Hiro's own mottos and a saying he likes to use from time to time.

"Wise words from a wise person."

Me having made my case, we fall silent again. I know I'm promising a lot, but my mind is made up. I'm going to fight for this relationship even if some sacrifices have to be made. I guess that's true for both of us. I can tell by his soft sigh that the prospect of confronting his parents about this is pretty intimidating, and his desire not to lose me is only barely keeping at bay the conformitive instincts that have been nurtured since his early childhood.

"I know this probably feels very intimidating to you, but I don't think we have anything to lose by at least trying."

"Except possibly the respect my parents have for me at this moment. Regardless of what they say, I will probably have to work very hard to win it back."

"I still think you're a very good son to them. You're smart. You're loyal. You're dedicated. And when your father retires you'll do a wonderful job leading your family's company. And you know what?"

"What is it?"

"Seeing that the company recently made customers and partnerships in the UK, wouldn't it be fitting if you'd eventually expand and both the family and family company were to become half Japanese and half Scottish?"

I take his brief chuckle as an agreement.

"I am not certain if my parents would find it amusing. I think my best bet would be to try and convince them that you would be a very diligent and capable wife. But be warned that on the slight chance that they were to accept, they will expect you to make good on that."

"No impassioned speech about the power of love, huh?"

"That is unlikely to convince them. Nobody in our family's social circle that I am aware of married for that reason. It was usually for security or simply to join two prominent families together. A speech like you are talking about would merely cause my parents to remind me that this is real life and not some theater play."

That sounds kind of sad to me. Then again, a few generations ago 'Lie back and think of England' was probably a common piece of advice on the British Isles as well, so maybe I shouldn't judge too harshly. Still, this means that appealing to their sense of romanticism is right out. Thinking back on what we spoke of earlier, however, I am reminded of something else.

"Hiro?"

"Yes?"

"The Satou company recently getting its foot in the door in the UK... Did anybody at your work ask any questions?"

"All the official introductions were done by the usual party, and I made sure to keep a low profile."

Although I now live in Japan, I've still made it a habit to visit headquarters and my family in the UK every four to five months. Since Hiro became my boyfriend, I've also picked up the habit of doing some unofficial networking on his company's behalf whenever I was in the UK. I still have a very large network of contacts I built up during my days as a business reporter, and I knew that dropping the right name at the right moment and in the right place could have very real results, especially since Hiro's company doesn't sell equipment to consumers.

I didn't think much of it at first. Hiro was my boyfriend, the company would be his someday, so I didn't think there was anything wrong with doing something that might benefit him in the future. But at some point last year, Hiro made mention of several business opportunities suddenly popping up in the UK. At this point several hospitals in the country are among the Satou company's clientèle and there's talk of hiring a local company in Scotland to assemble some of their products there to make distribution easier. The same local company I recommended to Hiro early after having visited there myself to talk to them about their theoretical willingness to do assembly jobs for foreign clients and assess their ability to do the job well. Seems like he did a good job subtly getting my advice to the right people without making too many waves.

"Part of the credit goes to the quality of your products and the efforts of your marketing department to seize the opportunities that were presented to them, but..."

"...we owe you a great deal as well."

"Hiro... then maybe you should tell your father about that. He might feel an obligation to... a look-in. "

If we can't appeal to his sense of romance then maybe appealing to his sense of obligation would help.

"It is not something he would be able to ignore, but it could easily end up escalating the situation."

"You know them better than I do. I'll trust your judgement."

"I might need to sleep a few nights on it. Think carefully on what I should say. And anticipate every single one of their possible responses."

"You'll only get one chance at this. So make it count. Give it your all. Don't hold back. And don't back down. Heck, make sure to have had a drink before you confront them. Just one. Always worked for me."

"I will do what I can to find a way to... settle this. I do not want to lose you, Karla, but I do not want to lose or abandon my family either."

"And you'll never have to, Hiro. I'll never ask you to choose between me and your family, nor will I ever expect you to abandon them on my behalf. You have my word. I think that with some honest effort... the two won't remain mutually exclusive."

06

Chapter 53 (Hisao)

01

As I pass through the school gate, I stop for a moment and take a deep breath. Even though it's been two months since I started attending here, the sheer size of Kasshoku University's campus still manages to overwhelm me. I don't think I'd mind the quiet and cozy atmosphere of Yamaku at this point, but high school is a definite thing of the past now.

After my graduation from Yamaku just over two months ago, I moved back into my parental home. It's taken some getting used to not living a mere three minute walk away from school anymore, but on the other hand it's good to see my parents on a daily basis again.

Kasshoku is too far away from home to walk, so I now commute to school each day. I can't say I enjoy stuffing myself into those crowded busses each morning, but my current living situation is certainly more comfortable than a dorm room on campus and less expensive, too.

The teachers are a bit of a mixed bag. Some of them seem to talk about their subject with genuine passion while others just mechanically scribe stuff on the blackboard. Business as usual, I guess. Overall, the majority of the subjects are pretty interesting.

I had to get used to walking to class on my own again. At Yamaku, I'd regularly walk there with Hanako, but Hanako flunked her entrance exams two months ago, and it was decided that her best option was to stay at Yamaku for another year. I didn't even know that option existed, but I guess they made an exception for her.

Not wanting to be late, I pick up a steady pace and make my way to the science faculty.

"And that's all for today. Remember that this material will return in the upcoming tests, so study it carefully."

As the teacher walks out of the room, I take one more opportunity to compare my notes with the contents of the blackboard. After confirming that I've got all the important points down, I put my books and notebook away, and my thoughts dwell on where to spend this lunch break. As I do so, I pick up pieces of conversation from the other people in class.

"Man, I'm glad it's lunch break. That guy just drones on and on."

"Hey, when are you going to return that copy of Valkyria Chronicles that I lent you? You've had it for nearly three weeks, and I barely had time to play it myself."

"Relax man. I'll have it with me the day after tomorrow."

"Wanna stop by the arcade later today?"

"Sure, why not?"

"You guys gonna stay here this lunch break or head down to the cafeteria?"

"I'm up for some ramen, so let's go and get some downstairs."

"Hmmm, don't know. I'd like some curry myself, but I'm kinda broke at the moment."

"Why not have you-know-who get you some? He still owes us something, doesn't he?"

"Hmmm..."

Just as I'm about to get up from my seat, three of my classmates suddenly crowd around my desk.

"Hey Nakai!"

"Hey guys."

"Do you already know where you're gonna have lunch?"

"Not really."

"Why not join us in the cafeteria? Also, could you buy me lunch today?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you kind of owe me something from two days ago, remember? If you buy me something to eat for today, we'll call it even."

"Ummmm..."

I get three stares that seem to suggest I'm crazy for having to think about such a bargain.

"Alright."

"Great. Just get me today's special. We'll be right there."

I pick up my stuff and leave the classroom. As I walk down the hallway leading to the cafeteria, I realize that being pressured into paying for someone else's lunch gives me a feeling of *déjà vu*.

Makes me wonder how Shizune is doing these days.

The three people who were at my desk just now were all people I already met before enrolling here, though I didn't know it at the time. Kamijo, Kisaragi and Sazukawa were there at the open house day last year as well and passed their entrance exams just like I did.

We tend to work together on group assignments during class, though we're not exactly close enough for me to stop by at their place for tea. Still, when I had to skip school last week due to having a checkup at the hospital, they were kind enough to provide me with a copy of their notes of that day when I got back the day after. I was grateful for that and told them to just give me a call when I could do something back. I was kind of aiming at letting them have my notes some time rather than getting one of them a free meal, but I guess there's no point in complaining. They did do me a favor last week, and I don't want to go back on my word, though I promise myself to be more specific about my counterfavors next time.

There's already a line forming in the cafeteria, so I quickly join the queue hoping the people in front of me aren't going to take too long to make up their mind.

"Can I help you?"

When it's finally my turn to order, I quickly address the man behind the counter.

"Today's special, please."

"Curried rice? "

"If that's today's special then yes please."

At least Kisaragi didn't go for the most expensive meal he could think of.

I pay for the meal and walk around the cafeteria in search of my classmates. I eventually find them at a table near one of the corners. As I walk up to them and put the tray on the table, I find them already in the middle of a heated discussion.

"Oh, thanks Nakai. You're a real lifesaver. I can't study very well when I'm hungry."

"I might just ask for a free meal myself the next time you miss a class."

"I'm sure you'll get the opportunity someday. Anyway, Nakai, we need your opinion. What type do you like most? Traditional or exotic?"

"Traditional or exotic what? Music? Food?"

Kamijo rolls his eyes.

"When was the last time you heard him talk about music or food?"

I let out a weary sigh.

"So this is about girls?"

"Hey, what's with the sigh? You're not... ah, never mind. Not my business."

"No, I'm not. But what's with the traditional or exotic thing?"

"Do you like a traditional woman... you know, the gentle and quiet kimono-clad kind or the hip exotic type?"

"Are those my only two choices?"

"It's more a spectrum than two choices, but surely your preference doesn't lie right in the middle?"

"Uhhh..."

I personally think that despite her dressing sense, Hanako is still the traditional type deep down. After New Year, Akira sent me a photo of Hanako dressed in a kimono - probably taken secretly - and I thought she was a very cute sight. I think that if she got over her skittishness, Hanako might be able to rival Lilly in terms of elegance.

"I think traditional."

"Damn, then we got a tie. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you after all. Oh well..."

"Where did this come from?"

Sazukawa shrugs his shoulders.

"While you were waiting in line, Kisaragi went to take a bathroom break and saw an attractive girl in the entrance hall."

"That's all?"

"What do you mean, that's all? You've been here long enough to know how much of a rarity it is to see females around this place. How many girls do you see around this faculty on a daily basis?"

"I have to admit not many. But I kinda wonder if males being in the majority isn't a universal telltale mark for most science faculties around the world. Social sciences or humanities-related faculties often have more female students than faculties that focus on physics, chemistry or IT. If you wanted to see more girls, maybe you should have ditched the university idea and attend a junior college. I heard the female-to-male ratio is around 90% to 10%."

"Yeah, but that would have gotten me into a big argument with the folks back home. Anyway, even you have to admit that this place is a sausage fest inside a sausage fest. I mean, this university probably has a 70-to-30 male to female ratio already and even that 30% might as well not exist when you're studying in this building."

"How does this relate to traditional or exotic?"

"Because the girl looked exotic. Probably a foreigner. Or a 'hafu'. You know, a half-Japanese. I wonder if she's an exchange student."

"And she caught your eye?"

"Yeah, she was really hot. I like exotic types. They're kinda hip although this one didn't really dress the part."

"So... by exotic types, you mean foreign people or people with mixed blood?"

"Yeah, kind of. Lots of fashion models and newscasters on TV are hafu these days. So I think they're kinda cool."

I can't help but grin a bit at that. I know only two people who are half-Japanese, and while the jury's still out on Akira, I don't think Lilly could ever be called 'cool' or 'hip' no matter how badly you stretch the definition. She's just way too old-fashioned for that. In fact, Lilly's really hard to place inside Kisaragi's inane traditional vs. exotic spectrum, because she acts more traditional than most full-

blooded Japanese I know, despite her foreign looks. I've actually found that when you spend some time around Lilly, you quickly tend to forget that she's half-foreign to begin with.

"So uh... This cool person, did you talk to her?"

Or did you just ogle her from afar?

"I would have, except... she was on the phone."

The rest of us lets out a snicker. Kisaragi's not a bad guy, but for all his talk about girls, I don't think he's ever asked one out. Most of his knowledge probably comes from the dating simulators he's so extremely fond of playing.

"Hey, I'm totally serious."

This creates an 'are not / am too'-discussion between Kamijo and Kisaragi that I decide to stay out of, and I decide to focus on finishing my lunch instead. After eating the last of my food, I decide to make myself useful and load the empty cans and plate onto the tray and then head towards the nearby tray rack. Just before I reach it, my phone suddenly rings, surprising me enough to nearly cause me to drop the tray. If I had set the volume on my phone a little bit higher, I probably would have dropped it for real.

"Whoa!"

I quickly put the tray away and then fish my cell phone out of my pocket. As I fold my phone open, I see a familiar name on the display.

02

"Lilly, is that you?"

"Hello Hisao. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"Not at all. It's been a little while since we've talked."

"About two months, hasn't it?"

"Yes. Are you calling to catch up? It seems... a little odd to do that during school hours, even though it's lunch break."

"I wanted to talk to you about that, but right now I was merely thinking I'd say hello personally while I was in the area. If it's not too inconvenient, that is."

"It isn't, but... Are you really here at the science faculty right now?"

"I am. Hmm, at least I think I am. Where are you right now?"

"I'm at the cafeteria."

"I'm in the entrance hall right now. Could you explain to me how to get to your location?"

"Wouldn't it be easier for me to just come over to where you are?"

"It would be easier, but it wouldn't be what I'd prefer."

"Uh... Okay then. Let me think."

I suddenly remember that whenever we visited an unknown location in the past and Lilly tried to orientate herself, it was usually Hanako explaining these kinds of things to her. I try to remember how she'd usually go about that.

"If your back is facing the exit, there's a hallway at one o' clock you'll need to follow until there's a large door on the left after...erm...I think about 30 meter. It's still rather crowded here, so you can probably follow the sound. When you enter the room, I'm near the corner of the area at ten o' clock."

"That should suffice, Hisao. Thank you."

Lilly hangs up the phone, and I put my cell phone back in my pocket feeling a bit puzzled. It'll be good to see Lilly again, even if it's only for a little while, but I do kind of wonder what she's doing here. This place is actually quite a stroll away from her own faculty. Did she walk here all the way by herself?

Wait...

Lilly said she was at the entrance hall right now. Kisaragi said he saw that 'exotic girl' there as well.

I groan loudly and slap my forehead. It looks like this whole idiotic discussion between my classmates just now has been about Lilly. Next time this subject comes up, I'm just going to do my best to shift the topic back to video games or baseball.

I walk back to the table and sit down. The back-and-forth between my classmates seems to have subsided a bit and they give me a curious look.

"Got a surprise phone call, Nakai?"

"Yeah, from a friend from high school who's studying at another faculty here and who wanted to drop by and say hello really quick."

"Oh? What faculty are we talking about?"

"English. It's been a little while since we last talked."

"Figures. That place is on the other end of the campus. Not a big chance of running into each other by accident."

"Yeah."

Kisaragi grins.

"Maybe we could ask him for his opinion too. To break the tie that you caused."

"Not that again, please."

I kinda wonder how my classmates are gonna react to Lilly. I hope they're not gonna say anything embarrassing. There's another issue too. I've never told my classmates about my heart condition. The only people who know about it are my mentor and a nurse here. They're mostly following the outlined plan that Yamaku's head nurse wrote up for them after I graduated. If my classmates see that my

friend from high school is blind, I kinda wonder if they're gonna jump to any conclusions about me. I really hope not. I found that as my time at Yamaku drew to a close, I didn't really have much difficulty telling fellow students about my condition anymore. After all, everybody there had something or another. But out here, I realized that I was still squeamish about telling others that there was... well... something wrong with me. I might eventually let them in on it, but I still prefer to wait a bit with that.

"Hey guys, look over there."

Sazukawa points towards the front of the cafeteria where I catch a glimpse of familiar blond hair. He turns to his neighbor.

"Is that the person you talked about?"

"Yeah, that's her. So, any of you guys want to reconsider your vote?"

"Well, she doesn't look bad, but she's kinda tall for my tastes. I like girls who are just a bit shorter than I am."

"She's not on the phone this time, Kisaragi. Wanna try and say hello to her."

"Gimme a break."

"Hey, do you see what she's carrying? Is that a cane? You know, the kind that blind people use?"

"I wonder if she got lost."

"If you want to know for sure, ask her. Ask her if she's looking for something or someone."

"Looking? Aw, that's cruel, man."

Trying to block out the random remarks from my classmates, I follow Lilly with my eyes as she's slowly approaching the spot where we're sitting, occasionally standing still to listen. It's still kinda crowded in here, and she's probably feeling a little disorientated, so I get up and call out to her.

"Lilly! Hey Lilly! Over here!"

Lilly's head instantly turns towards the source of the voice calling her name. She slowly walks towards me, and when she's right in front of me I greet her to confirm my presence.

"Hi Lilly. Long time no see."

Lilly turns to face me responds to my greeting with a dazzling smile.

"Hello Hisao. It is indeed. How have you been doing?"

"Okay, I guess. How about you?"

"I think I've been doing fairly well. Are the classes to your liking?"

"Yeah, they've been pretty interesting so far."

"Hey Nakai, what's going on here?"

Lilly tilts her head slightly in an attempt to place the voice of Kamijo who just spoke up.

"Hmmm, you're not alone here, Hisao?"

"Sorry, I was having lunch with a couple of classmates. I guess I should do introductions."

I step aside a bit so Lilly faces my classmates.

"These are Shouta Kamijo, Takumi Kisaragi and Yuuto Sazukawa. We're in the same workgroup, we usually do group projects together and hang out during lunch break."

Lilly makes a polite bow in their general direction.

"I'm honored to meet Hisao's friends. I am Lilly Satou, and I'm a friend of Hisao's from high school."

Kisaragi makes a baffled face.

"You're a friend of Nakai?"

Lilly nods.

"Yes, we often had lunch together last year. Hisao is also currently dating my best friend."

"Oh... Uh, nice to meet you."

"Yes, pleased to meet you."

"Uh... H-hi there..."

With the introductions behind us, I turn back to Lilly.

"I didn't expect to see you here. It must have been quite a walk from the English faculty to this place."

Lilly nods.

"It was, but I'm slowly getting the hang of the layout of the campus. I've been taking strolls around the campus since I first started attending here. At first strictly in the company of others, but lately I've also been exploring by myself."

"So it's kind of like training to you?"

"A bit. It ties into my mobility training. Since you will be attending classes in this building for the upcoming years, I felt it worth the time to try and familiarize myself with the location."

"That's very much appreciated. So that's why you didn't want me to meet you in the entrance hall?"

"Indeed. It's easier for me to remember the layout of a place when my hand isn't being held."

"I'll keep that in mind. I'd give you a tour of this place and catch up a bit with you in the meantime, but I'm not sure if we can do that and still leave you with enough time to get back to your own building before the next classes start."

Lilly nods her head.

"I appreciate the offer, but you're right in that there's probably not enough time for a tour. Perhaps another time. As for the catching up... Did you get the card I sent you with my new address?"

"I did. Thanks. You must be pretty thrilled to still have been able to get a place of your own. I'd love to see it sometime."

Lilly smiles.

"That's actually part of the reason why I'm here. I know it's a bit sudden, but do you already have plans for this evening?"

"I don't. This evening will work fine. We can catch up then."

"I'm looking forward to it. Between seven and eight o' clock at my apartment then?"

"Works for me."

Lilly turns towards my classmates and bows again.

"It was a pleasure to meet all of you. Perhaps until some other time."

I walk Lilly to the cafeteria's exit where we say our goodbyes. When I watch her slowly make her way out the front entrance, I can't help but feel a bit of admiration. I haven't been to the English faculty ever since the open house day and would probably have trouble finding it unless I paid very close attention to the signs. And here's Lilly navigating the campus without eyesight. Maybe I gotta get around more as well.

Still, her visit was a nice surprise today, and I'm looking forward to visiting her this evening. First things first though. Lilly has at least been thoughtful enough to avoid asking me about my health, but it's still possible that the guys are now wondering whether I attended a special school or not and if so, what the reason behind it could be.

I sigh and return to the canteen to find my classmates in the middle of another heated conversation. I feel a bit uncomfortable as I sit down at their table and get three pointed stares in return. I decide to make an awkward attempt at conversation.

"So... I guess the person you guys were talking about turned out to be an old friend of mine. What a coincidence, huh?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Why are you guys so quiet all of a sudden?"

"Nakai..."

"What is it?"

Kisaragi gives me a withering look.

"The first hot girl who's walked into this building for nearly a month doesn't merely turn out to be on first-name terms with you, but also invites you to spend the friggin night with her right in front of us and all you have to say for yourself is 'What a coincidence'? I'm never lending you my notes again! And these guys won't either. Serves you right, you son of a bitch!"

"She said 'evening', not 'night'. Don't get the wrong idea."

"Like that makes a difference! And you're already dating her best friend too! Is there any more salt you wanna rub in my wounds while you're at it?"

I smirk and roll my eyes. Looks like I have nothing to worry about after all.

03

I look at the card in my hand a few times in order to confirm that I have the right address and then walk over to the buzzer. As I look at the nameplate next to the button, I can see that's it's clearly been placed recently. Sure enough, the name engraved on the nameplate, next to the number 522, clearly reads 'Satou'. I press the buzzer, and a little while later I see the door open slightly.

"Hisao?"

"Hi Lilly. Can I come in?"

"Welcome, Hisao."

The door now opens completely to reveal Lilly standing there.

"Please come in, and make yourself at home."

"Thanks."

I walk into the entryway area and put my shoes away. Lilly walks past me and makes her way down the hallway into the living room. I notice that she moves around this place without her cane and without carefully feeling her way around, so she's probably intimately familiar with the layout of this apartment already. As we reach the living room, Lilly turns around and spreads her arms in a welcoming gesture.

"Welcome to my little home, Hisao."

As she hears me walk closer, she carefully feels her way to my shoulder and then gently pulls me into a loving embrace which I'm all too happy to return. I have to admit I did kind of miss my daily interaction with Lilly. As we break off our hug, Lilly chuckles.

"This seemed like a more fitting way to celebrate our reunion. Unfortunately, hugging in the middle of the school cafeteria would have been a bit improper."

"You probably saved my life by deciding not to hug me there. Our faculty barely has any female students, and at least one of my lunchmates is a frustrated single, but he probably wasn't the only one in the room. I would have been lynched for sure."

Lilly giggles.

"Still getting used to your new school life?"

"A little bit."

"Can I get you some tea, Hisao?"

"It wouldn't feel right without some, wouldn't you agree?"

"Completely. Please make yourself comfortable. I'll be right with you."

Lilly gestures towards the couch and then walks over to the kitchen area. She opens one of the cabinets and takes a tea set out of it. I instantly recognize the red color and flower motif on the cups and teapot. A sense of comfortable familiarity washes over me. So much has changed since I left Yamaku, so a familiar ritual such as this feels surprisingly good to me.

As Lilly's busy heating water for the tea, I take a moment to look around. The apartment is surprisingly spacious. It's probably built to house a couple and one or two children. The living area is rather sparsely decorated, but the furniture has the same antiquish style as the cabinet in her dorm room. A table in the middle of the room serves as the dining area, and near the back of the room is a sitting area with a low table and an angled sofa that seems large enough provide room for five or six people. In the corner is a cabinet with a landline phone and an extremely small television on top of it. The kitchen area is rather standard although one thing that catches my eye is the fact that there are several sheets of paper with text in Braille attached to one of the cupboards.

"Feel free to look around a bit if you wish, Hisao."

"Don't mind if I do."

I walk back to the entrance area and look around. Aside from the front door and the doorway leading to the living room, there are three other doors there. One of them merely leads to an extremely small room with a few cabinets. It's probably used as storage area. The other doors lead to a bedroom and a bathroom area.

Lilly's bedroom has the same familiar fragrance of perfume and nail polish that her dorm room at Yamaku used to have. In addition to a bed, it also has a bookshelf and a desk. Despite there being a bookshelf here, half of the books in this room are still stacked on the floor. Either Lilly has a system she's been using for a very long time and doesn't like to deviate from or she simply doesn't like putting away her books. The desk houses a braille device similar to the one I've seen in Yamaku's student council office a few times. There's also an old-fashioned typewriter there. Each of the typewriter's keys is covered by a sticker with something that looks like a braille code for the respective characters. Seeing that her teachers probably don't know Braille, this must be how Lilly writes the reports and essays she has to hand in.

The bathroom area houses a simple sink and two inner doors, one leading to a toilet area and the other one to a bathing area with two small stools, a small bucket and a rather deep bath. All in all, Lilly's apartment seems to have all the amenities of an actual family home.

I return to the living room and take a peek behind the door near the cabinet holding the television. There's a fairly large but completely empty room behind it. One of the walls has a large empty compartment that was probably built to house futons. This room would probably be used as either a secondary bedroom or a secondary living area, but currently it seems to serve neither purpose. I think I have an idea of the reason behind it.

"Hisao?"

I look around and notice that Lilly has finished preparing the tea and has put the cups and tea pot on the table in the sitting area.

"Okay."

04

I take a seat at the low table and watch as Lilly pours the tea in a practiced motion. She hands me a cup and slightly raises her own.

"To the good old times?"

"Works for me."

It's been two months since I last saw Lilly. We both graduated that day and passed our entrance exams to boot, but our joy was marred by the fact that Hanako didn't manage to make it in, and to make things worse, Hanako had disappeared without a trace, apparently having left the school grounds earlier that morning.

Hanako's therapist informed us that Hanako was in a safe place and busy sorting out her thoughts, but I don't think I was the only one who suspected that Hanako's desperation simply got the better of her and that she fled the school because she didn't know how to deal with the situation. We reluctantly left the matter in Miss Takawa's hands, and returned home with our parents, though I suspect I haven't been the only one who had trouble sleeping the nights after.

Finally, two days afterwards, just when I was contemplating calling Yamaku, I received a text message from Hanako. It didn't shed a lot of light on her circumstances, but it did say that she was okay, that she'd be spending another year at Yamaku and that she was sorry for having run off like that. I couldn't reach her when I tried to call her, but an hour later I received a phone call from Miss Takawa who explained the situation to me in full.

It turned out that Hanako had sought shelter in the orphanage where she grew up. I can't say I ever would have found her there, seeing that Hanako never told me where exactly it was located. Miss Takawa also informed me that Hanako had been accepted into Yamaku's ronin program, and that the school would do its best to make certain she'd be better prepared for the exams next year.

I offered to drop by at Yamaku that very day, but Miss Takawa said that it was better if I didn't. She said Hanako'd had a few very stressful months behind her and that it was best to simply let her get her bearings back and give her time to get back into a normal daily routine. In time, Hanako would have settled down enough to initiate contact with us. In the meantime, she advised me to concentrate on getting settled in my new life myself as I probably had more adapting to do right now than Hanako. I couldn't really argue with that, so I left it at that.

I had a long phone conversation with Lilly that same day, and it turned out that Miss Takawa had contacted her as well. While both of us were already missing Hanako, we agreed that there was no longer any reason to worry about her, and the best thing we could do was get our own life in order right now so Hanako wasn't going end up worrying about us. Lilly argued that it probably was best for us

to go our own way for a little while and focus on meeting new people at our respective faculties, rather than clinging to each other for company. I've missed hanging out with Lilly, but I recognized the value of getting familiar with the people in my own class, so we agreed to focus on our own lives for a bit and catch up once life started settling down a little.

"You used to call your parents' place your home. I suppose now that you have this place, that's not the case anymore?"

"Actually, I call both places home now. It can be a bit confusing, but it reflects how I feel."

As I drink my cup of tea, I notice that it has a very familiar taste.

"Is this the same tea you'd usually drink at Yamaku?"

"Orange Jaipur. Indeed. I'm fortunate that the local store carries it."

"If you don't mind me asking: do you do your own shopping nowadays?"

Lilly smiles.

"I do. We have a very convenient system in place for that."

"A system?"

Lilly briefly points at the sheets of Braille paper taped to the front of the cupboard.

"Those lists you see there are shortened inventory lists of some of the nearby stores. They contain most of the items I need in my daily life. When I need to do some shopping, I can make a phone call to one of those stores and tell them what I need. By the time I've made it there, they usually have the order ready for me to pick up. All the remains then is to pay for it."

"Wow, that's some customer service."

"Father made the arrangements for me. He and I had a personal talk with each of the stores' managers, and they were happy to be of assistance to a regular customer."

"Looks like you managed to adapt really quickly."

Lilly modestly shakes her head.

"Last Wednesday was actually the first day I've lived completely on my own. Up until that point, Mother has lived here with me. Throughout the first four weeks, she's been here with me seven days a week. During the first three weeks, she even accompanied me to school. Over the last two weeks, she's only been here on Mondays and Thursdays. I don't think I would have been able to adapt without her efforts. I'm truly thankful to her. And also to Father for changing his mind about letting me live here without a roommate."

"Wow, that's some dedication."

"She said she felt she owed it to me. I... don't really agree, but I'm nevertheless thankful for her efforts. I think... it's truly better that Mother has taken this role upon herself and not Hanako. Better for everyone."

That's probably true. I could have seen Hanako agreeing to move in with Lilly anyway if that had been the only way for Lilly to be allowed to live here, but it probably would have lead to problems down the road, especially in the emotional state Hanako was in around graduation. With no school to study at and nothing to do all day long except act as Lilly's temporary crutch, her self-esteem probably would have suffered, and as Lilly became less and less reliant on her, it'd probably start dropping even more with each passing day. I'm not sure how well Hanako would have functioned guiding Lilly around a crowded school either. No, this approach was definitely better.

"I agree. So, is your mother still staying over every now and then or are you truly on your own from now on?"

"She won't be spending the night here anymore, but I still spend my Sundays at my parents' home each week. When they come here to pick me up on Sunday mornings, Mother usually does a quick check to see if everything here is still in order and does some additional cleaning if it's required while Father assists me with my mail and administration."

"Sounds like you're holding up here just fine."

Lilly empties her cup and then promptly refills it. Looks like that raging caffeine addiction of hers hasn't gone anywhere in the meantime. As she takes another sip, she smiles playfully at me.

"That about covers my life up until this point. How about yours, Hisao? Catching up is a mutual process, you know?"

"Point taken. I've moved back in with my parents. We don't really see each other that often because both of them are working, but we try to spend some time together each evening. I'm also trying to make myself useful around the house and do some chores every now and then. They are paying for my tuition after all."

Lilly smiles in appreciation.

"That is a very good attitude to have."

"It's kind of funny, but I didn't really use to be very close with my parents. I think that ever since I started dating Hanako, I've grown a bit more... appreciative of them."

Lilly gives an understanding nod.

"I think I know what you mean. How about the people at school? Were the people you were having lunch with your friends?"

"It's kind of difficult to say. We work on group projects together and spend lunch breaks together on a regular basis. They even made notes on my behalf when I was absent for a day last week. So I guess you could call us friends, though I kinda feel like the odd one out."

"Hmmm, how so?"

"I'm the only one who doesn't live in the dorms for starters."

"That's not necessarily a problem. You don't have to live in the dorms to make friends. With the exception of Hanako, I made all of my friends at Yamaku during my first year when I was still living with Akira, and many of my friends were boarding from the beginning."

"I guess there's something else too."

"Your health? How is it these days?"

"I haven't had an episode since I started attending here. I no longer have a running track in my backyard, so my parents and I shelled out some money for a home trainer that I use on a daily basis to stay in shape. Emi would probably call me a turncoat for switching from running to cycling, but the neighborhood I live in just isn't very suitable for jogging. I had a checkup at the hospital last week, and they seemed satisfied with the results."

"That's good news. I'm happy to hear that you're taking good care of yourself."

I can't suppress an amused smirk. I don't think Lilly even realized how extremely motherly that sounded just now. She really hasn't changed a bit.

"Well, I try. I'd really hate to have an episode during schooltime."

"Hisao... Does anybody at school know about your heart?"

"One teacher and a school nurse. I guess I'd have some explaining to do if I ever were to have a heart flutter in the middle of class, so I'm doing my best to prevent that kind of thing from ever happening in the first place."

"Most of your old classmates from Yamaku knew about it, didn't they?"

"Yeah, eventually. But that was because I also came to know their reason for attending Yamaku. Everyone had their own condition to deal with, so once I accepted what I had, I felt petty for trying to avoid the subject in front of my fellow students. After all, having a medical condition didn't make me different from the rest. But it's kind of different now, because I'm probably the only student in class who attended a school like Yamaku. The last thing I want is to get stares and whispers whenever I enter class. I'm not sure if this is something people even care to know about."

Lilly looks a little saddened to hear my words.

"It almost sounds like you're feeling guilty for being the way you are. Have I ever apologized for my blindness, even once? You can't help the way you were born, Hisao. There's no point in apologizing or feeling guilty for who you are."

I wouldn't have expected Lilly to say anything else. But there's a difference between us. Lilly's blindness is impossible to hide, so it'd be unreasonable for people to expect her to do so. My condition is a lot more subtle, so it's not really fair to compare the two. Still, since Lilly can't hide her condition, I wonder how her school life's been.

"Lilly, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Hisao."

"How's your school life been? It's good to hear that you've managed to adapt to your new environment and that you're now capable of finding your way around, but how's your interaction with your classmates? And... How's their interaction with you?"

"Most people in my class are very friendly. There are several people with whom I spend time after school. I still like to take walks across the campus during lunch break in order to familiarize myself with the terrain, but eventually I'll probably join them for lunch as well."

"..."

Lilly makes an uncomfortable grimace.

"You... are asking how people reacted to my blindness, aren't you?"

"If that's not too personal a question."

She shakes her head, but judging from the expression on her face, it very well might be.

"Mostly positive. It's difficult for me to determine if I get many stares or not, but people don't speak ill of me. Quite the opposite. People are generally very helpful. But there's still quite a bit of awkwardness from time to time as well. I can tell that people sometimes don't really know how to act around me. I... could probably do without the praise too."

"Praise?"

"Sometimes people try to be friendly and tell me how impressed they are that I can eat with chopsticks or use a cell phone, despite the fact that I've been doing that for years. They mean well, but it comes across as a bit..."

"Condescending?"

"...a bit like: 'Look at that monkey peeling a banana, mommy.' "

"That's kind of why I'm reluctant to let other people in on my condition. I don't want people to have that kind of interaction with me."

"Neither do I, but your classmates might eventually find out about it unless you go out of your way to keep them at arm's length. And doing that will make you more of an outsider than your condition ever could. I believe that people simply need some time to adapt. After all, you were a little uneasy when you first came to Yamaku, weren't you? If you could do it, certainly others can as well."

"That's not a bad point."

"Whenever people are awkward around me, I try to remind myself that many of my former classmates from Yamaku, as well as yours, are probably faced with the same situation or will someday. The knowledge that I'm probably not alone in this makes it easier to put things into proper perspective."

True. Several of my classmates have disabilities less subtle than mine. I'm pretty sure Shizune or Miki or even Natsume would be more eye-catching than I would be. And that's not even counting Hanako.

"Are you talking about Hanako?"

"Not specifically, although it's probably unavoidable that she'll attract her share of stares eventually. We can only hope that by then she can deal with that kind of attention."

I wonder if Hanako will ever be able to deal well with that kind of attention, but at least that's not going to be a concern for at least ten more months.

"Speaking of Hanako; she and I have been corresponding through e-mail lately. Has she... reestablished contact with you as well?"

Lilly's smile returns.

"She has. Just a moment, please."

Lilly gets up, disappears into the hallway and comes back after a minute holding a binder in her hands.

"I keep all my correspondence with her in here."

I take a look at the binder that Lilly placed on the table. It contains between eight and twelve sheets of Braille paper, presumably letters from Hanako to Lilly. Looks like Hanako found a way around Lilly's lack of technical savvy. I can't really read what the letters say, though most of them aren't extremely long. Assuming she started writing Lilly around the same time she reestablished contact with me, Hanako must have been writing about 2 letters a week to Lilly. That's quite a lot, considering the fact that she and Lilly correspond through snail mail.

"Letters in Braille. Hanako's probably using the newspaper club computer to print them. I believe she said it has a program that can convert normal text into Braille. That's how they make the special editions of the school newspaper too."

"Apparently it works both ways. She said it was okay for me to write back in Braille too. I'm better with a brailler than with a normal typewriter, so this is quite convenient for me."

So Hanako basically scans in Lilly's letters and then runs them through some conversion software.

"So when did she start writing you?"

"Around the third week of April. I was getting a bit anxious already, but I wanted to keep my promise to Miss Takawa."

"So Miss Takawa also asked you to leave it up to Hanako to reestablish contact?"

"Yes. I asked her why and she said that Hanako having to take that initiative was part of her therapy and that it was best if we first let her regain her footing a bit until she was comfortable enough to interact with us as equals again."

"Hanako probably still feels really bad about what happened on graduation day, so indirect contact through e-mail and letters probably feels safer to her."

Lilly nods.

"I think so too, though there may have been other factors besides her actions on graduation day. It's a real shame though that she doesn't seem comfortable with phone contact yet. I'm fine with letters,

but... Being able to hear her voice from time to time would be very welcome too. Especially during this week, don't you agree?"

"This week?"

"You know..."

"I'm not sure..."

Lilly looks a bit upset. Did I miss anything? Hanako's birthday is still slightly over a month away.

"This week, one year ago, something very special happened."

"..."

"..."

"Wait! Was this week the week I transferred to Yamaku last year?"

"It was. Last year, it was during this week that Hanako and I first met you."

"I can't believe you remembered that."

"I'm sure Hanako remembers it too, Hisao. Girls remember these sorts of things, and meeting you was a very special occasion for her."

"Yeah..."

"Hisao?"

"Yes?"

"Is something the matter?"

I tried to be casual in my tone, but it looks like Lilly still managed to pick up a wistfulness in my tone.

"Can I ask you something, Lilly?"

"Of course."

"How do you feel about... Hanako no longer being a daily part of your life?"

Lilly smiles sadly.

"I miss her presence, and I hope that she'll soon get to the point where we can talk directly to each other again and spend time with each other again. In the meantime, I keep telling myself that Hanako received a valuable opportunity to become stronger and that it's a good thing that she's chosen to take advantage of it."

"That's a good way to look at it, I guess."

"But how about you, Hisao? You two were dating, and then you were suddenly separated and thrust into a long-distance relationship. To be very honest, I would personally have difficulty maintaining a relationship of that kind, so I'm curious how you are holding up."

I sigh.

"To be honest, the moment where our relationship suddenly changed didn't take place on graduation day, but several months earlier. All that happened at the end of March was a physical separation."

Lilly smile immediately vanishes, and a guilty look appears on her face.

"Hisao... I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't be like that. I'm not pointing fingers."

It's not like I'd need to anyway. Lilly already does a fine job of claiming responsibility for Hanako's situation even though I don't think that Hanako is blaming her. I do kind of wonder if I should discuss this with Lilly to begin with, but ultimately decide that Lilly's probably still the best person to talk to about this.

"Of course... Please continue, Hisao."

"That period between the start of our relationship and that incident at Kasshoku consisted of some of the best months of my life. But afterwards, she immediately started relapsing. She started secluding herself in her room again. She often seemed lethargic whenever we could make time to hang out. Maybe that stressful exam period was a blessing in disguise because it served as a distraction from the fact that our relationship was already in the freezer. There were times when I told myself that everything would be okay after we all graduated and that we'd be able to pick up where we left off afterwards, but that was probably very naive."

"I'm sure that Hanako isn't happy with the situation either, Hisao."

"I'm not blaming Hanako, Lilly. I'm mostly frustrated with the situation and not really with her...anymore."

"Anymore?"

I take a deep breath.

"I won't lie. There have been times when I wondered whether it was even worth it. I couldn't help but wonder if this was what a relationship with Hanako was going to be like in the long run too: good times, followed by months and months of helplessness and feeling like I'm walking on eggshells. What if it's a cycle that never ends?"

Lilly looks uncomfortable. Given how supportive she's always been of our relationship, this must be painful for her to hear.

"I don't think that's fair to Hanako, Hisao."

"I know that. It's not just unfair, but hypocritical too."

"Hmmm?"

"After my last hospitalization, Hanako and I made up and she made me a promise."

I pause for a moment to study Lilly's face and her tiny knowing smile confirms that Hanako must have told her about that at some point.

"When she promised me that if something happened to me again, she'd wait for me, even if she couldn't be by my side through it all, that meant the world to me. It may seem like a small thing, but her keeping that promise would still put her ahead of most people who used to be in my life. And despite her relapse, I'd like to think she'd keep that promise, even now."

"She would, Hisao. There is no doubt in my mind about that."

We both let out a soft chuckle. I bet that Lilly, like me, realized that the most sure-fire way of seeing Hanako in the flesh again would be for me to have another heart attack.

"Let's hope I won't have to find out. Anyway, in the end it wasn't me who got put out of commission, but her. And now I feel like it's up to me to keep up my end of that vow. It's pretty likely that at some point in the future, I'll be hospitalized again, maybe be out of commission for months on end, just like Hanako. It's happened before, after all. How can I expect Hanako, or anyone for that matter, to stick with me if I can't stick with them when they go through their darker moments?"

"It's almost like a test, don't you think? Like a trial to test your resolve?"

"I told myself I'm going to tough things out, but even so, I never expected the wait to be so...damn...long."

Lilly nods and there's a long silence. I've never discussed this with anybody and I'm surprised how relieved I'm suddenly feeling after letting this off my chest. I'm happy that I took this opportunity to talk about this to the one person who probably knows Hanako as well as I do. Eventually, Lilly speaks up.

"Is this situation on your mind a lot?"

"I'm trying not to think too much about it. And for the most part, I've been successful. I've had my hands full getting my university life in order over the last two months, so I've been able to keep my mind off Hanako so far and I thought that was a good thing since it's better being busy than being bitter, but now I'm starting to wonder if that was the right thing to do to begin with. What if I focus so much on my university life that I'll wake up one day and realize I feel content with the way things are now? And then realize I feel content despite being in a relationship that's a relationship in name only?"

Lilly gives me an amused smile.

"I think I know what you mean. It's a little bit similar to how I used to feel after Mother and Father left for Scotland. Eventually I got to the point where I was fairly happy and content despite them not being there because there were others who were an important part of my life as well. That doesn't mean I wasn't hoping they'd move back someday. I don't think you should feel guilty about feeling content with your life, because you can feel good about yourself and still hope for your life to get even better."

"Maybe... It's just that I can't shake the feeling that this isn't how things are supposed to be. I was pretty frustrated when she left just like that, but focussing on getting settled at my new faculty allowed me to get my mind off things and I'm no longer upset with her, but I'm not really feeling that

spark either. They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but I'm just not feeling that right now."

"Do you really feel like your relationship with Hanako is one in name only? Despite the fact that you're exchanging correspondence with her?"

"The mails we exchange are usually rather short and about casual stuff. It sounds a bit harsh, but right now it feels like Hanako and I are just pen pals, rather than boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Have you talked to Hanako about this?"

"I'm afraid that if I bring it up, she'll jump to the conclusion that I'm on the verge of breaking up with her."

"Maybe you could try to make your interaction with her less casual? Maybe I'm a bit old-fashioned, but have you tried writing her a romantic love letter? That would certainly win me over."

I chuckle briefly at that. That really did sound like something Lilly would say.

"I could be mistaken, but I think that's one area where you and Hanako are different, and I'm not merely saying that because I'm reluctant to write her a sappy love letter."

"How so?"

"What would your idea of a pleasant date be if you were in a relationship with someone?"

"Hmmm... I would... go somewhere together... for a nice dinner, some tasty wine and a pleasant conversation."

"You probably nailed it with the last part. I'm not saying that Hanako's incapable of enjoying conversation, but it's never been at the core of our relationship life. Whenever we'd go out on a date, we'd go and see a movie or visit an arcade center or do karaoke. Whenever we wanted to bond, we'd play a game of chess or snuggle up to each other while reading books or... uh... make love. I think some of the most romantic moments of our relationship have been just walking hand in hand through the forest near that Scottish village, or reading a book together or waking up or dozing off in each other's arms. Do you know what all those activities have in common?"

Lilly nods.

"You don't need conversation to enjoy them."

"Exactly. It's not that Hanako and I hardly ever talked, but I don't think Hanako or I are really talkers by nature and with Hanako's social skills, conversations often contain just a little bit too much awkwardness to feel fully relaxed. So we kinda built our entire relationship life around activities that we could enjoy just as much without the need to engage in conversation. And it actually worked really well for us. But right now... it seems that conversation is all we have left. To be honest, I don't think we're cut out for a long distance relationship. But if I tell Hanako that, she's probably going to freak out."

"..."

"Damn, just listing those things suddenly made me really miss her again."

Lilly giggles.

"It's a relief to hear that. I realize that a relationship with Hanako may not always be low maintenance, but there have been many wonderful memories you have of her despite the recent struggles, don't you agree?"

That's true and that's probably why I still consider her my girlfriend even though we're so far apart right now. Hanako's bad times have been pretty bad, but the good times have been wonderful and I sincerely want those back. I miss those little moments we used to share. Despite everything, Hanako's still really special to me even though being her boyfriend has been difficult the last couple of months.

"Yeah. I guess it'd be best to hold on to those memories and have faith that those kinds of times will return eventually."

"Hisao, would you like my opinion?"

"Uhuh."

"If just the mention of those moments make you feel that way, then perhaps we should make an effort to create such a moment ourselves. A bonding moment as it were."

"But how? Other than ignoring Takawa and taking the next train to Yamaku, that is."

"Maybe we could talk to her. Have an actual direct conversation with her. My landline phone here has a speaker."

"You want to phone her? Didn't Takawa ask us to leave all the initiative with Hanako?"

"We won't phone her, but we could tell her that we'd like to have a phone conversation, even if it's only once. We'd take part of the initiative, sure, but in the end the final decision would still lie with Hanako. We could plan a special moment for it."

"Do you have one in mind?"

Lilly gives a reassuring nod.

"I think I do. Do you have time to visit here later this week?"

05

Chapter 54 (Hanako)

01

"Haha, missed me!"

"Ugh..."

"I don't think that attack's going to do much good."

"Hmmm..."

"And here we go!"

"Hmph, lucky shot."

"Is this how you want to play it?"

"And... Owned!"

"Hehehe."

"Let's try this one more time."

"Ummm... Jun?"

"Yes?"

"Was it... uh... class 1-3 or 1-4 that held that fishing game today?"

"Mmm... I'm pretty sure it was class 1-4. You know that 1st year who joined the newspaper club recently? Makoto... something? He was operating the stall for some time and I *think* he's from class 1-4. Uh... We can probably check that later, right?"

"R-Right. Thanks."

"Okay."

"I accept the challenge. Give me your worst!"

"Huh? Jeez, that attack is overpowered. How did *that* get through the beta testing?"

"Well, both can play at this game."

"How's that?"

"Whew, that was close."

"J-Jun?"

"Yes?"

"Do you... know who organized that h-haunted house event?"

"I think it was Aoi from the student council. It's a bit cliché, but she's wanted to have one here for years."

"Okay."

I turn my attention back to my notepad and start scribbling again. I'm really exhausted right now and I'm struggling to hang on to my recollection of today's events, but if I don't commit as much as possible to paper before the end of the day, I'll have forgotten half of it by tomorrow morning. Besides, I need a basic outline done this evening to show Miss Yumi.

I have barely finished writing two lines when I realize that it's suddenly rather quiet in the room. I look back at Jun, who has spent the last hour or so in front of her television. There's a message on the tv saying: 'Searching for an opponent'. Jun's fingers are idly fiddling around with the Wii controller in her hands, but her eyes are looking at me.

"Is... s-something wrong?"

"You seem pretty serious about getting this piece of yours done. I'm not distracting you, am I?"

"It's okay."

"If you say so."

I don't think it's my place to tell Jun to stop playing games on her own console in her own room anyway, but fortunately her vocalized thoughts aren't particularly distracting.

Not distracting, but still a bit bizarre.

Jun recently found out about my tendency to only step on the dark tiles in tiled hallways when there are no other people around and was pretty amused by it. But before that, I already found that she has a rather interesting quirk of her own. Whenever she's playing video games, she *really* gets into them. When we were playing Mario Kart earlier today, Jun tended to suddenly lean left or right whenever she needed to dodge an obstacle or car at the last moment. And ever since we visited the arcade last year together with Naomi, I've known that Jun likes to think out loud while playing games. At first I thought she was talking to me and was a bit weirded out, but now I realize that she probably does this even if there's nobody else in the room.

She says she enjoys the game more this way.

It still feels odd for someone who usually provided the calm and collected counterpoints to Naomi's spontaneous outbursts during our writing club meetings.

"Hanako, is there a word for the opposite of being grounded?"

"Being g-grounded?"

"When you're sent to your room and you're not allowed to leave, you're being grounded, right? But is there a word for when you're told to stay of your room and you're not allowed to enter?"

I think for a moment, but then smile and shake my head.

"I... d-don't think there is."

"I guess your situation is that unique, huh?"

"Yes."

Today was a busy day for Yamaku as it was the day of the annual school festival. Since I'm no longer part of any official class, nobody asked me to help at any of the stands and to be honest, that suited me just fine. I don't think I would have enjoyed spending the entire day getting stares from people as I took their orders for fried rice or noodles. Unfortunately, the option of sitting the day out in my room was denied to me by noone other than Miss Yumi.

Two days ago, she gave me an assignment for today. An assignment that was meant to be part of my therapy.

The gist of it was that I wasn't allowed to set foot in my room or in the library today. I could bring a book from the library if I wanted to read, but I wasn't allowed to hide away in there. In addition, I was asked to write a small article about the festival. It wasn't necessary for it to be published in the upcoming newspaper issue, but Miss Yumi wanted to read it. Because of that, I was pretty much forced to go outside today and tour the school grounds. At least I had an official excuse to convince myself and something to keep me partially occupied.

I didn't really feel up to spending hours upon hours among the crowds today, so I got up really early this morning and tried to gather as much information as I could before the start of the festival while the students were still setting up their stands. I still ended up having to take a few trips across the school campus during the festival itself to fill in the blanks in my piece, but I managed to make those as quick as possible. I spent the rest of the day either reading a book in the school gardens, which remained relatively quiet, and hanging out in Jun's room who got a Nintendo Wii on loan from her father for a few weeks as a reward for doing well on her last test *and* as a consolation for fracturing a bone in her foot a little while back, forcing her to spend most of the day in her dorm room.

We spent some time playing a few games together until I decided to resume piecing my article together and Jun switched to online play. The last hour has consisted entirely of me trying to make something coherent out of my large collection of notes and Jun holding one-sided conversations with whoever's on the other side of her internet connection.

"How's the article coming along?"

"Okay... I think. I'm currently... trying to just get a complete outline done without too much detail."

"Are you sure you don't want me to help you write the whole thing out?"

"I'm sure. Besides, it sounds like you're having fun."

"Heh, I actually like the older Pokémon games better, but the ability to battle random people online is a pretty fun feature and..."

The 'searching for opponents'-message disappears from Jun's screen and is replaced with a menu. Jun gives me a look that says 'Do you mind if I take that one?' and I give a quick nod in response.

I get back to my outline and Jun gets back to her game. Judging from the sound of it, it's not going to be a drawn-out one.

"Hmm, hmm... Are you sure you want to pick that attack?"

"I have you now."

"Boom! One down. Bring on your next one."

"Uh?"

"OH, COME ON!"

I jump a little, startled by Jun's sudden exclamation. When I look at the screen, there's surprisingly a 'You win' message there that doesn't seem to validate the death glare that Jun is shooting at the television.

"W-What happened? You w-won, didn't you?"

That sure was quick though. Her matches usually last way longer. Jun doesn't respond at first, but eventually puts down her controller slightly more forcefully than usual and turns off the tv.

"I hate ragequitters."

"W-What?"

"Imagine you're playing a chess game against someone and during the opening you already manage to capture his queen. Instead of taking his setback with dignity, he flips the chessboard and walks off, probably under the belief that he hasn't really lost as long as you didn't get the opportunity to put his king in check mate. How would you feel?"

Probably extremely frustrated. I'd never goad my victory over a fellow player, so I really don't like sore losers either.

"P-Put off, probably."

"Exactly. I got one good shot in and the guy immediately disconnects. Ugh."

"I'd never do that myself."

Jun's smile returns and she nods.

"I know. That's why I like playing games with you. You're a good sport. You don't gloat when you win and you don't pout when you lose. I admire that mindset."

When playing video games with Jun, I spend more time losing than winning, although since our win-lose rate was close to 50-50 when we visited an arcade last year, that's probably simply due to Jun having had more practice with the games we play here.

"It feels good to be able to p-play games with someone."

"I sometimes feel a little guilty though. All the games we play here are games I've had lots of practice with. You're starting to catch up, but I still wonder at times whether you're actually enjoying yourself."

"It's okay. I enjoy playing games, regardless of the outcome."

"It doesn't matter to you whether you win or lose?"

"I like winning when p-playing, but I'd rather play and lose than not p-play at all. When I visit with Miss Yumi, we often play a game of Go. She really likes that game."

"Go, eh? Is she any good at it?"

"I think she mentioned once that she used to participate in local competitions a few decades ago. I've never beaten her so far. Sometimes the session ends before anybody's in a clear winning position, but most of the time she simply beats me."

"Is it even still fun that way? A competitive player going up against a casual one without some sort of handicap to even the odds is really unfair, isn't it?"

I smile sadly at Jun.

"Her answer to that was that... life isn't always fair either, so..."

Jun nods understandingly.

"So the best thing you can do is improve yourself rather than count on the rest of the world to keep accommodating you, right? That does make sense. Even so..."

"She's a very pleasant opponent. She usually gives me tips after each session on how to improve my game or points out the moments where I made mistakes. She also praises me when I come up with an effective strategy or counter one of hers. And I've been slowly getting better at it, which already feels good on its own. Just like it felt good when I started keeping up with you or was able to follow you across shortcuts in Mario Kart."

"In other words: the little victories can and should be appreciated too?"

Miss Yumi never grew tired of reminding me that the same principle also applied to life in general. My physical scars will remain with me forever, and many of my mental ones will take a long time to heal, but there are plenty of smaller victories to be savored in the meantime, and I shouldn't think of life as a zero-sum game that's always either completely won or completely lost.

"Yes, but those little victories wouldn't mean anything if I knew she was merely letting me win or deliberately holding back. They only feel genuine because she's never going easy on me."

Jun takes several seconds to think about this really hard, then taps her red-and-white cap and breaks into a smile.

"That does make a lot of sense. It's like those old 8-bit Famicom games, right? Back then you could barely ever save your game and lives were limited, so it was really hard. You'd first start playing it and you'd get a game over message on the first part of the first level. Then, with lots of practice, you'd beat the first stage, and you'd feel great about yourself. Then the second level repeated the process until you finally beat the game and felt like a pro or got to a point where things became too hard or cheap to continue. It was always a struggle, but it wasn't just beating the game that felt really good. Every time you got just a little further than before felt like a major accomplishment. It's something like that, isn't it?"

I giggle a bit and manage to avoid rolling my eyes. I don't have any experience with 8-bit consoles myself, so Jun kind of lost me half-way through her rant, but I think she caught the gist of things.

"I... I think so."

"So you like playing games for those little victories that come with getting better at it?"

"That's... one reason. I also like playing games because I feel good when playing. It's a... very special feeling. It's hard to explain."

Jun grins.

"I think I know what you mean."

I'm not so sure about that. What I feel while playing games with someone isn't the urge to play the role of some outlandish commentator. It's a sense of comfort I usually don't feel when interacting with someone in any other way. After I became disfigured, most of my ways of interacting with other people became stunted. I just wasn't able to relax while someone was staring at the burns on my face, and I knew my stammering and tendency to clam up made conversations frustrating for other people, which made me stutter even more and shut down even sooner as they waited for me to finish my sentences. In a way, playing a game with others is interacting with them too, but others' attention isn't on my facial scars for once and instead of exchanging words, you exchange cards or moves. It feels so much more natural. The sparse times I played games with others were the sparse times I felt a bit normal.

Miss Yumi and I spoke about this during therapy a few times, and she said she believed that playing games was my way of interacting with people as equals. She noted that people could be on different levels in terms of playing skill and still respect each other as opponents as well as respect themselves as players.

Playing a game against someone who takes the game seriously and who's making a sincere effort to win has always been the one time I felt like I was interacting with someone without them looking down on me or being annoyed by me.

"It's about... respectful interaction... while also relaxing and having fun."

Jun looks a little puzzled at that, obviously not completely able to figure out my train of thought.

"Ummm...?"

"N-Never mind."

I shrug in order to dismiss the matter. I really don't feel like going through the struggle of explaining all of that to Jun right now. Maybe some other time. Jun frowns for a moment, but then nods.

"Okay. Still, it might be a nice change of pace to play something you have more experience in. How about a little chess match some time? You're really fond of that game, aren't you?"

"B-But you don't have a chessboard."

Jun laughs.

"Chessboards are nice and all, but in this day and age they're not exactly mandatory anymore. If you're up for it, I'll just get my laptop and download a chess game off the internet. There are plenty of free ones available online. See?"

Jun opens her laptop, clicks her mouse a few times, types in a few words and then turns the computer around so I can look at the screen. It indeed looks like there are plenty of alternatives to my old-fashioned chess set these days, though I already knew that. Back at the orphanage I occasionally played

chess on the computer there, though never against another person. Lilly was the first human opponent I had in a decade and Hisao was the last one.

A game of chess does sound tempting, but before I can consider accepting Jun's offer, a sharp sense of guilt runs from my gut to the top of my spine and I shiver. Jun notices the expression on my face and frowns.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"It's... nothing. I think I'll p-pass this time."

Jun thinks for a second whether a 'nothing' that's obviously 'something' is worth questioning me about ...and decides that it is.

"I hope I'm not being a bother, but is it's not really 'nothing', is it?"

"P-Promise me that you won't laugh."

"Ah... Alright."

"It would... feel a bit like... I'd be... cheating."

From the baffled look on Jun's face, I can tell that my answer was not what she was expecting. She just sits there, with her mouth agape.

"Uh... I know it must s-sound a bit..."

My words are cut off when Jun starts giggling.

"Whoa. That's a bit... hahahaha. That's not something I ever expected you to say."

"P-Please don't laugh."

Jun makes an apologetic gesture, snickers a bit and then scrapes her throat.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at you. It's just that you're usually not that confident about anything. I may not be the best chess player in the world, but don't you think you're underestimating me just a little bit by saying that playing against me would feel like cheating to you?"

Ugh. That's not what I meant at all. I really could have worded that better.

"It's not l-like that. I mean..."

This may actually not sound any less silly to Jun.

"Ever since we... s-started dating, Hisao's been the only p-person I've played chess with. I quickly started seeing it as... something special between us. It... probably doesn't make sense to you, but..."

Jun quickly shakes her head.

"I think it makes perfect sense, actually. People can bond in all manner of ways, and I personally think that bonding over a game just feels more natural than bonding by getting drunk together or having a long conversation over dinner."

Somehow I feel that Jun's not the most objective person in the world in this regard. Still, it feels good to hear her empathize with me.

"I think bonding is the perfect word to describe it."

Jun suddenly gives me a playful look.

"So... ah... does that mean your boyfriend is also abstaining from chess?"

"W-What?"

I can barely suppress a cringe at that remark, and even when it becomes clear that Jun wasn't referencing my love life, it still takes me a moment to recollect myself.

"I... uh... don't know... how he feels."

"I'd be surprised if the significance was lost on him. It's not like you two got together only recently. Although..."

Jun's expression suddenly turns serious. The way she averts her eyes gives me the impression she's not fond of the idea of bringing up the elephant in the room, but she doesn't like the idea of ignoring it either. Eventually, she gives me an awkward stare.

"Wasn't today an ideal day for him to visit? I was kind of expecting him to drop by. And maybe your friend Lilly too. Even my parents were here briefly today, and they don't come over very often."

I sigh softly. I can't really blame Jun for bringing this up, though I kind of wish she hadn't. On my way back from the orphanage, after I sent my friends a text message to let them know I was safe and sound, Miss Yumi called up each of them and told them the situation in detail. One thing that stood out in my mind was the fact that she made a request to leave the initiative for further interaction up to me.

In theory, this meant I was free to set my own pace in the process of getting back on my feet and getting back in touch with everyone.

In practice, this meant that the process of getting back in touch with everyone has been moving along at snail's pace.

After returning to Yamaku, I started the long process of crawling back from the emotional edge I've been dangling over for months. When Miss Yumi mentioned she was planning to step up the therapy sessions, she wasn't exaggerating. During the first month, each day contained of either a session in the morning and one in the afternoon or one session spanning two hours or more. Either would usually leave me feeling drained. Miss Yumi pulling some strings allowed me to help the school librarian sort and categorize books from time to time, but most of the time the rest of the day would be spent studying in either my room or the library for the tests I was meant to take along with the 3rd years and the occasional supplementary lessons in the late afternoon or early evening.

I'd occasionally join Jun in her room for a bit of company or to watch her play games on her old laptop. Jun occasionally exchanges e-mail with Naomi, and she usually lets me in on how our mutual friend is doing. I'm pretty sure that in return, she's also keeping Naomi updated on how I'm faring, though I'm not too bothered by that.

Aside from that, most of my evenings are simply spent in my room, and it is during those times that I feel Hisao's and Lilly's absence the most. About a month after returning to Yamaku, I finally managed to work up the courage to get back in touch with them, using e-mail to interact with Hisao while exchanging letters in Braille with Lilly. The initial letters I sent made no mention of my sudden 'escape' from Yamaku on graduation day, and the letters I received in response avoided bringing it up as well, so in a way that was a relief. But I still can't shake the feeling that, as pleasant as our correspondence is, there's also something missing. It sometimes feels as if we're just going through the motions.

Miss Yumi likes to frequently remind me that in order to really pick things up where we left off, all I'd need to do is send them a little message telling them that I'd like to visit them or that I'd like them to visit me.

If only things were that simple.

Where exactly is 'where we left off'?

Is it that evening before the ceremony, when I listened in on Hisao and Lilly trying to figure out how to deal with my housing problem?

That was actually a horrible place to pick things up.

Or is 'where we left off' the time before both that open house day and my big relapse? Back when my anxieties seemed mostly under control, my self-esteem was higher than it had been in a decade and I was cautiously optimistic about the future?

My assignment today to mingle with the festival crowd wouldn't have given me nearly as much trouble eight months ago when, emotionally, I was in a better place. If, during that time, I was at my peak, I haven't gotten back there yet.

Miss Yumi argued that Hisao and Lilly weren't worrying over me out of pity, but because they too wanted the good times from the past to come back. I think I have enough faith in them to believe that. I didn't back when I was at my lowest point and even though I've since made a solemn promise to myself never to treat my friends that way again, I still feel really guilty about that.

But will I ever get back there? Or were those carefree times simply the result of me being ignorant and oblivious and too used to life inside the comforting bubble that is this school?

I really don't know.

Miss Yumi praised me for reestablishing contact with my friends, but in a way it has also made things more complicated. Exchanging mails and letters has felt relatively safe. My friends can't hear my stammering, there are no uncomfortable pauses, and since I can take my time to choose my words, I'm probably coming across as a lot less awkward and a lot more confident.

The magic words being: 'coming across', unfortunately. In reality, as I've been reminded once more today, my issues haven't really gone anywhere. I'm no longer as much of a nervous wreck as I was around graduation day, but I'm still quick to get nervous and start stuttering, I still have a great deal of difficulty dealing with crowded places, and my self-esteem is still severely lacking. I can only imagine

that if Hisao and Lilly were here right now, they'd be disappointed that I've made so little progress and that our correspondence put me in a better light than I feel I deserved. That's probably the main reason I've been hesitant to take our interaction beyond written correspondence - at least until I can clamber my way back to the place I was until everything came apart. Well, hesitance or not, that's not going to matter much anymore later tonight.

"We're... g-going to be on the p-phone t-tonight."

"I'm happy to hear that..."

Earlier this week, I received a letter from Lilly telling me that, for old times sake, she wanted to spend some time talking with me personally. She also mentioned that she spoke to Hisao this week, that he'd be visiting her today and that if I could be there, even only through the telephone lines, it would make both of them very happy. I talked the matter over with Miss Yumi and managed to send a letter of agreement back to Lilly to let her know that I would call her or she could call me.

We'll be having that phone call later tonight, and I'm really nervous about it.

Jun absentmindedly runs her fingers across her laptop's keyboard and then looks back at me.

"But are you really content with just contact over the phone? I remember the three of you were really close, but I haven't really seen your friends around here since graduation."

"W-We w-were... I mean... W-we are close. It's j-just... complicated."

"Well, I'm not saying it's not possible to keep a friendship going through letters or mail. I've been able to keep in touch with Naomi through mail, but..."

I don't really like where this is going.

"Relationships have to be maintained, don't they? If you don't meet up with your boyfriend, then how are you supposed to go on dates or... uh...?"

I give her a puzzled look, not sure if she means what I think she means, but when Jun shoots a quick, but obvious glance at her bed, I instantly feel every drop of blood in my body rush to my cheeks. The only response I can muster, a flustered 'I'm still working on that', comes out as such a soft mumble that Jun probably didn't even hear it.

What makes it extra uncomfortable is that Jun has a point. Hisao's probably been very busy since graduation with getting settled back in his hometown, starting at an entirely new school and getting to know new people and teachers. But eventually the hecticness of that big change is going to wind down. We might actually be at that point already. And then Hisao might start wondering why he's still in a relationship with me if he's not going to get more than casual correspondance out of it. At this point, we're little more than pen pals.

Then there's the matter of the sex life that Jun painfully reminded me about. I used to have one, and I used to be pretty happy with it. It was one of the ways we strengthened the bond that existed between us and the sense of closeness I'd feel during the afterplay, the sight and sound of the reactions I could draw out of him and the knowledge that I was giving him a good time and turning him on were just as wonderful as the physical pleasure I got out of it. Being able to not just be Hisao's girlfriend, but also his lover gave me a welcome boost to my confidence as well.

Then I had that breakdown and my... performance was completely crippled. I could barely get aroused, I couldn't get into it, and my mind kept wandering off. The experience ended up being such a failure that the sliver of self-esteem I still had left was utterly shattered.

We haven't done it ever since.

During the therapy session where Miss Yumi first gave me a recipe for a small batch of medication, she also handed me a printout with some general information about depression and one thing of note on there was a line about one's sex life being negatively impacted being extremely common. Having an official excuse didn't make me feel like any less of a failure.

I'm still worrying from time to time how things would play out if I were to visit Hisao and stay over at his place.

Would he want to do it?

Probably.

During the better times, like the summer break, I would have welcomed that. But how about now? Would it be like last time? Would I still be... lacking? And how would he react?

Frustrated?

"Hanako? Hey, Hanako."

"S-Sorry, what is it?"

Jun's voice suddenly pulls me back to planet earth. I must have gotten lost in thought.

"I said I was sorry about what I just said. I was probably a bit out of line."

"It's okay. I... t-think you had a good point before... about r-relationships needing to be... maintained."

Jun gives a satisfied nod and grins.

"They do. Neglecting your relationship is disrespectful towards those of us who are single."

With some effort I manage to hide an amused smile of my own. Jun likes to complain about her own status as a single from time to time, but at the same time she doesn't seem to ever make any active efforts to talk to any of the boys around here.

"I'm... trying."

Jun gestures towards her laptop.

"It's difficult for us to imagine, but one generation ago, maintaining a long-distance relationship was very tough and slow-paced. You were completely reliant on snail mail, and that was slower back then too. Telephones weren't very common, and there was no internet either. What horrible times to live in that must have been. Nowadays, you can use e-mail, chat programs or webcams. You can even set up game dates."

That's the first time I've heard that term.

"Game dates?"

"Or whatever it's called. I'm not sure if it even has an official name. It's a date in an online world. You know what Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games are about, don't you? They're like gigantic worlds for people to explore and play alongside other people. There are several examples of people who met in those game worlds and got involved with one another. Some of them actually went on dates inside the game world. I was thinking that maybe you and your boyfriend could try that kind of thing. It's not the same as the real thing, but it's a close second. You could get a 30-day trial for Final Fantasy XI, or you could look up a free online RPG-game. There are quite a few of them on the internet. You could walk around the game world together, try to find a secluded spot and talk. Maybe do a quest or two together and use the cash to buy each other a little gift in one of the stores there. It's a little nerdy, but it's a lot more involved than simply passing mails between each other. You can always borrow my laptop if you need to. It's not the most reliable system, but it's never died on me. Think about it."

I have to admit that that's a pretty creative solution Jun just thought up. I'm not sure how well it would work for us though. Hisao and I are both casual gamers at best, usually only playing video games when we visit an arcade hall together, and I've heard that role playing games can be quite the time sink. Going on a 'game date' might feel odd or unnatural too. Still, I don't want to dismiss Jun's suggestion outright. The idea to not just write back and forth but also do something together is a good one.

"I... I will."

Jun gives a satisfied nod.

"That's good to hear. You can ask him for his opinion when you speak with him tonight."

"Umm... I could... give it a try."

"When exactly is the talk with your friends?"

I look at Jun's alarm clock.

"In less than an hour. I'm heading for a place that's probably not t-too crowded right now."

Jun picks up one of her Wii controllers by its strap and playfully twirls it around.

"Does that mean there's still time for a little game of Mario Kart?"

I consider it, but then decide that there's still one more thing I have to do.

"Thanks, but... Maybe another time."

03

"Please enjoy."

"T-Thank you."

I put the bowl of tea I just received to my lips and take a careful sip. Miss Yumi does the same after giving the waiter who brought us our drinks a 'thank you' of her own. I try to remember the last time I visited the Shanghai. It must have been over half a year ago. They still serve some fine meals and drinks, even with Yuuko no longer working here, but I've nevertheless been reluctant to come here for the same reason I hardly ever have lunch in the 'tea room' anymore. It's a bit depressing without Hisao and Lilly around.

Miss Yumi's giving me an analytical look. I ran into her on my way to the nurses' building, and she asked where I was planning to be this evening. When I mentioned the Shanghai, Miss Yumi drove me here, and we got ourselves a tasty cup of tea.

"You look a little bit wistful, Miss Hanako."

"This was... W-where we hung out last year."

Miss Yumi gives an understanding nod and smiles.

"Then this is probably the perfect place to spend tonight as well."

Maybe.

"Now then, dear. Shall we get down to business?"

She briefly drums on the table with her fingertips and, getting the hint, I take out my phone. I take a deep breath, turn it on and put it on the table. Then I fish the outline of my article out of my bag and hand it over to Miss Yumi, who quickly starts reading it.

Minutes pass without either of us saying anything. Miss Yumi goes back and forth between skimming the sheets of paper in front of her and taking sips of her tea. I doubt it'd really take her that long to read through the whole thing. Maybe she's simply trying to buy some time.

"Well..."

Miss Yumi puts the sheets of paper on top of each other in a neat stack and then hands them back to me.

"From the looks of it, you've seen your first assignment through successfully. Only one more to go."

"Y-Yes."

"How are you feeling right now?"

I'm not really sure. In their correspondence, Hisao and Lilly told me that they're doing well. Does that mean they're doing just fine without me? Or have they been putting on a brave face just like I have? And am I to blame for some of that? I really don't know how to feel. Either way makes me uneasy.

Miss Yumi must have noticed my frown, for she makes an 'ah-ah-ah'-motion with her finger.

"I think I just saw some very bad thoughts sneaking in there, Miss Hanako."

Feeling caught out, I mumble an embarrassed apology. Miss Yumi nods and looks at me with a sheepish expression.

"It still happens from time to time, doesn't it?"

I don't answer, but that's probably okay. It was probably a rhetorical question anyway.

"I think the best advice I can give you is to simply concentrate on the moment. Don't dwell on what happened in the past or what might happen in the future. Just allow yourself to enjoy the present. It's not a good habit to adopt permanently, but I think it'll make a positive difference tonight."

"I'll... try."

"Good."

Miss Yumi beckons the waiter and pays her part of the bill. Then she takes a look at her watch.

"Are you... leaving already?"

"I can't stay for too long. I still have to make my way back to school and find a nice place to watch the fireworks. You don't need my help to hang out with your friends. That's never been the case. We'll wait for five more minutes and if there hasn't been an incoming call by then, we'll just call them ourselves. I'll leave once you've made contact. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to stay around any longer."

"O-Okay."

"You'll have no problems getting back to school on your own, will you?"

"Don't worry."

"Hmmm... And try not to violate curfew too much, okay?"

"Uh... I d-don't think..."

Rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg - rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg

"Aaah!"

My heart immediately performs a somersault as my phone on the table springs to life. Miss Yumi chuckles and gets up.

"That sounds like my cue. And yours. I'll ask the waiter to get you another drink. This one's on me. You go and enjoy yourself."

Rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg - rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg

It's been a long time since I've heard that sound. It still makes me shiver a bit.

Miss Yumi heads for the exit, but before leaving the room she turns around and looks at me.

Rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg - rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg

I take a deep breath, pick up my phone and flip it open. Miss Yumi gives an appreciative nod, waves goodbye and walks out, leaving me... well, not exactly on my own.

For a few seconds, there's near-absolute silence. I think I hear some soft background noise on the other end of the line, but nobody says a thing.

They made the call. The last move was theirs. I suppose it's my turn now. They're waiting for me to make the next move.

Just focus on the moment.

I feel a nagging sense of guilt in the back of my mind, but I'm able to preempt it before it has a chance to take hold and whisper a soft greeting into my phone.

"H-Hello?"

04

"Hello, Hanako."

"Hey there, Hanako."

Before today I wasn't quite sure whether I'd feel happy or uneasy when suddenly faced with my two best friends. Turns out it's a little bit of both. There's more happiness than unease, I think. I really did miss both of them terribly.

"H-Hey."

A brief silence. I think we all grasp the fact that it's been really long since we spent time together like this since I spent most evenings hiding away in my room prior to graduation day. Eventually, Lilly breaks the silence.

"It's really good to talk to you again, Hanako. It's been such a long time since I last heard your voice."

I don't think it was Lilly's intention, but I instantly feel a pang of shame upon hearing her words.

"I'm... s-s-sorry."

"I'm sorry too, Hanako. Maybe... we should leave it at that and not exchange any more apologies for the remainder of the evening?"

"O-Okay."

My attention is briefly drawn away when the waiter approaches my table and refills my drink. I quickly nod in order to acknowledge him, but don't say anything. Nevertheless, Lilly seems to have picked up the sound of his footsteps.

"Hanako, is there somebody with you right now?"

"It's just... the waiter. I'm at the S-Shanghai right now."

"The Shanghai? Just like..."

Hisao doesn't finish his sentence, but Lilly lets out a soft 'hmmm'.

"This week is a very special week, isn't it Hanako?"

"It is. This is... the week we f-first met Hisao. One year ago."

I hear Lilly giggle softly followed by Hisao's groan.

"Okay, okay. You were right. She remembered. No need for the smug expression."

"It's... the week of the festival this week, so it w-was easy for me to remember."

"Well, I definitely would have remembered, too, if there had been festival preparations going on around me. My first week at Yamaku was a pretty memorable one in hindsight. I'm just bad with keeping track of dates."

"Memorable, Hisao?"

"Well, while I was in the hospital, my life was pretty much on hold. It was during that week that things finally started moving forward again. Looking back on the whole thing, it seems like the entire foundation of my ten months at Yamaku was laid that week. I met Mutou who played a pretty big role in getting me to pursue a career in science. I met Shizune and Misha who helped me get settled in class and who saw to it that I always gave the class assignments a 100 percent. I ran into Emi who became my running partner in the mornings. Uh...there was Kenji too. But most importantly, I met you and Hanako who became my first real friends at school and in Hanako's case, more than a friend. Looking back on things, that first week turned out to be pretty important."

"F-For me too."

"Today it's exactly a year ago that you and Hisao first spent time together, isn't it Hanako?"

"Actually, t-today was the first anniversary of our f-first chess match, but... we... already spent s-some time together that day before."

"Yeah, I remember. I didn't really have anything to do after classes ended, and on a whim I decided to visit the library and read a bit. I met you there, and we spent several hours reading together. I think it was during that time that I first got curious about you. I remember you thanking me for spending time with you, which I thought was really sweet. Our time spent together that day was probably what made me seek you out again the next day."

I feel my the blood immediately rush to my cheeks upon hearing Hisao's sweet words, and I'm kind of relieved that he can't see me blush right now, though I also feel a bit sad that we're so far apart right now. What he said made me feel really happy, and if we had been in the same room right now, I could have given him a little kiss in return for his kindness. As things are, I have no way to return his kindness except by saying something sweet in return which I'll probably hopelessly fumble.

"T-That first... afternoon... was nice. And... when you... came to k-keep me company that day after and... we played chess together... that made me r-r-really happy."

I hear Lilly giggle softly.

"It sounds like the seeds that your relationship sprouted from were sown this weekend one year ago."

That's a rather poetic way to describe it, but it's probably true. I remember last year clearly. After watching the fireworks, we headed back to the school grounds and said goodbye to Hisao. Lilly seemed tired, so we called it a day without spending any more time together in her room. But before we parted ways, Lilly said that I sounded like I had a good time today, and I replied - perhaps a little too eagerly - that I did. This was followed by an awkward silence, and before she excused herself and went to her room, Lilly gave me one of those knowing smiles of hers that managed to keep me awake for a large part of the night, because it implied that she noticed the same thing I did.

I hung out with a boy that day. A boy who could see me and still willingly spent time with me.

A boy who liked reading and playing chess, just like I do. What were the odds of that?

A boy who sought me out and talked to me without asking what happened to my face.

A boy who had a very nice smile.

It was that last thought that shocked me more than any of the others, because that one was about me rather than him, and I wasn't sure whether I was comfortable with the implications. It was still a rather mild crush, but a crush nevertheless. And it was on a boy I had known for less than a week and spent barely more than a few hours with. The development scared me a bit. Surely he wouldn't actually like me in that way? Lilly seemed rather fond of him as well, so he'd probably just get together with her. I felt I was on the road to an inevitable heartbreak.

I ended up talking to Lilly about it soon afterwards. If I could get Lilly to admit that she liked Hisao as well, I'd at least know that it was best not to cling to any foolish hopes. Lilly played along at first, mentioning that she thought Hisao was a good person. When I tried digging deeper though, Lilly promptly shut down my offense by assuring me that she wasn't going to become a rival to me. All I could stammer afterwards was: 'How?'

Then she told me that she didn't know for sure until now. While Lilly was going on about how she thought we would be quite well-suited for each other, having several interests as well as maybe some past experiences in common, I was just sitting there feeling stupid. Still, with nothing to lose, I confessed to Lilly about how I felt. She told me not to immediately write myself off, since he did seek out me of all people during the festival.

The next day she invited Hisao to spend the evening with her and me.

I wasn't completely convinced back then that Hisao and Lilly wouldn't grow closer with me falling by the wayside. Why would Hisao put up with my large collection of anxieties when he could have someone like Lilly by his side, who was pretty much the perfect partner? But looking back on the whole thing, Lilly's promise not to become my rival turned out to be completely serious. If she really concluded that Hisao was probably more interested in me than in her, then that first week really did matter a lot more than I thought at first.

Hisao's chuckle interrupts my musings.

"Sown seeds, huh? It makes me wonder sometimes how our lives would have fared if things had gone a little differently. That day I first hung out with Hanako in the library, I was actually wondering if I shouldn't go and take a long walk around the surrounding area... maybe check out the town some more, or give in to the guilt trips Shizune and Misha put me through and help them out with the festival preparations. I actually befriended you two during this weekend last year. If that weekend had gone differently, would we be where we are today?"

"Where we are today?"

"I mean, would we still have become friends? Would Hanako and I still have gotten into a relationship? Would you have stayed in Japan anyway or would you have left? If not, would we still have taken that trip to Scotland? How about all the other events of last year, like my accident, Hanako's first aid course, your father's hospitalization and your parents' return to Japan? If you believe in the butterfly effect and that all things are connected, then a couple of minor events during the weekend last year could have had major consequences."

"Hmmm..."

Lilly sounds half-intrigued and half-amused at Hisao's words.

"What do you think, Hanako?"

"Uh. M-My head is spinning a bit right now."

Hisao laughs cheerfully at my reaction.

"You're probably not the only one. A lot has happened since then, and every time I try to imagine how things would have run their course if I had picked different people to hang out with at that time, I get a headache."

"Perhaps you're simply overthinking things, Hisao. Maybe it's a lot simpler than you think."

"How so?"

"Have you considered the possibility that... your actions were being guided all along?"

"I can't say I'm comfortable with that idea, Lilly. I'm not exactly religious."

"Most people in Japan aren't, but many of them do believe that their actions are guided in some way, be it by God, ancestors' spirits or simply fate."

"Fate, huh? Is that what you believe, Lilly?"

"I do, Hisao. I'd like to believe that you and Hanako were simply meant to meet and become part of each other's life, just like my parents returning to Japan was meant to happen. Even if you hadn't befriended us that weekend, it would have happened at some point afterwards. I would like to believe that because of the person that you are and the person that Hanako is, you two were fated to find each other eventually. Whether it was coincidence, fate or something else isn't all that important."

That's both kind of uplifting and kind of scary. If my relationship was meant to happen, the same is probably true for my breakdown. That's not exactly encouraging.

My thoughts and our conversation are suddenly interrupted by several loud noises coming from outside. Realizing the source of the sound, I quickly pay the waiter and hurry outside. When I make it outside, the sky is already brightly lit up. As I look at the colorful explosions above me, I hear the voices of my friends.

05

"That sound... Hanako, is that...?"

"That's the sound of fireworks, isn't it, Hanako?"

"It... it is."

"That brings back memories."

"Y-Yes."

My thoughts briefly return once more to the evening we shared here last year, back when we watched the light show together with Yuuko.

"Hanako, how is it?"

"It's... just as beautiful as last year. Maybe even more so."

"Hanako, could you describe the sight to us?"

"Umm... okay."

My eyes focus on the bursts of light that are lighting up the sky.

"There's a white one over there that looks a bit like a flower... and uh...there's one a bit farther away that consists of really pretty green and red sparkles... and umm... there's also..."

The fireworks last for several more minutes, and I do my best to let my friends experience the show through my eyes. Eventually the last colorful sparks fade out on their way down, and for a long time neither of us says a word. The silence is strangely comfortable.

"Lilly... Hisao...?"

"Yes, Hanako?"

"T-Thank you... f-for sharing... this moment with me."

"Thank you too, Hanako, for making us part of it."

After everything we went through, we've made a pleasant memory again together. I'm happy I didn't chicken out of this phone call this evening.

"Hanako, how are things going at school? Is this a busy period for you?"

"A bit. I'm trying to take all the tests that the 3rd years take. There are several coming up this month. I'm trying to study as hard as I can."

"Do you have any plans for summer break?"

"N-No. How about you? Are you going to Scotland again?"

"Not this summer. Akira said she expected things to get very busy for her at work during the later part of the summer, and I'd feel like I'd be imposing on her. I'm expecting to spend most of the summer break in Hokkaido. Father and Mother will be renting a vacation home there, near the place where the

previous summer home was. I... don't think they would mind if the three of us spend some time there as well. Would you two consider it?"

"What do you think, Hanako?"

"I..."

I did enjoy the little bit of time we spent in Hokkaido last year. Maybe this year won't be different.

"I... I think I'd like that."

"Then if your parents have no objections, we'd both be glad to accept your offer."

"I'm really happy to hear that, Hisao. I'll talk to my parents about it, but I don't expect any problems."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too."

I hadn't even thought about the summer break before. Lilly's proposal at least gives me something to look forward to. But summer break's still nearly two months away. Hisao will probably be disappointed with me if we go back to just mail contact after tonight. Jun's suggestion springs back to mind momentarily, but it seems like a silly thing to suggest right now. I'm still not even sure how well that'd work for us, since neither of us is really into those kinds of games.

My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by a loud beep from my cell phone.

"Hanako, what was that sound just now?"

I look at my phone's display and cringe.

"It says... My phone's b-battery is running low. I forgot to charge it b-beforehand. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Hanako. You'll probably have to get back to school in order to avoid missing curfew and it might be time for me to go too. It'll still take me some time to get home."

I think I just heard a yawn in his voice.

"Can I get you one last cup of tea, Hisao?"

"Yeah, that'd be great, Lilly. Thanks."

Despite Lilly merely being a good host, her exchange with Hisao still stings me a bit. Lilly invited Hisao to join her and participate in this call, and she's acting as a host. What have I done for Hisao lately?

I wonder if there isn't a way I can improve our relationship with no risk of screwing up.

"Hanako, we'll mail again this week, won't we?"

"I'll be sure to write you, too, Hanako."

"Y-Yes."

I wonder if...

"I was really good talking to you, Hanako."

"Yes. Stay well, okay?"

Another beep from my cell phone. This conversation looks to be over, whether I like it or not.

"I will."

Suddenly, as I briefly think about Jun's suggestion again, I have a sudden moment of clarity and before I can have second thoughts or my friends can hang up, I shout my boyfriend's name.

"HISAO!"

"Huh?"

"Uh... I... I'd like to... play a game of chess with you..."

"Well, uh... it'd be my pleasure, but..."

"A chess site! There are... s-sites where you can register and... p-play others online. W-We could both... create a profile. It... might have a chat function too, so we could talk during the g-game. We c-could... we could..."

I'm not sure how the idea suddenly popped in there, but while Jun was showing me an internet search about chess games, I saw several sites that allowed people to play others online. If we could 'meet up' in this way...

"Hanako..."

"Y-Yes?"

"That's a brilliant idea! We should do that. Do you have a site in mind? Just mail me the address and I'll register an account there. Maybe we can plan a game for tomorrow or the day after."

For a moment I'm too overwhelmed to respond. I didn't expect him to be this enthusiastic. While I'm trying to think of how to react, I hear Lilly chuckle.

"That was an unexpectedly enthusiastic reaction, Hisao. It almost sounded like Hanako offered you a date this week rather than an online game of chess."

"I don't know if the difference is as big as you're making it out to be, Lilly. We'll still get together to talk and more importantly, engage in an activity we both greatly enjoy and that has a strong meaning for both of us. It's a lot like a date, especially since to me, chess has kinda become 'our thing'. I guess that also means I'm a little bit out of practice. I hope I can still give you a decent challenge, Hanako."

"I'm... out of p-practice too, so I..."

Another sharp beep from my phone and then the display goes dark. I listen closely, but it sounds like the connection's lost. I sigh loudly in frustration. What an anticlimactic way to end our talk.

06

Still, something good came out of it. The three of us will be spending some time together in Hokkaido this summer. That still gives me some time to focus on my therapy and build a bit of confidence before hanging out with Hisao and Lilly again. Most importantly, Hisao and I will be going on an online chess date this week. I could use the computer lab or maybe get Jun to lend me her laptop. I can't call her to ask, but maybe I can make it back to the dorms before she goes to bed. I put my phone back in my bag and start walking down the road heading back to Yamaku.

"A chess date..."

I let out an excited giggle.

I start walking faster. A wide smile is starting to form on my face.

Our relationship still has a way to go before it's back to where it was before my breakdown, but tonight I feel I managed to recover a very important part of it.

My steady pace speeds up until it's a stiff little jog. Running uphill is probably not the smartest thing I can do, and I'll probably be out of breath in less than a minute, but right now it feels good to run off the feeling of excitement that just welled up inside me.

Some true progress at last.

I'm really looking forward to tomorrow.

07

Chapter 55 (Hisao)

01

The first time I saw this gate, it felt intimidating and unwelcoming. Now, just over a year later, it almost feels like an old friend whom I haven't seen in a long time.

When I left this place about three months ago, I didn't expect to see it again this soon.

The lush greenery of the school grounds feels soothing. It's not like Kasshoku doesn't have any gardens, but somehow Yamaku's feel neater.

Or maybe that's simply nostalgia talking.

Either way, when I first came here I couldn't help but feel that I stepped into another world. Even though I'm familiar with this school and its surroundings now, coming back here after having spent some time in university and Chiba it once again feels like I've entered an isolated bubble that's cut off from the rest of the world. How strange that I still feel this way, even after all this time.

As I walk down the tree-lined walkway leading from the gate to the main building, a group of students passes by. They don't look familiar, so they're probably 1st years. As we pass one another we exchange a polite greeting, but as I proceed, I feel their eyes on my back and for the first time since my arrival, the feeling of nostalgic comfort fades a bit to make room for the sense of being a stranger here.

Ironically that's how I felt when I first started attending here too.

For a moment I find myself wishing I still had my old school uniform. Being the only teenager around here not wearing green and white probably draws way more attention than I'd welcome right now.

I suppose the best thing I can do is not loiter around here for too long.

I reach the point where the pathway splits off in several directions, and I wonder where to go. Would Hanako be in her room today? I rack my brain in an attempt to determine whether she was already holing herself up in her room around this time last year or not, but can't tell for sure.

I'm not sure if it's a good idea to go straight to the girls' dorms though. I think I'll search the school building first, particularly rooms like the tea room, the library and the newspaper club room. Maybe our old classroom too.

The lobby of the school building is a little busier than the area outside, and my eyes dart left and right, scanning the place for people I know. A group of three female students stands near the entrance, chattering away. A nurse is checking his watch as he's hurrying for the exit. A teacher and a male student are coming down the ramp leading to the first floor. A student with crutches is sitting in a chair near one of the doors reading a study book.

The student in the wheelchair coming down the ramp actually looks familiar and he's even waving at me. The teacher accompanying him is someone I know too, but he's decidedly *not* waving.

Oh crap! How ironic is it that Mutou's once again the first person I run into? Since I've already been discovered, I wave back at my former clubmate and my former homeroom teacher.

"Hi there, president Hisao!"

I roll my eyes at the boy in the wheelchair before returning his greeting.

"That's former president Hisao, president Nobuyuki. But good to see you, too."

"Couldn't stay away from us, huh?"

"Well, I felt I had to check up on you guys from time to time, just to keep my peace of mind."

"Is that really so, Nakai?"

Contrary to Nobuyuki's jovial expression, Mutou's looking a bit sour. I hope he's not jumping to the wrong conclusions about me. I face my mentor and make a respectful bow.

"It's good to see you too, sir. I was just joking a bit. There's another reason I came here."

Nobuyuki snickers.

"You didn't drop out already, did you?"

Mutou's glare tells me that if I dare to say yes, even as a joke, I can safely consider my life over.

"Hey, what do you think of me?"

"Well, it wouldn't make sense for you to visit here if you dropped out. In fact, if that's what happened, it'd be in your best interest to stay as far away from here as possible. So I guess you're still in the running."

My former homeroom teacher's expression becomes just a little less hostile and a little more curious.

"Then what brings you here, Nakai? Is it...?"

I nod.

"I came to see Hanako. It's... uh... her birthday tomorrow."

Mutou doesn't immediately answer. It's obvious that he's at least partially in the loop about Hanako's birthday issues from the past years. Eventually he sighs, probably having decided that this isn't a subject that's appropriate to be discussed at length, particularly in front of Nobuyuki. Not wanting me to get off the hook too easily, he gives me a scolding look.

"You're still skipping class."

"The only major thing for this week is a report for molecular physics that I have to finish together with some classmates. I brought some books from the faculty library with me, and I intend to use the computer lab here tomorrow to type up my part and send it to the rest. I'll be doing an extra large piece of the work to compensate for my absence."

In hindsight this seems to have been a real bargain for my classmates, since they got me to write up the toughest part. At least I was discreet enough not to mention that I was taking my leave of absence in order to visit my girlfriend, or they would probably have dumped the entire project on my shoulders.

"Hmmm..."

A few painful seconds pass, and then suddenly Nobuyuki looks up at our teacher and addresses him.

"Sir, may I make a suggestion? Maybe it'd be a good idea to have the former president drop by the club tomorrow and tell everyone about university and what he's learned there so far. It could be a big boost for morale. He could show us his report too, so we can have a taste of what's going to be expected from us after we graduate. I think everybody would love it. Maybe even be inspired to work as hard as we can to get good marks and do well on the exams."

That's some pretty smooth talking right there. I can see Mutou furrow his brow, and he doesn't say anything for a very long time. Just when things start feeling too awkward, he gives me an exasperated look.

"I hope you can show us something impressive tomorrow, Nakai. I will not be expecting anything less from you."

He makes a small bow in my direction, and after I return it, he walks off in the direction of the staff room. Nobuyuki and I watch him until he rounds the corner of the hallway. When he's finally gone from sight, I turn towards my former clubmate.

"That was a pretty clever suggestion you came up with. I could just see the teacher and the scientist engaged in a tug-of-war game inside Mutou's head."

"And the scientist won out. Lucky for you."

"This was not how I imagined my reunion with him."

"He probably would have welcomed you with open arms if you had only picked a Saturday afternoon to drop by. I think deep down he was happy to see you, but as a teacher he can't bring himself to condone someone playing hooky. As a guy who wants to follow in his footsteps someday, you ought to understand that."

"Yeah, that's a good point."

"I'm kind of surprised he dropped the matter this quickly. Maybe I was wrong and he's simply biding his time and waiting for the right moment."

"What do you mean the right moment?"

Nobuyuki snickers.

"Not only did you turn up here in the middle of a school week, but you also suggested that you're planning to spend the night here, most likely in the girls' dormitory. That's... probably not the smartest thing you've ever done. Maybe Mutou decided that having you kicked off the school grounds here and now would be boring, so he's gonna ask the dormkeeper to check in on your girlfriend's room later this evening and have you kicked off the school grounds wearing nothing but your underwear."

"I see the position of club president hasn't done much to diminish that twisted imagination of yours."

We both laugh at that. I've always gotten along pretty well with Nobuyuki during our science club sessions, and when I graduated I felt like the club was left in good hands. He's a pretty good guy with a real passion for science, especially physical cosmology, but also fun to occasionally exchange down-to-earth banter with.

"Glad to see you too."

I step aside as a group of students passes us on their way to the exit. I exchange a glance with Nobuyuki who smiles sheepishly.

"I think we're kind of blocking the traffic here. Want to stop by the cafeteria? Or am I keeping you from your girlfriend?"

"I guess I can spare a few minutes. I'm not even really sure where she is yet anyway. It's possible she's in her dorm room, but I thought I'd check a few places in the school building first instead of heading straight to the girls' dorms."

We head over to the cafeteria where I pick a quiet corner for us to sit. With my clothes having already drawn a few stares, I'd rather avoid attracting too much attention. I wait until Nobuyuki has maneuvered his wheelchair into the right position before posing the question that's been on my mind since I ran into him today.

"So Nobu... How's the science club doing these days?"

Nobuyuki smiles proudly.

"We've picked up six new members among the 1st years. Courtesy of Takahiro and me campaigning at the start of the school year."

"Hey, nice work! I'm looking forward to meeting them tomorrow."

"That reminds me... Some of them have been having a bit of trouble with the finer points of thermodynamics. I was wondering if you could... hmmmm..."

"I can see where this is going. Isn't it your job to provide the explanations now? You've always gotten good marks for science, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but I'm not as good at explaining the stuff as you are. Help me out, will you? Consider it a counterfavor."

"A counterfavor for what?"

"For not making an anonymous phone call to the dormkeepers' office this evening."

"You're stooping to blackmail now?"

"It's okay. You weren't going to turn us down anyway, were you?"

"Okay then. How many people are going to take part in this miniature tutoring session?"

"Eh... Jurou, Katashi and Minoru. That's three."

"All guys. We're still a men's club, aren't we?"

"Uh, yeah. There are a lot of female students here, but our club still only has male members. I wonder if the female part of the student body simply isn't interested in science."

"I don't think it's that simple. There are probably few female students who like the idea of being the only girl in the club, so they're hesitant about joining, which in turn discourages other girls from joining up as well. It's kind of a vicious circle."

Nobuyuki grins.

"Even though we're a club filled to the brim with strapping guys? I know that the prospect of being the only guy in an all-female club wouldn't put *me* off. Heck, maybe the opposite."

I chuckle.

"Then you'd better stay far away from the faculty I'm studying at right now, because guys are all you ever see there. If you're hoping to get lucky, best try your chances here while you still can. A strapping guy like yourself shouldn't have too much trouble following in my footsteps in that area too."

My successor puts on a mock-grumpy expression.

"Rub it in, why don't you? I know I'm definitely making that phone call tonight."

"Let's drop the phone call stuff, okay? I'm kinda curious. You're in class 3-3 now, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Are you taking classes with Hanako these days?"

"Ikezawa? I don't think she's actually part of any class right now. I think she studies somewhere else during the day. You'd have to ask her."

"Have you seen her today already?"

"Not as far as I can remember. If she's in the building, there's one place I'd check out before all others."

"The library."

"Yep."

"I'll go and have a look then. If she's not there, I can come back here."

"I have some homework to do actually, so I'm afraid I can't stick around. But assuming you're not going to get kicked out of here, I'll see you tomorrow after classes, right? Classroom 3-3."

"Alright, alright."

I say goodbye to Nobuyuki and leave the cafeteria. As I walk through the school's hallways in the direction of the library, I replay the events that just took place in my head. I didn't count on immediately running into Mutou, so I was caught off guard when I suddenly came face to face with him. It's a shame we got off on the wrong foot like this. I hope I'll be able to get back in his good graces tomorrow. It'll be good to see the guys at the club again, though I hope this unexpected club session isn't going to mess up my schedule for tomorrow.

A wave of nostalgia hits me as I open the door to Yamaku's trusty old library and walk inside. The gardens and cafeteria were familiar places, but I never spent hours in there. The same cannot be said about the library. This room holds a lot of memories for me.

A quick glance around tells me this place hasn't changed a bit. The slightly musty smell, the students studying or stealthily sleeping at the tables, the sunlight shining through the windows and the peaceful atmosphere... It's all exactly like it used to be. Well, almost exactly. A teacher and two students are standing near the counter, and I can hear a soft shuffling sound coming from the storage room behind the counter. I play with the thought of hanging around here and saying hello to Yuuko, but then I remember that Yuuko doesn't work here anymore, so I walk past the counter and towards the quiet little corner that Hanako has always used as her own personal place of shelter.

I guess even here, some things do change. To me, Yuuko's always been a part of the library, and yet now she's gone. I wonder if Hanako's once again in her usual place.

As I approach Hanako's corner, I can't help feeling a little apprehensive. Hanako doesn't know I'm here. My visit here is a surprise, and I have no idea how she's going to react when suddenly coming face to face with me. There's a chance she'll be overjoyed, but a little voice in the back of my mind also tells me that there's probably a chance of her either clamping up or even running off. That'd make things awkward in a hurry. It's too late to turn back now though, so I take a deep breath and make my way past the bookcases only to find...

...nothing.

My heart, which has been beating at a significantly faster pace since I entered here, slows down again and a pang of disappointment surfaces. I just got myself riled up for nothing.

I suppose even Hanako isn't in here 24/7. Maybe I should check the tea room or the newspaper club classroom next. Before doing so however, it might be a good idea to talk to the librarian and ask if Hanako's already been here today. She's bound to be a familiar face around here even to a new staff member.

I turn back and head back towards the entrance. My mind is already trying to determine where to go next. The tea room is closer to the library than the place the newspaper club uses to have its meetings, but the chances of Hanako being in the tea room outside of lunch breaks are slim. Maybe it's worth heading to the dormitory straight away. I'm still weighing my options when I suddenly hear a thud coming from the direction of the counter. I turn my head towards the source of the sound and my heart promptly skips several beats.

02

Standing behind the counter, both hands in front of her mouth and eyes wide enough to fall out of their sockets, is my girlfriend. She doesn't move. She doesn't even blink. She just stands there, staring at me in total shock as if I'm a ghost. I open my mouth to greet her, only to find out I'm at an equal loss for words. Just when the moment becomes unbearably uncomfortable, the spell is broken by a sharp cough from the teacher standing at the counter. Hanako's eyes dart from me to the people standing near the counter, and a blush appears on her cheek. I turn to the bystanders and make an apologetic bow.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I'll be on my way."

I quickly turn to Hanako, who still hasn't moved a muscle.

"Uh... I'll be in the usual place, okay?"

My girlfriend manages a nod that almost seems mechanical and, still looking a bit dazed, bends down to pick up the books she just dropped. Meanwhile, I go back to the reading corner where I sit down on one of the beanbags and try to put my thoughts in order.

03

I'm not surprised to have found Hanako here, but finding her behind the librarian's desk was certainly something I didn't see coming. Well, she did say she ran a few errands for the librarian in one of her more detailed e-mails, but this is a lot more than a mere errant.

As much of a surprise as Hanako's apparent job here is to me, it didn't even remotely compare to the shock she must have experienced when suddenly finding me right here at Yamaku. I quietly curse myself for having been just as tongue-tied as Hanako despite the fact that I've had nearly a day to think up something to say.

But what do you say when you're suddenly faced with a girlfriend you haven't seen in months?

Good to see you again?

I've missed you?

I love you?

I'm not sure if I'd be able to say these kinds of things just like that without sounding cheesy.

The fact that there were other people nearby didn't help matters. I would have liked to speak with her without anyone else around, but since there are still students coming and going I don't think that's an option right now. The best thing to do is probably to just wait.

I check my watch. It's nearly five o' clock right now. The library closes at half past 6. That means I've got just over 90 minutes to kill.

Racking my brains over what to say to Hanako might do more harm than good. I don't want to spend one and a half hour getting myself worked up. Maybe it's best if I simply find something else to do. I could make a start on my report. If I can't come up with something that'll impress the guys at the club tomorrow, Mutou's probably going to be grumpy again.

I think I'll do that. It'll allow me to get my mind off things until it's time to speak with Hanako. I get up and head for the scientific literature section. I recall there being a book or two about molecular physics that I borrowed for the science club a few times last year.

Fortunately, the books I was looking for are still where I remembered them to be and after returning to the beanbag, I start thumbing through the pages in search of excerpts I can use. If I'm not allowed to take these books out of the library, I'll just use the photocopier to copy the pages I need.

As the outline of my report slowly starts taking shape, my thoughts occasionally jump back to Hanako.

She's probably trying to figure out how to deal with this sudden reunion, just like I am. I wonder what she's thinking right now.

I wonder if they made Hanako the school librarian as part of her therapy or simply in order to give her something to do other than studying during the day. I'm kind of curious how she's handling it. I remember how there was always a guilty look on Yuuko's face whenever she told me that it was time to leave because the library was closing. I could see Hanako having similar troubles.

Still, it seems fitting - just like it seems fitting that our reunion takes place in the very spot where we first talked to each other. That feels like such a long time ago.

I lose track of time as I work my way through the first book I borrowed, and as I finally finish my list of references I intend to use, I suddenly become aware of how silent the place has become. When I first sat down here, I could hear the occasional sound of footsteps or people speaking in hushed tones. Right now, though, the library is almost eerily quiet. A quick peek at my watch tells me it's a quarter to seven right now; 15 minutes past closing time. Just when I consider getting up and paying a visit to the front desk, I become aware that I'm being watched.

04

I turn my head, and Hanako, who seems to have been standing in the nearby aisle for a while, quickly looks away as my gaze meets hers.

I wonder for how long she's been standing there, just watching me without saying a word.

I can tell that my stare is making Hanako nervous, but I try to block her fidgetting from my mind. It's been over three months since I've last seen her.

Despite the uneasy expression on her face, Hanako's actually looking a lot better than she did the last time I saw her. That evening before graduation day, she looked ill, scrawny and at emotional rock bottom. From the looks of it she's at least eating regularly again. I could be mistaken, but I think her

hair's a little bit longer than it was three months ago. Even though Nobuyuki suggested that she's not officially part of any class, Hanako's still wearing her usual school uniform.

The mutual staring is starting to get a bit much. Seeing that there doesn't seem to be anyone but us left in the library, this awkward situation is probably going to last until one of us says something. Since I took the initiative to come here, I guess it's up to me to make the first move to break the ice.

"Hey, Hanako."

"Hey... H-Hisao."

"Uh... You know, you're...looking a lot better than the last time we saw each other. I mean... You're... uh... looking pretty good."

I cringe upon realizing how stilted that sounded, but I think that for just a split-second I could see a trace of a smile on her face.

"I... ah... wasn't really sure whether coming here at this time was a good idea or not, but... I was hoping you'd at least be happy to see me."

"I... I... I'm h-happy t-to see you."

"..."

"..."

This ice proves tougher to break than I thought. It's a little jarring how awkward our interaction is right now. It wasn't this bad while we were exchanging e-mails or smalltalk through the chess site's message channel. Then again, Hanako probably realized this, and that's why she's been limiting our interaction to more indirect ways of communication until now.

Well, there was that phone call on the evening of the festival, but back then Lilly was present with her ever-reliable knack for making pleasant and relaxing conversation. I won't be able to rely on her this time.

But then again, maybe making conversation isn't what we need right now. We've had conversations over the internet, but I didn't really have the impression that we started closing the distance between us until we started playing online chess against each other. The fact that Hanako suggested those chess games made me realize that she's also aware of how our relationship works.

I could tell her that I've missed her, and she'll probably stammer a response, but there are other ways of getting that point across and maybe those other ways are worth a try.

"Hanako?"

"Y-Yes?"

I smile at her, doing my best to hide my nervousness, and gently tap my knee with my hand. I feel a bit silly doing this, but judging from the sudden blush on Hanako's cheek, she understood the meaning behind my gesture quite well.

After a short moment of hesitation, she walks up to me, turns and sits sideways on my lap. I wrap one arm around her waist and place my other hand on her leg. For a while, she doesn't react. She just keeps staring at it, seemingly unsure of what to do now. Then she carefully takes my hand in her own and starts caressing it with her own.

Neither of us says a word. My gaze wanders from the sight of her hand stroking mine to the unreadable expression on her face and then back to the hand that's caressing my own. To my surprise, my eyes first focus on her neatly trimmed fingernails before they move to the scarred area on the back. It's a relief that even after a few months of separation, looking past her scars is still a second nature to me.

I let her caress my hand for a little while longer and then gently move it up to my face where I press a little kiss on the back of her hand, right on the spot where her scar tissue ends and her undamaged skin begins. Then I look at her face for a reaction.

This was one of the little gestures we came up with on one of our dates during the summer vacation last year. The time that was more or less the honeymoon stage of our relationship. That seems so long ago now and so many things have happened since then.

But then a look of recognition appears in her eyes and she takes my hand, brings it up to her lips and places a little kiss on it herself.

She remembered. That's a relief.

I pull her a little closer to me until her left side is leaning against me and I think of what to do now.

Maybe the best thing to do is to just keep going.

Think up some other ways to make things more comfortable between us without having to hold a conversation.

I rack my brain trying to remember the little rituals and gestures Hanako and I used to take part in. I know she really used to like playing footsie, but I'm pretty much guaranteed to destroy the moment if I ask her to get off my lap so we can take our shoes off.

Then I suddenly remember something else that especially Hanako enjoyed far more than a person of her age probably should. I bring my hand up to my lips and place a kiss on my fingers. Then I slowly move my fingers in the direction of Hanako's face and very softly touch her cheek with my fingers, as if putting a kiss there. A childish smile appears on Hanako's face as she presses a kiss onto her own fingers and then touches me on the nose.

This 'kissing by proxy' game was something we came up with during our vacation in Scotland last year. We'd often play it while we were in public places that weren't too crowded, trying to see how many 'kisses' we were able to sneak in while avoiding attracting attention.

I respond to Hanako by placing an indirect kiss on her nose as well.

Which results in a touch just underneath my right ear.

Then one just above her eyebrow...

An excited giggle...

One to the side of my neck...

One near the edge of her mouth...

A tender one on my lips.

One on her lips as well.

I eagerly wait for Hanako to pick a new spot for her next semi-kiss, but there's no immediate response. She merely fidgets a bit, her eyes jumping back and forth between me and her hands. Then she gets up and turns towards me. Just when I'm about to get up as well, she takes a step forward, lifts her skirt just a little bit and straddles my lap. My heart instantly skips a few beats. This is one sensation I haven't felt for a very long time.

06

Hanako still doesn't say a word, but she slowly moves her shaking hands towards my face and gently places them on both sides of my head. Her hands are just a little bit sweaty and very warm to the touch. It definitely feels nice.

Eager to reciprocate, I take her face in my hands as well, brushing aside the lock of hair that obscured her right eye until now. A rush of nostalgia hits me as my right hand feels her warm, soft cheek and my left hand feels the leathery roughness of her facial scars.

Noone but Hanako feels like this.

Our faces slowly approach each other, and I close my eyes and open my mouth just a little in anticipation of what's to come. Then I feel a pair of lips gently suckling on my upper lip. Hanako moves her head just a little bit and locks her lips with mine. Unable to wait any longer, I slip my tongue into her mouth, and as soon as my tongue finds hers and almost pounces on it, it's like a switch is thrown in the back of my head, and all the self-restraint I've mustered up to now vanishes in an instant.

My hands, moving on their own, slide down her back and then lock around her waist, pulling her closer.

My tongue dances around hers, sampling the taste and softness.

My lower body has started making jerking motions in response to the grinding movements of her hips. I feel myself slipping off the beanbag just a little and brace my right leg in an attempt to compensate.

My breathing becomes shallow as I struggle to breathe in and out without breaking our feverish kiss.

I want her. Badly.

We both gasp for breath as she breaks our kiss. Then she embraces me and hugs me, causing my face to press tightly against her chest. I can actually hear her heartbeat which sounds just as frantic as mine, and the feeling of her breasts causes my arousal to go through the roof. One of my hands makes its way underneath her blouse and starts stroking her back.

As she briefly lets go, I look up at her and smile sheepishly.

"This... kind of brings back memories, doesn't it?"

She blushes a bit, but nevertheless nods and smiles. Then her lips lock with mine again, and she starts moving once more.

I feel myself slipping off a bit again, but I'm way past the point where I can bring myself to care. Our bodies start moving in unison, old instincts reawakening within both of us.

Until I slip off the beanbag completely, nearly dragging Hanako along with me.

07

"Whoa!"

"Aah!"

Fortunately, I kind of slide off instead of dropping straight on my tailbone. I'm more startled than hurt. Hanako, though, looks at me with eyes as large as saucers.

"I'm okay. I'm not hurt."

I hold out my hand, which Hanako takes and uses to pull me up. When I'm back on my feet we exchange an awkward stare. I may not have been hurt, but the mood we were just in has been killed on the spot. Pity.

"I... uh... guess these beanbags aren't suitable for this kind of thing, huh?"

Hanako doesn't respond. I can't really blame her. It's not like this discussion about beanbags is really gonna go anywhere.

"So uh..."

Now what? Ask her if we can go to her room? That would be kind of bold.

While I'm busy trying to figure out what to say, I notice that Hanako's kind of fidgetting and fumbling as well. The expression on her face is a familiar one. It's her 'I want to say something, but I'm not sure how to say it'-expression.

"Hey Hanako, is everything alright?"

Still no response. Hanako closes her eyes, and I can see a frown on her face as if she's trying hard to make a decision of some kind.

"Hanako?"

Her eyes open, but her gaze remains focussed on her feet.

"H-Hisao...?"

"Yes?"

"Ummm..."

She falls silent again and starts to nervously play with her hair.

"You know you can tell me anything, don't you?"

She nods, but still seems to be struggling to say something. Eventually, she opens her mouth.

"C-C-Can you...?"

"Can you?"

"CANYOUWAITHERELEASE?"

Before I can say 'sure', Hanako has already taken off towards the librarian's desk. I wonder what that was about. I scratch my head, shrug and sit down on the beanbag again.

That sure felt familiar just now.

But so did many other things.

Her sitting on my lap. Us holding hands. The kissing-by-proxy game. They were all familiar little rituals from the earlier days of our relationship.

Even her straddling me like that, holding me to her chest and moving around on my lap. She did that during our vacation in Scotland in an attempt to distract me. She was kind of tipsy back then and really embarrassed about it afterwards. We both were, in point of fact, and kind of avoided speaking of it afterwards.

And yet, when I brought it up just now, we both smiled. Maybe because at this point, it may still be a little embarrassing, but it's also turned into a pleasant memory. A memory of more carefree times. A memory of how much fun we had together back then and how happy we were.

Maybe that's the key to bridging the gap between us. Maybe we need to remember the good times, draw resolve from them and do what we can to relive them.

Well, that's kind of why I'm here to begin with.

Maybe there's no need to talk at all.

I kind of wonder what Hanako's doing right now. If she wants to leave here and retrieve her handbag, why is it necessary for me to wait here?

Just when I start considering to get up and see what she's up to, I hear footsteps and the next moment she's walking up to me. As I look at her, my eyes grow wide in surprise.

Hanako's standing there, her mouth clamped shut, her eyes aimed at the floor and her face red like a tomato.

She's wearing the hairclip that I gave her on our first date.

And she's holding a blanket in her hands.

A blanket!

My first thought is: 'where did she get this?'

That's kind of an irrelevant question though and it's quickly replaced by a more relevant one.

Here?

Well, assuming Hanako locked this place up already, we'll actually have more privacy here than in the girls' dorm. But still...

Here?

While I'm trying to digest this sudden turn of events, Hanako hasn't moved a single muscle, and if I don't say anything, I could easily imagine her remaining standing here all night.

Here?

On the other hand, is there a more suitable place to reconnect than the very place where we first connected with each other?

Maybe there's no need to talk at all.

As I get up from the beanbag, I realize my legs are a little shaky. While we were making out earlier, going all the way would have felt more natural than it does now. The last time we did it, it ended rather badly. I pray that we won't end up in that kind of situation again.

No point in worrying about that now.

08

When I reach Hanako, I let my forehead rest against hers and look into her eyes for several seconds before giving her a quick peck on the lips. It's another familiar gesture we've used in the past to say something without having to say it out loud. And when I receive a quick peck on the lips in response, I realize Hanako hasn't forgotten either.

Given where we are, we probably can't afford to ruin the mood again, lest we end up chickening out half-way through. Conversation will probably kill the mood. Thinking too much will probably kill the mood. I don't think we'll need to do either. We have our memories.

I take the blanket from Hanako and spread it out on the floor near the beanbag. Then I take off my shoes and socks and sit down on the blanket. It's soft enough to feel comfortable. Hanako follows suit and sits down facing me after taking off her own shoes as well.

Hanako's eyes still aren't aimed at my face. They're aimed somewhat lower. She says nothing, but I nevertheless give her an understanding nod. This has often been one of the first steps in the past. Fighting off the slightly uneasy sensation of Hanako's intense gaze, I take off my vest, followed by my shirt. It feels a bit weird to be doing this again after all this time.

Hanako's eyes are drawn to the scar on my chest as usual, and she tentatively places her right hand on it. This simple ritual of her scars touching mine has always been a powerful bonding mechanism for us both, and a sense of nostalgia hits me as she tenderly starts stroking the spot where the surgeons operated on me all that time ago. Maybe Hanako's feeling the same way as there's a dreamy look in her eyes while her fingers are running up and down the light line on my chest.

We stay like this for quite some time, but just before I can start wondering whether Hanako has lost her desire to go further, she pulls her hand back and turns around. She takes a deep, shuddering breath and she starts to tug at her ribbon. I sit there wordless as she slips off her ribbon and continues to unbutton her blouse, before working the clip on her bra. The process seems slow, but I know better

than to try and hurry it up. If I want this to go well then Hanako needs to be able to set her own pace. I look on as Hanako, hands trembling a bit, unclips her skirt. Finally, she takes her blouse in her hands and draws it off, her bra falling from her shoulders. She sits there in front of me all but bared, save for her stockings and underwear.

I slowly reach out and gently place my hands on her shoulders as she lets go of her blouse. She gasps a little; not in fright, but in simple startlement. Her lips are open, just a little. She lets out a sharp breath as, without thinking, I lean forwards and press my lips to hers.

The kiss only lasts for a fleeting moment before our faces part. The feeling of Hanako's mouth lingers, and her eyes remain locked to mine. I decide to move things forward and unbutton my pants. Hanako's body flinches at the sound of my zipper being pulled down. Maybe it's better if I let her do this part. I lean back a little and raise my hips just a bit, giving Hanako a quick nod. She grimaces just a little, but then reaches out and takes hold of my trousers. I gently move my hips back and feel both my trousers and my boxers sliding down until they're removed completely. I suddenly feel extremely vulnerable and quickly pull my knees up a bit in order to cover up my private parts.

Hanako seems a little uneasy too and looks at a loss on where to look. Nevertheless, she mirrors my gesture, raising her bottom a bit. Saying a silent prayer that the next part isn't going to take longer than it needs to, I reach out and take hold of her stockings. I slowly, but deliberately pull both her stockings and panties down. The first time she and I did it, I wasn't even able to completely remove them, but in the months that followed I got plenty of practice with those stockings, and I'm relieved to see that I've still retained enough of my special touch to take them off without much trouble.

Wanting to move the situation forward quickly, I position myself in front of the beanbag I was reading on earlier and lean against it a bit. Then I open my legs and pat the blanket we're sitting on. I feel extremely embarrassed being in this position and I keep my eyes averted, hoping for Hanako to quickly make the next move. She thankfully gets the cue, and a moment later, she sits down in front of me, drapes her beautiful dark hair over her right shoulder and leans back against me. I wrap my arm around her waist and eagerly pull her closer. The feeling of her back and shoulders leaning against my chest is really nice. I think the hardest part is over now. I can probably go with my instincts from here.

I run my fingers gently across the side of her face, stroking her cheek before giving a loving kiss on it. My hand, as if possessing a mind of its own, starts stroking her shoulder and neck before ending on her left breast. She lets out a sharp breath as I start caressing it, starting with the sensitive underside before moving up, my hand going in ever-shrinking circles around the center, tracing the edges of the areola. I keep this up until she unexpectedly moves her upper body forward. Taking this as my cue, I take her breast in my hand and start kneading and fondling it, tweaking her nipple between my thumb and index finger.

She arches her back a bit and turns her head as far as she can. I notice her eyelids are slightly lowered, and her breathing has become more shallow. I lean forward and manage to embrace her lips with my own. My other hand, which was still stroking her tummy now works its way up until it rests on her right breast before it starts mirroring the movements of my other hand. I kiss Hanako passionately, drawing her sharp breaths into myself as my hands enjoy that wonderful combination of softness and firmness. Despite Hanako's right breast being partially covered by scar tissue, I've always found her breasts to be really beautiful and have always loved fondling them. The fact that Hanako has always enjoyed it as well certainly helped too. I continue kissing her, muffling her occasional moans as her nipples become erect underneath my fingertips. Sensing that she's probably ready for more, I let my left hand wander down until it rests on her upper leg.

Still keeping my right hand focussed on her breasts, my left hand slides further down and starts fondling her inner thighs, switching from her left thigh to her right and then back again. Each time I move my hand from one thigh to the other, I teasingly bring it mere centimeters away from her most intimate place before moving on and each time I do so, Hanako's breath stops for a moment. I keep this

up for several times until eventually Hanako can't take it any longer and while my hand is hovering over her private spot once more, her lower body shoots forward and presses itself against my fingers. Eager to continue, I start making slow, circular rubbing motions with my fingers, just the way she always liked it best. We stay like this for a while, Hanako content to let me pleasure her and me content to listen to the little sounds and sighs my fondling draws out.

Deciding she's ready to go further, I bring my right hand up to her face and stroke her cheek with my index-and middle finger. She gives a barely visible nod and softly kisses the two fingers caressing her face. She shivers in anticipation as I run my hand down her body and briefly finger her with two hands until the fingers of my right hand are wet enough. Then I carefully slip two fingers inside her. She lets out a sharp gasp, and I immediately feel her tighten around my fingers. I give her a reassuring kiss on the cheek and wait until she's used enough to the sensation to relax. Soon, she lets out a long sigh, and the tension in her body slowly starts ebbing away. I push my fingers in a little deeper and then start making beckoning motions with them while letting my other hand wander up and down her body. At first, her entire body tenses up each time my fingers press against her sweet spot, but she soon gets into it and relaxes in my arms.

I realize that this is almost as arousing for me as it is for her. The sound of her rhythmic but shallow breathing, the sight of her naked body pressing against mine, the way her hands are squeezing my upper legs with each motion of my fingers and the sensation of her bottom rubbing and wiggling against my groin. Part of me would like to keep going until she reaches her limit.

Hanako, however, suddenly takes my wrists, gently pulls my hands away and gives a long breath of relief from the intense stimulation she's been experiencing. Her face looks to mine a little, silent, but expectant. I nod my head, sit up a little more and push away the beanbag we've been leaning against. Then I lie down on my back, ready to let Hanako take over from here.

Hanako turns around, gets on her knees and positions herself above me. She takes my erect member in one hand and slowly starts lowering herself, trying to aim the tip just right. The sight of her still shaky legs makes me a little nervous. Hanako must have seen my expression for she lets out a cute little giggle behind her hand, easing the awkwardness a bit. Then she lowers herself further onto me, and a warm sensation envelops my tip before extending all the way to the base.

"Oooh..."

I can't resist a moan when her insides embrace me completely, and I instinctively put both hands on her hips to prevent her from raising herself again. I close my eyes for a moment and relish the sensation.

So tight...

So wet...

So soft...

So warm...

I don't remember being inside Hanako feeling this wonderful. I open my eyes again when I feel something pressing down on my chest. Hanako has put her hands on my chest, on both sides of my scar, in an attempt to steady herself. For the first time since we started this, she's looking directly at me without any discomfort, and I take a long look at her as well.

Her soft and slightly pale skin, colored by a slight blush.

Her beautiful dark and long hair, sticking to her back and sides right now due to her already being covered in sweat.

Her attractive figure and well-shaped breasts, the nipples now erect and blood-engorged.

The scars covering her body that give Hanako her unique look and feel.

Her pretty dark eyes which are half-closed and have a dreamy look about them.

Her smile.

That beautiful smile that sets her apart from everyone else I know.

I love this girl - scars and all.

A tear runs down her cheek as we look at each other. I bring my hand up to her face and tenderly brush it away. Words aren't needed here. The look we're exchanging is all we need.

After tilting her lower body a bit in order to get a better angle, Hanako slowly starts moving her hips, grinding against me in circular motions, slowly and carefully at first, but faster once we've figured out a rhythm. With me lying on my back and Hanako straddling me, I take advantage of the fact that I have my hands free to let them wander all over her body.

Her neck and shoulders...

Her sides...

Her upper legs and buttocks. I can't resist the urge to squeeze them a bit, but Hanako's too much into it to protest or even care.

Finally, her breasts. Due to her scarring, Hanako's right half tends to move differently from her left half during sex and her breasts tend to bounce out of sync as well, but I've always felt that it looked kind of cute. I start stroking them with both hands, and Hanako, gripped by the experience presses her chest against my hands, wiggles her upper body in order to increase the sensation.

"Hah... mmmg... hmm!"

"Aah... mmmmm...nnnng!"

We're both breathing heavily and already past the point where we're even trying to restrain our voices. I doubt there's even a single soul other than us on this floor, and letting the other know how much we're enjoying each other is more important than anything else. Even if somebody were to come in, I doubt we'd even be able to stop anyway. We've come too far already.

Suddenly, Hanako takes my hands off her breasts, lies flat on top of me and takes my head in her hands. I wrap one of my arms around her waist, gently place my other hand on the back of her head and push her head closer to mine. We share a passionate kiss, and I start wiggling my upper body in response to her movements, my breath briefly taken away by the sensation of my nipples rubbing against hers. It feels like every part of my body is now being stimulated by her... my tongue, my upper body, my netherregion... everything.

I can feel our limits approaching rapidly. Our movements are becoming less and less controlled and more and more desperate... instinctual even. I gave up repeating scientific formulas in my head in order to stave off the intense sensation minutes ago. Our breathing is ragged and shallow. My muddled mind can just barely make out the sight of Hanako's face as she squeezes her eyes tightly shut and grits her teeth. Then her entire body starts squirming, forcing my body to do the same. Her mouth opens slightly. I close my eyes, bracing myself for the inevitable. We hang onto each other as we race past

the point of no return together, still trying to prolong the moment for as long as possible. Then Hanako cries out, and her entire body freezes while her insides give me the most powerful squeeze I've ever felt. A wave of pleasure races up my spine as I, too, freeze up and then discharge into Hanako.

Everything around us seems to disappear in haze of white, as if there's nothing and nobody left in the world except Hanako and me, our bodies shaking and convulsing in a climax of shared ecstasy. Finally, after the last aftershock subsedes, the pleasure makes way for a sense of all-encompassing bliss. As my breathing slows down to a normal rate, Hanako slides off of me and puts her scarred hand on my chest. I concentrate on my heartbeat as it slowly returns to its normal pace as well. For one moment I feel a slight abnormality in its rhythm, but the feeling passes as quickly as it came up. I put my hand over Hanako's, look her in the eyes and give a silent nod. A happy smile appears on her face, and she closes her eyes, yet can't prevent a few tears streaming down her cheek.

Starting to feel a little cold, I sit up, pull the nearby beanbag a little closer and lean back against it. When Hanako sits up as well, I motion her to sit sideways on my lap and then wrap the blanket we've been lying on around us, like a wonderfully warm protective cocoon. Our lovemaking has left me feeling drained, and I feel my eyelids getting heavier. Hanako's drenched in sweat, and her unscarred skin is heavily flushed, but she isn't looking as sleepy as I'm feeling right now. Remembering how important this is to her, I hold her close and stroke her face and scalp with my free hand while gently rubbing my feet against hers. In response, I feel her hand stroking my chest and her left cheek brushing against mine. The feeling of sleepiness is getting stronger, and I blink my eyes a few times in an unsuccesful attempt to shake it off. Then I suddenly feel Hanako shift a bit, and a moment later I feel a tender kiss above my eyebrow. My mind eased by Hanako's gesture, I close my eyes as the warmth of the blanket and Hanako's body gently lull me to sleep. For one more moment, my mind registers Hanako's cuddling, and then I sink into a comfortable, dreamless sleep.

09

When I wake up, I notice it's already pretty dark, especially in the corner where I'm sitting against the beanbag. I must have slept for several hours. I let out a yawn and moments later, I hear someone softly whispering my name.

"Hisao?"

"Hanako. When did you wake up?"

"A little while ago. How are you f-feeling?"

"Pretty good, I think. My lower back feels a bit sore though. I guess I'm a little out of practice."

Hanako giggles.

"M-Mine too."

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"Erm... I hope you don't mind me asking, but... How was it?"

I wouldn't blame Hanako for refusing to answer a question like this, seeing how embarrassing it is, but I nevertheless get a reaction; not in the form of a reply, but in the form of a tender little kiss on my lips. It makes me smile and just a little bit proud too.

"I... uh... really enjoyed it too."

That earns me another kiss. I nevertheless feel a little awkward thinking back on the last few hours. Things took a pretty unexpected turn after we were reunited with one another. In a way it felt natural that our first act of intimacy and our first physical union in many months took place at the very spot where we first got to know each other. Our relationship underwent a bit of a rebirth in the very place where it was first born. But now that the adrenaline and endorphins are no longer raging through my system, my mind also reminds me of the implications of what we just did.

We just had sex.

In the school library.

The school's been pretty accommodating to Hanako over the years, but I have little doubt that if they were to find out about this, they wouldn't waste any time expelling her.

"Uh... Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"You remembered to lock the door, right?"

"Yes."

"We'd better not tell anybody else about what we just did. You could get into trouble."

"It'll b-be our shared s-secret."

"Heh, they say that shared secrets strengthen a couple's bond with one another."

My girlfriend giggles.

"Yes."

"Hanako? Where did you get this blanket? I didn't expect to find something like this in a library. And whose is it? We... uh... got it kinda dirty it and the owner may not be happy about that."

"It's okay. It's my spare blanket. I k-keep it in the storage room. I'll w-wash it when I have the chance."

It did kind of look familiar, now that I think about it.

"Why are you keeping a blanket in here?"

"Uh... ever since I... started helping the l-library staff, they've allowed me to... lock up at the end of the d-day and said that if I wanted to, I could use the library to study after closing hours. Ever since, I've often spent my evenings here. But... the heating in the building is automatically turned down after a certain time and it can get a little c-cold here in the evenings, so I use that blanket to k-keep warm."

I chuckle.

"My girlfriend the librarian. It kind of fits you. But why didn't you tell me in our mails?"

"This is... only m-my first week as an actual l-librarian. Before, I was just helping out s-sorting books and learning the ropes. I w-was going to tell you after I g-got settled a bit."

"Oh, okay. Do you often spend your evenings in here?"

"Usually a few days every week."

"You're not sleeping in here too, are you?"

It was just a playful little joke, but Hanako suddenly freezing for a second makes me realize I accidentally hit a nail on the head that I didn't even know was there.

"You're sleeping in here too."

"N-N-Not always!"

"Hahaha. Jeez... You're sleeping in here?"

"N-Not always. Only once or t-twice."

I chuckle. What a weird habit.

"Is that even comfortable?"

"If you... c-curl up on one of the larger beanbags, it's not too bad."

"I'll take your word for it. This is kind of nice too though."

That's an understatement. I hope Hanako's not in a hurry to get back to her dorm room, because the prospect of remaining here for a little longer, wrapped in a comfortable blanket with my girlfriend's warm body pressed against mine is really, really appealing.

"Do you... want to stay like this for a little while longer?"

"I wouldn't mind. Do you?"

"I'd... like to, but aren't you hungry?"

"A little bit, but the cafeteria is probably closed already anyway, so there's no point in hurrying."

"Ummm... Hisao? Can you reach my bag?"

I turn my head to the left and see Hanako's handbag lying near the beanbag we're leaning against. I stretch my arm out as far as I can and manage to pick it up without having to leave the spot we're sitting. With some effort, I fish a lunchbox out of it.

"This is your dinner?"

"Yes. I sometimes bring food along, so I can eat here after closing time. It's not much, but... we can share. I have... uh... rice balls, p-pieces of sashimi and some rolled sushi."

"Sounds tasty."

After some fumbling, I manage to open the lunchbox with a single hand and hold it in front of Hanako, who wiggles an arm out from under the blanket and takes a piece of sashimi.

"Could you say 'aaah'?"

I roll my eyes and sigh.

"This again?"

"P-Please?"

"Alright then. Aaaah."

I open my mouth, and Hanako puts the piece of sashimi inside, quietly giggling to herself. I've always had to roll my eyes at this childish little ritual whenever my girlfriend made me take part in it, but Hanako has always enjoyed it a lot, and I see no reason not to humor her right now.

Neither of us says a word for a long time, not during our quiet shared dinner and not during the time afterwards when we just sit there and enjoy each other's presence. Eventually, I start feeling a little drowsy again, and I yawn slightly.

"Are you sleepy, Hisao?"

"Not overly so, but I attended morning classes at Kasshoku and there was the long train ride too, so all in all it's still been a pretty long day."

"Is it... r-really okay to s-skip classes for my sake?"

"I think it's perfectly fine. I'm actually one of the most diligent pupils in my class. I can afford it. Some folks in my class hardly attend at all. There seems to be an unwritten understanding at university that everybody who's attending there had to work really hard to make it in, and after they graduate they'll once again have to work really hard until the day they retire, so now's their last chance in a long while to hang back a bit. Some take that further than others. I'm still going to do my part for our group project tomorrow, so my absence isn't too big a deal."

Hanako seems to consider this for a moment.

"If you... really say so."

"It's okay, I promise."

"Okay."

"So, do you want to stay here?"

"We... s-shouldn't sleep here. The cleaning ladies are usually here p-pretty early in the morning and if they found you here, that would be b-bad."

"Then maybe we should get dressed now before this starts feeling too comfortable."

"Okay."

I pull the blanket away, causing both of us to shiver a bit and fish a handkerchief out of the pocket of my pants so we can clean ourselves a bit. After dressing ourselves, we leave the school building and set out for the girls' dorms. Just before we reach the entrance, I turn to my girlfriend.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"You... know why I'm here, don't you?"

Hanako averts her eyes and looks a little uncomfortable, but then she nods.

"Yes."

"And it's still okay with you if I stay here tonight?"

"It...is. I...would love... for you to...stay w-with me."

10

Chapter 56 (Hisao)

01

"Mmh..."

As I slowly wake up from my slumber, I wearily open my eyes only to immediately close them again due to the bright light. My eyelids feel heavy as does my head. My body feels like lead.

Did I forget to close the curtains last night?

Something feels very different.

As my mind starts trying to orientate itself, I'm starting to become aware of various things.

I can't feel my right arm. I try to move my fingers, but I'm not sure if they're even responding. Looks like my arm is still asleep for some reason.

I do feel my left arm and my left hand is resting on a soft surface. In fact, something is pressed against my body. Something nice and warm. It's a pleasant feeling.

I don't think I'm wearing my pajamas. Or anything else for that matter.

Something is tickling my nose. There's a faint smell of something... familiar.

I hear the sound of soft breathing nearby and carefully open my eyes a bit. As my eyes gradually get used to the light, I start making out my surroundings.

It only takes me one brief glance at the flowing, dark hair in front of me to realize where I am and who's currently sharing the bed with me.

Hanako.

This is Hanako's dorm room at Yamaku. I came to visit here yesterday. We shared Hanako's leftovers from lunch last night. She told me she wanted me to stay with her. (good thing too since it was too late to return home at that point) Then we snuck into her dorm room and... well...

Let's just say I'm happy that I made the effort to stay in shape over the last few months.

I take a long look at Hanako. She's lying on her back, and I'm lying on my side next to her. My right arm is wrapped around her, and her head's been lying on it which probably explains why it's asleep right now. My left hand is resting on her tummy which gently moves with the rhythm of her breathing. Our legs and feet are tangled up in one another, and my head was resting against hers until a moment ago. It was probably one of her locks of hair that tickled my nose earlier.

I try to move my fingers again, but they still don't seem to be responding. Using my other arm, I eventually manage to pull my right arm free. Hanako stirs for a moment, but doesn't wake up. I take another look at my girlfriend. Hanako looks really peaceful. A lot more peaceful than she usually is when she's awake. She looks really cute too. I hope she'll be at ease too when she wakes up.

It's the 10th of July today. Hanako turns 19 on this day. Since Hanako spent the last couple of her birthdays securely holed up in her room, I had been hoping to preempt the situation rather than risk arriving here on the day itself and only seeing a locked door.

I move my head closer to hers and take a gentle sniff. Hanako's hair always has a rather distinct smell. She probably uses a special shampoo to keep it as vibrant as it is. It smells really nice.

It turns out that Hanako's hair is the only thing that smells nice about us right now though. As I move a bit and start massaging my numb right arm with my left, the romantic mood of the moment is slightly spoiled by the faint smell of perspiration and... other stuff... coming from beneath the blanket. After our lovemaking last night, we didn't want to ruin our moment of closeness so we snuggled up to each other and drifted off to sleep without taking the time to clean up. It felt like the right course of action back then, but I'm feeling kind of sweaty and sticky right now. I could really use a shower...

...which might be a problem right now seeing that I'm currently in the girls' dorm. I don't want to cause a scandal while I'm here.

Guess it'll have to wait.

I suppose I'll just lie here until Hanako wakes up. It's not like I have a lot planned for today.

Then again, I think I have an idea that she might appreciate.

I quietly get out of bed, making an effort not to wake Hanako and start gathering the clothes scattered across the floor. I neatly fold Hanako's clothes over her desk chair and put on my own. I had the foresight to take along an additional set of clothes in my backpack, but I'd better keep yesterday's clothes on until I can wash myself.

I take the room keys from Hanako's desk, unlock the door and exit the room without making a sound. A boy walking through the girls' dormitory this early in the morning will immediately cause people to become suspicious, especially if said boy isn't even wearing Yamaku's school uniform, but it's still fairly early in the morning so with luck most of the students here are either still asleep or simply hanging out in their own room. I hurriedly make my way to the kitchen area and open what I remember to be Hanako's cupboard. She probably did some shopping earlier this week because there are plenty of things inside. I don't want to spend too long here, lest I attract the attention of half the building's residents, but it shouldn't take me too long to cook some miso soup with the stock and miso paste that Hanako has in here. I hurriedly put two pans with water on the stove; one for the miso soup and another for the instant noodles I found among Hanako's things.

While I'm waiting for the water to reach boiling temperature, I find myself repeatedly looking at the doorway. This isn't very relaxing. If the boys' dormitory had been a bit closer I could have gone there to prepare the meal, but walking across part of the campus carrying our meals isn't really feasible either.

After a few minutes, the water in the pans starts to boil and I add the stock, paste and noodles. Only a few minutes more and I'll be able to return to Hanako's room. With a bit of luck she won't have woken up yet.

"Huh?"

My attention is suddenly drawn away from the food when I hear a girl's voice behind me. I turn around and see a sleepy-looking girl still wearing pajamas standing in the doorway. Her long, unkept hair has an extremely light color, giving me the impression that she's an albino, and she has a rather skinny build. I think I vaguely remember her from when I still came here on a daily basis.

"Aren't you in the wrong building?"

I make an apologetic gesture.

"Sorry, I'll be done in a minute or two."

I quickly get back to my breakfast preparations, but when I take a careful glance over my shoulder, I notice the girl's still standing there, looking at me. She's probably either too polite or shy to tell me to hurry up, but I feel like I'm being stared out of the room. Just when I'm about to say something, another girl comes walking in; a familiar girl with a crutch who gives me a friendly wave.

"Oh, hello."

"Hey. Nice to see a familiar face."

The girl who first came in here turns to her fellow-student.

"Do you know him? Why is he occupying our kitchen?"

"He's Hanako's boyfriend. And I guess he's... making breakfast for her?"

"Who's Hanako?"

"The new librarian. She's a friend of mine from the newspaper club."

"Oh."

The first girl shrugs her shoulders.

"I figured I'd be the first person here if I got up a little earlier and I'd have the kitchen all to myself. So much for that. Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"I'm almost done. Sorry for making you wait."

She shrugs again and then takes a seat at the nearby table. The girl with the crutch, whom I recognize as Jun Yamazaki, approaches me.

"Good morning. Please don't mind my classmate. She's not really a morning person."

"It's fine. I know I'm a bit out of place here. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

She nods.

"How does it feel to be here again?"

"A little weird, but also strangely comfortable. I still can't help but feel a little bit like an outsider now though. That's something I didn't expect."

I take a look at her crutch and then at her. She makes a reassuring gesture.

"I had a little misstep a few weeks after graduation day and I'm not extremely mobile yet, but I can manage."

"Okay."

I shift my attention back to our breakfast and finish preparing the meal. I get a tray from the cupboard, pour the soup and noodles into some bowls and put them on the tray. Jun looks at the tray with a slight look of envy in her eyes and sighs.

"I wish I had a boyfriend who did these kinds of sweet things for me."

I give Jun a surprised look, but her classmate at the table rolls her eyes. She's probably heard this before. She gives Jun an annoyed stare.

"Then maybe you should talk to boys more often or spend more time around them instead of sitting behind your computer surfing the web or playing games all the time."

Jun makes a face.

"If I have to give up everything else I enjoy in life, a boyfriend's still going to result in a net loss of happiness. Besides, nobody is attracted to frail grannies without wrinkles anyway. Well, except for my dad..."

"Ewww, gross!"

"Ugh, that's not what I meant. Get your mind out of the gutter before it catches something!"

I don't think I need to be part of this discussion, so I say goodbye to Jun, leave the kitchen and make my way back to Hanako's room. It takes a bit of effort to get the door open without dropping the tray in the process, but I eventually manage to get inside and deliver the meal to its intended recipient, who has already gotten out of bed in the meantime and has put on her nightgown. As I enter the room carrying the tray, Hanako lets out a surprised gasp.

"Oh..."

"Aww, you're already awake."

"Uh... S-sorry?"

"It's okay. It's just that I was hoping I'd be able to treat you to some breakfast in bed."

Hanako doesn't look me in the eyes, but after a few seconds a little smile appears on her face, and she gets back in bed while giving me an expectant look. I grin and sit down on the bed, putting the tray in between us.

"T-Thanks."

"I'm sorry it's such an unexciting meal, but I didn't want to take too long. I kinda felt like an intruder in the dorm's kitchen area."

"It's... probably best if you stay in h-here until classes have started."

"Yeah, since I no longer have a school uniform, I'm probably standing out even more than usual already."

We finish the meal I cooked up without making any further conversation. I'm still trying to read the mood in the room. Hanako's not exactly talkative, though that's hardly out of the ordinary with her. She doesn't seem to be struggling with depression either, so that's definitely a step forward compared to the previous years. But how is she feeling right now?

"Thank you for the meal, Hisao. It tasted really good."

I chuckle.

"It was just a basic soup and noodles breakfast. Still, I'm glad you appreciate it. It was the least I could do to get you off to a good start for the day."

The fact that Hanako averts her eyes as I finish my sentence confirms that she acknowledges that today is no ordinary day.

"Hanako?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Uh... Can I... congratulate you?"

Hanako pauses for a moment to consider this, but then slowly nods her head. I lean forward, we close our eyes and I share a quick but tender kiss with her. When our lips separate, I smile at her.

"Happy 19th birthday, Hanako. I'm really happy I met you."

Hanako looks a little awkward, but there's a brief trace of a smile on her face.

"T-Thank you... Hisao. I'm... r-really happy I met you too."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm... n-not really sure. A little mixed, I think. P-Part of me still wishes this day would be over, but... I'm... happy you're here right now."

I pick up the tray and put it on Hanako's desk. As Hanako gets out of bed again I give her a curious look.

"So... uh... Do you have any plans for today?"

She meekly shakes her head.

"I... h-have to take a shower and then open the library."

"So you're working today?"

Hanako nods slowly.

"It's... an official assignment... from Miss Yumi. I h-have to spend t-this entire day away f-from my room. Just like... during the festival."

"At what time does your shift end today?"

"Usually until... the library closes. But... Miss Morita can probably t-take over after five o' clock."

"Miss Morita?"

"She... works at the s-school administration office, but she sometimes acts as r-replacement for the librarian. She used to... fill in for Yuuko at times too."

"So... five o' clock. I was wondering if you'd be willing to head to town with me afterwards. We can take a little walk in the park, and I'd like to treat you at the Shanghai afterwards. It'll be good to visit that place again after several months."

"O-Okay."

"Then it's a deal. I'm looking forward to it."

"But... that won't be until five o' clock, and it's still morning now. What will you do in the m-meantime?"

"Well, I promised Mutou I'd be at the science club today and tell the other members about life at the science faculty. He'll also be expecting me to show him and the rest at least a semi-finished science report. It's probably the only way I'll be able to earn his forgiveness for not being at school right now."

Hanako giggles, but also looks a bit guilty.

"Good luck."

"I'd like to take a shower and put on some fresh clothes, but it's probably best to do that in the guys' dorm. I'll just wait until classes get started. It's unlikely anybody will even notice me there with school being in session. I think I'll spend most of the day studying and working on my part of the school assignment. Though if there are any chores you want me to do, like shopping or laundry, I'll be happy to do them."

Hanako considers this for a moment but then smiles and shakes her head.

"Thanks, but that's not n-necessary yet."

I take a brief look at the bed.

"I'll be sure to wash the sheets and blanket though. You can't say that's not necessary yet either. We messed up two blankets in one evening."

Hanako instantly turns beet red and doesn't respond. I chuckle. It's not very nice, but I think her awkward fidgetting is surprisingly cute.

"It's a deal then. You should go and take your shower now. You want to be in time to open the library."

Hanako nods and, still blushing a bit, walks out of the door. As I'm left alone in the room I take the opportunity to look around a bit. When we first came here last night, we had other things on our mind, and when I woke up this morning, I was focussed on making breakfast before Hanako woke up. Now that Hanako's away, I find myself taking in the surroundings.

When I first saw the inside of Hanako's room I was shocked at how frighteningly plain it was. I still wouldn't mistake it for anybody else's room, but a few things in here are different now from how I remember them.

The teddy bear that Naomi got Hanako during the writing club's outing is lying under the bed. We put it there to make room for me last night.

The plush puppy that Hanako once gave Lilly is keeping the teddy bear company. Before we left Yamaku on graduation day, Lilly gave the plush dog to Miss Takawa with the request to leave it with Hanako as a sign of support.

It looks like she finally got herself a new alarm clock to replace the one Naomi accidentally broke. For a long time was stuck using her phone's alarm clock function.

I notice two framed certificates on her dresser. One of them is the first aid certificate Hanako earned nearly a year ago. The other one is the prize she and her friends from the writing club won in that contest. I remember she used to keep these in her desk drawer. I wonder if it was her idea to frame these or someone else's. Is she using these as reminders of what she can achieve if she puts her mind to it?

There are some papers on her desk. I briefly skim one and can immediately tell who wrote it by the writing style. It's a letter from Lilly. Hanako must have run Lilly's original letter in braille through the conversion software at the newspaper club and printed it out. Next to the letter is a sheet of paper with text in Hanako's handwriting. Seems like this is her correspondence with Lilly.

The most eyecatching additions to the room are on the shelf near the bed though. One is a photo album that seems to contain several dozens of photos from our vacation in Scotland. The other is a rather large frame containing what seems to be a collage of pictures. As I look closer at the frame, I realize I recognize most of them.

Near one of the corners is the class photo that was taken last year, just a week before we visited Kasshoku. Looking at it makes me feel nostalgic even though it's only been a few months since I last saw everyone at graduation. Hanako looks pretty good in that picture. She has a shy, but sincere smile on her face.

There's also a picture of Hanako, Naomi and Jun that was probably taken after the outing they went on to celebrate their writing prize. Each of the girls is holding a plush doll in their arms that Naomi presumably got from one of the crane games. Hanako is holding the teddy bear that's currently residing under the bed, Naomi has a 'Hello Kitty' doll in her arms and Jun is carrying a cute plush Pikachu. They seem to be laughing in the picture, and Hanako is holding her bear particularly close to her face, so her scars are practically invisible in the photo.

Another one is the picture we took on the plane to London at the start of our vacation.

And one with Hanako, Lilly and me having a picnic on that second day of our trip.

Then there are several photos that were made during our activities in Inverness and our time in my hometown during the summer break.

Finally, I spot a photo of me and my parents that was probably made when Hanako and I dropped by for Christmas and another picture of the Satou family that Hanako must have taken during New Year since I doubt Akira would wear a kimono on any other day of the year.

I'm pleasantly surprised seeing these things. There was always something unsettling about the emptiness of Hanako's room. It was like a jarring confirmation of her words that her life's been on hold for a long time.

After leaving Yamaku, there have been times when I wondered if Hanako's life went back on hold after her breakdown. Was this extra year truly going to make a difference or was it just postponing the inevitable? At times I feared it was the latter, but after today and yesterday I'm not so sure anymore.

02

I give a few polite knocks on the door of the office. After Hanako left the dorms this morning, I went to the guys' dorm to take a quick shower and change my clothes, and then I went through one of my study books while the washing machine was busy cleaning Hanako's sheets. Afterwards, I went to the computer lab, checked for mails from my classmates at Kasshoku and spent a few hours typing up my part of our group assignment. After mailing it to the others, I realized I still had some time before the science club started, so I went to see an old acquaintance with whom I already had a conversation over the phone earlier this week.

"Mister Nakai! So glad you could make it. Please come in."

The old therapist gives me a welcoming smile and gestures for me to come in. I've been here often enough to know the usual ritual by now, so I follow her inside, sit at the table and patiently wait while she pours us some tea and hands me a bowl.

If she does this with every person who visits here, I wouldn't be surprised if she's just as much a caffeine addict as Lilly is.

"I hope I'm not imposing on you."

"Not in the least. As you can see I'm not having any clients over at the moment, so your visit was well-timed."

She smiles at me.

"Your visit was surely a nice surprise to Miss Ikezawa. She must have been quite pleased when you suddenly reunited with her."

She was... in several ways.

"You could say that. Thank you for the blessing the other day. Three months ago you told me it was best if as much initiative as possible was left to Hanako for the sake of her therapy. I thought it'd be best to ask you ahead of time if this was okay or not."

"There's nothing wrong with exceptions from time to time. I don't think she would have asked anyone herself to take a day off to be with her on her birthday after all. I won't go as far as to condone truancy, at least not officially, but if the university doesn't complain, neither will I."

I have the impression that if Mutou puts up with my truancy without further complaints, I'll probably have Miss Takawa to thank for it.

"I also felt that it was a smart idea to test the waters a bit myself since her birthday is a bit of a sensitive issue. Last year and the year before, Hanako spent her birthday hidden away in her room, probably wallowing in depression. I wasn't quite sure how things were going to be this time. I didn't want to run the risk of the same happening this year."

"Hmmm... Did you really think that would have happened?"

"I don't know. Before I came to Yamaku I never met anybody who reacted to a birthday the way Hanako did."

"Do you know why she secluded herself on that day in the past?"

"...Do you?"

Miss Takawa chuckles at this strange stand-off.

"I do."

"She told me once that her birthday was the one day when people would pay attention to her and she wasn't treated like an inconvenience. The sheer contrast of that day and all the other days of the year only served to make her feel worse about herself."

"But you are not merely pretending to care about her, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Then I don't think how she feels about her birthday really applies to you. Miss Ikezawa's faith may waver a bit from time to time, but I don't think she doubts the fact that you sincerely care about her. Because of that, I don't think she would have turned you away today. Please keep that in mind."

"Well, it turns out that she wasn't going to hide in her room regardless since you specifically asked her to go about her daily schedule as usual today. I don't understand why you didn't tell me about this when we spoke on the phone earlier."

Miss Takawa gives a casual shrug.

"Those assignments I give her on occasion to let her take gentle steps outside her comfort zone are part of her therapy and since you asked about her birthday, I didn't feel it was necessary to bring up her therapy with you."

There she goes again with the need-to-know stuff. I get why she's doing it, but it's annoying at times.

"Is Hanako working here as a librarian part of her therapy too?"

Miss Takawa smiles proudly.

"She's still a little awkward right now, but since this is her first week as an actual librarian rather than an assistant, I think things are still going pretty well. The job really suits her, don't you agree?"

Given how jumpy Yuuko was most of the time, Hanako almost seems like the perfect replacement to carry on the tradition at Yamaku of having the school library run by socially awkward people.

"It does seem pretty fitting. Does she get paid for it too?"

"Not directly, but if she can keep this up until the end of the school year, the school is willing to refund a good part of this year's tuition fee. That's one of the perks that come with the job."

"Perks?"

"In addition to that, it also gives her a useful activity to keep busy during the day and she's allowed to use the place to study in the evening. Having a job also tends to boost one's self esteem ever so slightly, which is always welcome with Miss Ikezawa. Most importantly though, it forces her to have casual interaction with other people on a daily basis while still in a relatively controlled environment that is familiar and safe to her and that she knows well. Through this daily contact with other people, we're hoping to restore her faith a little bit."

"Faith?"

"Not in a religious sense, but more in a personal sense. She trusts you and Miss Satou for example, but she's had quite a bit of time to get to know you and it took her a long time before she trusted you enough to open up to you. That's not a viable approach to take with people in general. In daily life you often meet new people with whom you have to deal and you don't get the time to gradually get to know them. In order to deal with them you simply need to have faith that they bear no ill will towards you. If every unknown person around you becomes someone who's potentially thinking bad thoughts about you, it becomes impossible to function in everyday society. Sometimes you just need to put your trust in mankind."

"Hanako's had some pretty rotten experiences with mankind."

"I am aware of that. That's why she needs this daily contact with other people so badly. She needs good or at least neutral experiences to cancel out the bad ones. If she cannot lose or soften this deep-seated distrust of people in general, it'll once again ruin her chances of moving on when it's time to take the entrance exams. What we're trying here is to prevent history from repeating itself."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you've lost me. Did you say that Hanako's distrust of people in general caused her to flunk her entrance exams?"

"I did."

"I thought it was her fear of not being able to function outside Yamaku that contributed to her failing the entrance exams."

"That played an important role as well, but if I had to point out one central issue that must have dominated her thoughts back then, this one was probably it. To her it was a bad situation with no way out."

"The situation being exam season?"

"Yes. I think she really wanted to pass her entrance exam, Mister Nakai. She really, really did. She wanted to attend the same university as you do. She really wanted to continue her relationship with you and see you on a regular basis. She really wanted to become Miss Satou's roommate. She really didn't want Miss Satou to lose her chance of getting her own little place because of her. And yet... Despite the stakes being this high, another part of her felt terrified of succeeding. Probably even terrified enough to flunk that important entrance exam."

"But why?"

"Fear. Fear of others. Surely you understand her position. The stakes were so high and yet... That breakdown she had in the lecture hall... There were many people there. Apparently between 150 and 200. Many of those were high school students, just like herself. Many of those were potentially future classmates. And Miss Ikezawa made a very bad first impression on them that day..."

So that was what was on her mind. Hanako...

"Hanako was afraid that... the people who witnessed her breakdown that day... would remember it and... would start bullying her over it? And you're saying she...threw the exam? On purpose?"

"A term like 'on purpose' is a little too black-and-white for my tastes. And is it that hard to imagine Miss Hanako worrying about history repeating itself?"

"No, but I... Jeez, that must have been eating her up inside. But..."

"Yes?"

"What would the chances be? From what I've experienced so far, the atmosphere at university is very different from middle school and high school. Much more... laid-back. Much less pressure. It's a different environment."

Miss Takawa gives me a smirk that's almost derisive.

"Can you give her a guarantee that she won't get picked on, Mister Nakai? Because I certainly cannot despite the odds probably not being as high as she thinks them to be. People don't stop judging each other the moment they graduate high school. Bullying and exclusion can take place anywhere. Even at university or at the workplace. People get more subtle about things when they grow older, but group dynamics remain roughly the same throughout life."

"That's pretty depressing."

"Which is why Miss Ikezawa cannot afford to think like that. If she does, I'm afraid that the whole thing might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those first few weeks at university will be crucial. That's when groups are made. She cannot afford to lag behind despite having a disadvantage over the rest. You are right about the environment being different. I believe that if she can make it through those crucial few starting weeks and make a few friends, things will be fine for her, and she might graduate from university as a much more confident young woman. If, however, she enters university under the conviction that a repeat of middle school is inevitably waiting for her there, her behavior and

mannerisms will reflect that belief. Her resulting behavior will be almost certainly keep potential friends at arms' length while at the same time attracting the attention of whatever bad apples might be nearby. That's why restoring her faith is so important. We cannot influence with whom she'll be attending university classes, but we can influence partially how those people will come to see her. As a fellow-student who's merely a bit nervous on her first day, just like the rest - or as a barely functioning loner."

"Do you think that can be done?"

"Her anxieties won't be gone at the end of the school year, but with enough effort on her part she'll be able to handle them better. That's what we're aiming for."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I think you've already made a difference by coming here today. Even though I cannot officially condone the practice of skipping classes, I think it's a good thing you're here. Miss Ikezawa's bonds with her friends are at the foundation of her efforts to cope and adjust. Whenever I tell her to have faith in people, I bring up you and the rest of her friends as examples. Do what you can to honor that trust because without it, her resolve to see this year through to the end would quickly crumble."

"...sure."

The old lady chuckles.

"That probably sounded a bit more demanding than I meant it to. I think that if you simply keep up your interaction with her and watch your own health a bit, things'll work out fine."

"Here's hoping. With luck, today will add a little bit to that foundation of hers you spoke of."

03

"Uhuh..."

"Well, there's still some time left, but try not to take too long."

"Huh? Hey, there she is already. 15 minutes ahead of schedule. I have to hang up. I'll talk to you later."

I hang up my phone and wave at Hanako who's approaching the bench where I've been sitting for the last 10 minutes.

"Hey there! You're earlier than I expected."

"Miss Morita s-said she came a little earlier so I could spend a b-bit more time with you."

"That's really nice of her. Shall we go?"

"Okay."

I get up and we head through the school gate and down the road to town.

"It'll be nice to go on this little walk again after all those months."

Hanako nods and then turns to me.

"Who... were you talking to just now?"

"Oh, just one of my classmates. I mailed a piece I wrote for our group assignment their way earlier today and he needed some clarification."

"Were you... able to do you part?"

"Yeah, I used the computers at the computer lab to type up my contribution and to look up stuff I didn't know. I also took some of my science books with me for additional references. I feel that today's been pretty productive."

"And how was the s-science club?"

I smile broadly at the memory.

"It was really good seeing the guys again. They were all happy to see me, and I found out that the club gained six new members while I was gone. We had a really good time together. I felt embarrassed being addressed as 'president' again though."

"I think... it makes sense. You're not just the club's first p-president, but also its f-founder. That m-makes you... a bit special."

"I personally don't think it's too big a deal."

"Did you get to talk about university?"

"Yeah, I did. Mostly about the various subjects and assignments I've had so far. Mutou actually ended up giving me some pretty helpful feedback on my science report, so I might end up getting something out of this too."

"Isn't that... uh... cheating?"

"I don't think it is. Mutou gave me some directions, but he didn't spell things out for me. There's nothing wrong with letting others review your stuff before you submit it. Scientists do that all the time."

Hanako lets out a soft giggle, and I realize that that probably came out wrong.

"Not that I'm calling myself a scientist, mind you."

Hanako merely shakes her head and smiles, obviously still amused by my comment. I decide to change the subject.

"How's the newspaper club, by the way? Are you still involved with it?"

"A b-bit."

"Seeing that you're probably the oldest member of the club right now, certainly you have special status."

Hanako smiles and meekly shakes her head.

"Not... r-really. Most people there h-have been members for a longer time than me."

"You say you're still a bit involved. Do you still go to meetings?"

"Not anymore. I have to work during their meetings. But I still t-try to write at least one piece for each of their issues. It's... a column where I r-recommend one or more books that w-we carry here."

"That sounds like something that's right up your alley. Do you have any recent issues? I'd love to read one."

"In my desk drawer. If you... still have time after we get back, you can r-read them."

"Looking forward to it."

We finally make it to town, and I take a wistful look around. I've lived in the city for most of my life and am used to bustling urban areas, so this town maintains a charming and soothing atmosphere.

"Shall we go?"

"Uh... T-the Shanghai is the other w-way."

I roll my eyes.

"I know that, but if it's okay with you, I'd like to take a little walk through town first. I'm not really hungry yet."

"I don't mind."

We walk through the peaceful streets of town until we see the lush vegetation of the park before us. I give my girlfriend a knowing look.

"I'd like to pick a nice spot somewhere around here and take a little break for a while."

"Okay."

Of course the words 'picking a spot' would suggest looking around, keeping a few options in mind and then choosing the option we like most. In truth there's only one spot in the park that I think is suitable right now, and Hanako's probably been thinking the same as we take a quick look at the other at exactly the same time when a particular bench with a vending machine nearby comes into view. The look we share is enough for both of us.

"It's been decided then."

Hanako lets out a cheerful giggle.

"Yes."

We head over to the bench, I get two cans of apple juice from the nearby vending machine, and we sit down. For a long time neither of us says anything. We both know the significance of this place. This is the place where, nearly one year ago, Hanako and I reached out to each other and became boyfriend and girlfriend.

04

"This place brings back memories, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"I can't believe it's been nearly a year since we got together."

"Y-Yes..."

Hanako doesn't finish her sentence, and when I look at her, I noticed that there's a pained expression on her face.

"Hanako, what's wrong?"

"It's been... nearly a year, but I... haven't been a very good girlfriend for... a large part of it. I feel... good about the first f-few months, b-but afterwards..."

"You don't have to be so hard on yourself. You were going through a rough time."

"My... r-rough time spanned half of our r-relationship. We l-live far away from each other. I w-wasn't really there for you. I ran away from all of you. I... c-couldn't even do... that... with you anymore."

"I think yesterday proved that that last part was a temporary hurdle..."

Hanako's cheek turns a little red at the reminder of yesterday's events.

"...and besides, it was partially my fault as well. The last time we shared a bed and things didn't go well, you offered to... uh... tend to me using alternative means and I immediately shot the offer down because I didn't feel good about the idea of just me having a good time. I didn't even consider that putting our entire love life in the fridge was probably going to make you feel worse about yourself. I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay. I'm... guilty of the same when you were f-forced to take it easy because of your heart."

"So I guess the moral of the story is for both of us to be a bit more flexible in that area."

"Uh... Y-yes."

We both blush a bit at the implication of what we just said.

"You know... In the end, exam season probably would have played out the way it did regardless because I wasn't exactly in peak physical condition myself. In fact, I'm not sure if I would have been able to take anything more intense than a kiss."

"Isn't that... a little bit exaggerated?"

"I never told you or Lilly this, but I had a rather intense heart flutter less than eight hours before the National Center Test. Kenji needed to borrow some notes, he knocked way too loudly, I was concentrating on some last minute cramming and got startled badly, and my heart suddenly went crazy. It was really scary. When Naomi had that seizure the morning after, I realized how reckless I had been. I could have easily been the one who had to drop out early instead of Naomi. After that epileptic fit of hers, I promised myself to take it a little easier and let the nurse in on my condition. Even with

the additional medication he gave me, I remained in a rather volatile state until the entrance exams were over and I started sleeping regularly and working out again."

Hanako looks a bit troubled upon hearing that.

"I... I never knew."

"Sorry. I just didn't want you to worry about me. I figured you already had enough on your mind."

"S-Same here. I... ever since that d-day at K-Kasshoku, I knew that I... probably w-wouldn't be able to make it in. I started having bad dreams. I gave everything I had on the C-Center Test, because I d-didn't want you to worry about me. But after the Center Test, the n-nightmares became more frequent and... a lot worse. I... d-don't think I ever r-really had a chance. I didn't know what to d-do or how to face you and Lilly. I felt I was ruining things f-for all of us. I felt like I was b-becoming a burden to all of you again. I..."

She swallows.

"I... I hated that you h-had to watch me r-regress like that. I wanted to be... the way I was during our v-vacation. I thought... maybe it was better if we... didn't meet until I was... back at that point. So that... when we'd meet... you could b-be proud of me again."

I can't say I'm surprised to hear her say that, but I still let out a sigh.

"Everybody knows how much effort you've been making, Hanako. There was no need to avoid us until some arbitrary point in time. I've really missed you and I think the same is true for Lilly. I just..."

Hanako lets out a sad sigh of her own.

"M-My absence is an even b-bigger burden, r-right? M-Miss Yumi already t-told me that before."

"Yeah, but it's not just that. It's just...what's the point of having friends who are willing to support you when relying on them is just gonna make you feel bad? If you can't bear to be around me when you're not feeling in top shape, doesn't that make me just a fair-weather friend? I really hope we moved past that already."

"I...I'm n-not..."

"I know that you tend to feel like a burden whenever people are having to accomodate you, but don't you get that people are accomodating you by choice? I just wish you could see that when people are going out of their way for you, they're doing it because they want to. At least that's the way it is with me. And it's really frustrating when every effort I'm putting in is just making you feel worse about yourself, because it makes me feel like none of those efforts is even appreciated."

The corners of Hanako's mouth drop down. I don't think she likes hearing this, but this has been something I've been wanting to say for quite some time.

"S-Sorry..."

"I know this is not a switch you can just flip, but...the next time people are going the extra mile for you, instead of feeling like a burden, maybe you could just...feel thankful that they're making those

efforts? Even if you can't immediately repay the favor, you could still make them feel appreciated. That's usually all people want in return. It's all I've ever wanted in return."

Hanako's silent for a very long time. She really seems to be thinking deeply about this. I hope I didn't just ruin our moment. When the silence finally ends, she gives me a guilty look and then nods her head.

"I'll t-try. I p-promise. Okay?"

There's an almost pleading look in her eyes as if she's afraid I won't believe her. This is better than just another reflexive apology. I give a satisfied nod and smile at her.

"Thanks. I'm really happy to hear that."

"Hisao, are you... happy with our relationship? With the way t-things are now?"

"I can't say that our circumstances are ideal right now, but I'm hoping we can find a way to make this work. I don't think we're really the ideal couple for a long-distance relationship, but that's simply the situation as it is right now. I don't like the idea of our relationship being put on hold. Maybe we can both think about what we want out of our relationship and how we can achieve that."

"I... r-really like the fact that we're playing chess again, even if its through an internet site. I... always look forward to our next game."

"Me too. That was definitely a step in the right direction. Maybe that's the key to maintaining the relationship. Finding things to look forward to."

"Like?"

"Dates maybe? We could, like, plan one every three or four weeks or so. You could either come over, or I could come back here. Even if we just end up spending that time in your room or mine, I'd still be looking forward to it."

"Every four weeks..."

"What do you say?"

"I... I think I'd like that."

"Great. Let's give that a try then."

"T-Thank you, Hisao."

"Huh?"

"F-For not g-giving up on me."

I chuckle.

"Hanako, do you remember when I got out of the hospital last time and you made a promise to me?"

"T-To wait for you?"

I nod.

"When you made that promise to me, I made a similar promise to myself. I may not be able to be there for you on a day-to-day basis, but waiting for you is the least thing I can do."

Hanako smiles happily and I feel her hand tenderly brush across mine.

"Ummm... H-Hisao...?"

"Yes?"

"Uh.... Hmmmm..."

Hanako has suddenly started fidgeting nervously. I'm curious about what could make her act like this. I patiently wait until she's worked up the courage to speak up, which she eventually does.

"Hisao, since it's b-been... just over three m-months since you left here, that m-means we're... at l-least three d-dates behind."

"Yeah, we kind of are."

"Uh... I know it's s-selfish of m-me to ask, b-but... w-would you... Tt-take me on a date tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Well, I can probably do some more work in the computer lab, and I made sure to bring my medication along. We can go somewhere after you've closed up the library tomorrow."

"And ummm... m-maybe Saturday afternoon and S-Sunday m-morning too? Then we'll b-be...on schedule."

She's blushing heavily now, but I give her a happy smile to reassure her.

"How could I possibly say no to an offer like that?"

A happy smile now appears on Hanako's face too.

"R-Really?"

"Really. Let's recreate some of the good old times starting tomorrow. Heck, starting today."

"I'm... l-looking forward to it."

"Me too. I'll have to phone my parents this evening and tell them I won't be home until Sunday. I'm sure they'll understand. I might have to avoid Mutou tomorrow though."

I move a little closer to her, gently take her hand in mine, and we share a long, comfortable silence. This went better than I expected. I feel that the rift between us is gradually starting to mend. Eventually, the silence is disrupted by a sound from my cell phone. I take it out, take a look at the screen and put it back in my pocket again.

"Who was that?"

"Just one of my classmates. He can wait a little while longer."

I take my and Hanako's empty can and toss them in the garbage bin near the vending machine.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"I think I'm ready to have a bite to eat. Shall we head for the Shanghai?"

"Okay."

Hanako gets up from the bench, and we casually stroll back to the park entrance and then to the street where the Shanghai is located.

"It'll be good to eat there again. It'll be just like old times. If only Yuuko was still there, things'd be perfect. But since you're the librarian now, I suppose Yuuko finally got into university as well."

"She did. But the new person there isn't too bad either."

As we reach the coffee shop's entrance, I stop for a moment.

"Hanako, could you wait here for a moment? I'll go and see if they have any free tables."

Hanako looks puzzled.

"Uh... It's Thursday, Hisao. They always have free tables at this time of the week."

"I know, just a moment."

I walk in, take a look at our usual spot and then quickly return to Hanako.

"We can sit at our usual table. Shall we?"

Hanako still looks a little baffled by my actions, but still follows along. As we enter, I take Hanako's hand in mine and guide her towards the spot where we always took our seats. As we approach, Hanako looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"H-Hisao, I think there are already people sitting there."

05

"Hey, there she is! Hurray!"

"Aah!"

I feel Hanako's grip tighten in shock as an excited voice suddenly calls out. An excited voice we haven't heard for some time, but is still instantly recognizable. One of the people sitting at the table gets up, and we see a head full of bleached blonde hair pop into view, sporting a million-watt grin.

"Hehehe, surprised to see me?"

Hanako's eyes grow to nearly twice their size, and her right hand flies in front of her mouth to cover up a gasp at the unexpected sight of Naomi. I gently escort her up to the table where the other people sitting there rise to their feet as well.

One of them is Lilly, who has a happy, but also slightly nervous smile on her face.

Standing next to her is Akira, who's looking at Hanako's face with a look of amusement.

Standing a bit unsteadily next to Naomi is Jun, her crutch leaning against a nearby wall. She's looking at Hanako with an expectant expression, trying to determine how the latter is going to react. It's probably something that's on all our minds right now.

I was a bit skeptical when Lilly called me last week and proposed to hold a surprise party for Hanako. Last year when Hanako found out about a party we were planning for her, she had a full-blown panic attack in class. I ended up making a phone call to Miss Takawa to ask her for her opinion. She told me that she thought it was a good idea not to just ignore her birthday. When asked about the possibility of Hanako having another breakdown, Miss Takawa gave the not exactly reassuring answer that if that were to happen, she'd at least know that she had her work cut out for her.

We decided to limit our little group to the handful of people Hanako's been closest to over the last year. That covered Lilly, Akira, Naomi, Jun and myself. We didn't have Jun's contact information, but fortunately we still had Naomi's, who was excited about the idea and sent word to Jun in our place.

I ended up coming to Yamaku a day in advance in order to gauge Hanako's mood and call the whole thing off if necessary. It was also my task to get Hanako to the Shanghai and to keep her occupied while Lilly and Akira dropped by the school by car and picked up Jun. I suppose it was a good thing Hanako and I had several things to talk about until I received Akira's text message that things were ready here.

We considered asking Lilly's parents along, but in the end we decided that the atmosphere would probably be less awkward without them present. They'll be picking up Lilly afterwards though and will probably take the opportunity to congratulate Hanako then, since Akira will be staying at a hotel near the airport tonight before flying back to Scotland tomorrow morning. It turned out that the business delegation she was part of already left the country two days ago, but Akira extended her stay for this party's sake.

There's a birthday cake on the table that I know Lilly spent a lot of time on, and I notice two bags underneath the table that probably contain presents. A lot of effort went into this. All that remains to be seen is how Hanako's going to react. At this point, she doesn't seem to be reacting at all, except nervously shifting a bit under everybody's gaze, her hand still covering her mouth and her eyes still wide. I put my hand on her shoulder in an attempt to reassure her.

"Hanako? Your friends are here to celebrate your birthday with you. Aren't you going to welcome them?"

For a second, Hanako's gaze jumps to me as if suddenly remembering I'm here with her. Then I hear a whisper from behind her hand.

"M-My friends..."

I'm trying to reassure myself by reminding me what Miss Takawa said. All of the people here genuinely care about Hanako. There's no pretending here. But does Hanako feel that way?

"Hanako..."

Having picked up Hanako's response, Lilly takes a step forward and feels out Hanako's shoulders with her hands. She gives her best friend a warm smile and embraces her.

"Happy birthday, Hanako. I'm really happy that you're here with us right now."

Finally, Hanako seems to relax a bit and after a few moments she returns Lilly's embrace. When I look at her, I notice a happy smile on her face.

"L-Lilly... everyone... t-thank... t-thank y-you..."

06

Chapter 57

01

Friday July the 11th

Dear Mister and Mrs Nakai,

I wanted to send a little letter of thanks for the sweet birthday card you wrote to me. Hisao gave it to me yesterday during the party. I really appreciate the thoughtful gesture. I'm sorry for my absence over the last few months. I have no excuse. I promised Hisao yesterday that I'd visit your home during the upcoming summer break. We can catch up then.

I also apologize for having asked your son to stay here a few days longer. It's been a very long time since we've spent some time together, so I hope you understand.

I hope that you're both doing well.

Best regards,

Hanako

Sunday July the 13th

Dear Lilly,

Hisao has just taken the bus to the train station, and I'm finally getting around to writing you.

First of all, thank you so much for the wonderful birthday surprise. I have to admit I felt a bit strange at times, asking myself if this birthday was really different from the way they used to be. I think it helped when I stopped thinking and just tried to have fun. I'm happy we got together like this. So thank you again. I actually feel a bit bad for not having taken the initiative myself to hold a party. Maybe next year?

I'm also really happy that Hisao agreed to stay a little while longer. I have to admit that over the last few months, I've had my worries about the feasibility of our relationship, but this weekend served as a good reminder for both of us why it's worth staying with each other despite the distance. We both enjoyed the last few days a lot, and we made a mutual promise to try and keep our relationship going. It's a real load off my mind. I'm already missing Hisao, but I promised to visit him at his home during the summer break. I think I can hold out for some time.

It was a shame that I still had to work on the first two days, so we only had the evenings to spend together. We went to see a movie last Friday and got off the bus in town rather than near the school gates. It was relaxing to walk the final stretch back to school together.

Saturday evening was dedicated to karaoke. It's been over half a year since I've done that. It felt good to sing again. We spent the night in the city afterwards. We brought some food along the previous evening, so we were able to have breakfast in bed. It's a really nice way to wake up.

We visited a miniature golf course later that day. We fought a hard battle, and I lost, although it was close. Still, we both had a lot of fun. That's what's most important, isn't it?

I know that I promised last Thursday that we'd call each other on occasion from now on, but if it's okay with you, I'd still like to continue our correspondence through paper mail. It allows me to save our interaction and re-read it from time to time.

I'll talk to you later.

Love,

Hanako
To: Akira Satou
Subject: Thank you + messenger account
Date: Tue, 15 Jul 2008 12:32:43

Hi Akira,

I hope you've already recovered a bit from the long trip back to Scotland. I feel a bit bad that you took three days off just to attend my birthday party instead of returning home with the rest of the business delegation last Tuesday.

Nevertheless, it was really good to see you again, so thank you, and I'm also very thankful that you and Lilly picked up Jun at the school gate. I would have hated to think of her having to walk all the way to the Shanghai with that crutch of hers.

Anyway, my instant messenger name is "Flowergirl_89", so feel free to add me. I'll be keeping an eye out for you, though due to the time difference we might not catch each other very often.

Love,

Hanako
From: Jun Yamazaki
Subject: Re: Fwd: Fits_and_Giggles has sent you an invitation
Date: Fri, 18 Jul 2008 16:41:22

Hey Hanako,

I received the same e-mail from Naomi. She's set up a Mixi group for us. You're familiar with Mixi, right? It's a semi-anonymous social network service that allows you to interact with friends who share the same interests. I've already accepted her invitation. I suppose you don't yet have a Mixi profile? Registering can be a bit of a hassle and you need your cell phone number to finish the process. Let me know if you're having trouble.

Greetz,

Jun

P.s.: Did you see her username? Kind of a groaner, isn't it? I should have known there was more where 'The Broken Quills' came from. ;)
To: Jun Yamazaki

Subject: Re: Re: Fwd: Fits_and_Giggles has sent you an invitation
Date: Fri, 18 Jul 2008 16:50:07

Hi Jun,

I'm not really sure. It probably seems paranoid to you, but I really don't like the idea of giving other parties my cell phone number. Or making an online profile about myself. Or having people I don't know request that I become their 'friend'. The word 'friend' has a very specific meaning to me and giving that title to random people with whom I only share an interest or two feels sacrilegious to me.

That probably sounded strange.

So I'm really on the fence on this.

Greetings,

Hanako
From: Jun Yamazaki
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Fwd: Fits_and_Giggles has sent you an invitation
Date: Fri, 18 Jul 2008 17:04:28

Hey Hanako,

I think they merely use the cell phone number to discourage people from making fake accounts and make it easier to ban people if they violate the terms of use. They're not used for anything else. At least, as far as I know. You don't really need to enter any personal info. I noticed that Naomi uses an actual mugshot of herself in her profile, but the majority of Mixi users don't seem to do that. My own profile picture simply features Cubone from Pokémon.

The group Naomi created would only be accessible to the three of us, so you don't have to worry about other people seeing pictures of you. In fact, Mixi discourages the posting of personal photos, because they don't want people using the site as a dating service. Now that I think about it, that might be a problem if we use a Mixi group to interact with Naomi.

About friend requests, whether you get any depends on what you put in your profile. I get several of them each week, probably due to the video game titles in my profile, but I generally deny them. It can be annoying sometimes, but not overly so.

Anyway, if you want to discuss this further, why don't you drop by my room this evening? It's faster than typing.

Greetz,

Jun
To: Naomi Inoue
CC: Jun Yamazaki
Subject: The Broken Quills forum
Date: Sat, 19 Jul 2008 14:22:51

Hi Naomi,

Sorry for not replying sooner. I had a few reservations about registering a Mixi profile and talked them over with Jun last evening. Jun also noted that Mixi has certain user policies regarding the posting of personal information that might clash with what we want. So we came up with an alternative.

Jun is currently setting up a private forum that's hosted on the webspace that's also used by her father's website for his store. (he's okay with this) You need to log in in order to view the contents and only the administrator can create new accounts. So it's only open for the three of us, and we can post anything we want without fear of anybody else seeing it or us violating anyone else's terms of service. I personally think this is a better approach as it adds a more personal touch. When Jun is done, she'll mail us our account info.

Talk to you soon,

Hanako

H1S4O is online.

You have issued a challenge to H1S4O.

H1S4O has accepted your challenge.

- H1S4O: Hey there.
- Flowergirl_89: Hi. :)
- H1S4O: Are you on lunch break right now?
- Flowergirl_89: Yes. We should have enough time for a game. Shall we?
- H1S4O: Okay.

1. e2-e4_____ e7-e5

2. f2-f4_____

- H1S4O: How are things?

2. f2-f4_____ e5xf4

- Flowergirl_89: Lots of studying.

- H1S4O: Exams are just before summer break, aren't they?

- Flowergirl_89: Yes.

3. Nb1-c3_____ Qd8-h4+

4. Ke1-e2_____

- H1S4O: Aren't you exempt from them since you're no longer a third year?

4. Ke1-e2_____ d7-d5

- Flowergirl_89: They're optional for me, but I've decided to take them. I want to make sure I'm keeping up with the rest.

5. Nc3xd5_____ Bc8-g4+

6. Ng1-f3_____ Bf8-d6

7. d2-d4_____ Nb8-c6

8. e4-e5_____ O-O-O

9. e5xd6_____ Rd8xd6

10. c2-c4_____ Bg4xf3+

11. g2xf3_____ Ng8-f6

12. Nd5xf6_____ Nc6xd4+

- H1S4O: Feeling stressed already?

13. Ke2-d3_____ Qh4xf6

14. Bf1-h3+_____ Nd4-e6+

- H1S4O: Uh oh!

- Flowergirl_89: :twisted:

15. Kd3-e2_____ Qf6-e5+

16. Ke2-f2_____ Rd6xd1

- H1S4O: Grrr.

- Flowergirl_89: :)

17. Rh1xd1_____ Qe5-c5+

18. Rf2-g2_____ Qc5xc4

- Flowergirl_89: Not yet, fortunately. It helps that it's material I already studied for last year.

- H1S4O: Lots of luck with it then.

- Flowergirl_89: Thanks. :)

19. Rd1-e1 _____ Qc4-c2+
 20. Kg2-g1 _____ Rh8-d8
 21. Bc1xf4 _____ Qc2xb2
 22. Ra1-c1 _____ Qb2-d4+
 - H1S4O: Do you have any plans for the summer break already?
 - Flowergirl_89: Stay at your place? :)
 - H1S4O: That was just going to be for a week, right? Anything else?
 23. Bf4-e3 _____ Qd4-a4
 24. Re1-e2 _____ Kc8-b8
 25. Bh3xe6 _____ f7xe6
 - Flowergirl_89: Hokkaido, right? Lilly invited us there.
 - H1S4O: Looking forward to it. Too bad Scotland wasn't an option this time.
 - Flowergirl_89: Indeed.
 26. Re2-c2 _____ c7-c6
 27. Kg1-f2 _____ e6-e5
 28. Rc2-e2 _____ Qa4-h4+
 29. Kf2-g2 _____ e5-e4
 30. f3xe4 _____ Qh4xe4+
 31. Kg2-g1 _____ Qe4-g4+
 32. Re2-g2 _____ Rd8-d1+
 33. Rc1xd1 _____ Qg4xd1+
 - H1S4O: Naturally.
 34. Kg1-f2 _____ g7-g6
 35. h2-h4 _____ Kb8-a8
 36. Be3-h6 _____ b7-b5
 37. Kf2-g3 _____
 - Flowergirl_89: By the way, there's an assignment I have to do during summer break.
 - H1S4O: An assignment? For what subject?
 - Flowergirl_89: For Miss Yumi.
 37. Kf2-g3 _____ Ka8-b7
 38. Rg2-d2 _____ Qd1-g1+
 39. Kg3-f3 _____ Qg1-h1+
 - H1S4O: What has she asked you to do this time?
 - Flowergirl_89: Go on a trip by myself.
 40. Kf3-g4 _____ Qh1-e4+
 - H1S4O: You mean going on vacation? All on your own? Isn't that boring?
 - Flowergirl_89: Not really a vacation. More like a day or two, maybe three, that I have to spend visiting places. But I have to visit them on my own.
 41. Bh6-f4 _____ Kb7-b6
 42. Kg4-g3 _____ h7-h5
 - H1S4O: As therapy?
 - Flowergirl_89: To 'push against my boundaries' as she called it.
 43. Bf4-g5 _____ a7-a5
 - H1S4O: Did she mention where you had to go and when?
 - Flowergirl_89: She allowed me to pick the destinations myself, though it had to be some distance from Yamaku. I can't just visit the nearby city.
 44. Kg3-f2 _____ Qe4-f5+
 45. Kf2-g1 _____ Kb6-a6
 46. Rd2-b2 _____ b5-b4
 - H1S4O: Do you have any ideas?
 - Flowergirl_89: Tokyo.
 - H1S4O: That's not too far away from where I live.
 47. Rb2-d2 _____ Ka6-b5
 48. Rd2-b2 _____ c6-c5
 - Flowergirl_89: I was thinking that maybe I could make those trips after our week together. And...still

spend the night at your home? That way I wouldn't have to sleep in a completely strange place.

- H1S4O: Sure, that's not going to be a problem, I think.

- Flowergirl_89: That would be really nice.

49. a2-a3 _____ Qf5-d7

50. a3xb4 _____ Qd7-d4+

51. Rb2-f2 _____

- H1S4O: You could get up early in the morning, take the train to Tokyo and be back in the evening.

- Flowergirl_89: Yes.

- H1S4O: Do you already have an idea what you're going to do in Tokyo?

51. Rb2-f2 _____ a5xb4

52. Bg5-f6 _____ Qd4-g4+

53. Kg1-f1 _____ b4-b3

54. Bf6-e7 _____ Qg4-h3+

- Flowergirl_89: Disneyland.

- H1S4O: You like Disney and Disneyland?

- Flowergirl_89: Yes, I like Disney. But I can't remember Disneyland very well. The only time I've been there was when I was very young.

55. Kf1-g1 _____ Qh3-g3+

56. Kg1-f1 _____ Qg3xf2+

- H1S4O: Oh boy!

57. Kf1xf2 _____ b3-b2

- Flowergirl_89: I'll be back. ;)

58. Be7-g5 _____ b2-b1Q

- Flowergirl_89: Yay.

- H1S4O: Well, at least there's still only one of them.

59. Kf2-e3 _____ Kb5-c4

60. Ke3-f3 _____ Kc4-d3

61. Kf3-f4 _____ c5-c4

- H1S4O: I'm sure you'll have a lot of fun there.

- Flowergirl_89: I'm not sure if I'll have a lot of fun, but at least it's a place that I like. Or used to like. It might make it easier.

62. Kf4-e5 _____ c4-c3

63. Ke5-f6 _____ Qb1-b6+

64. Kf6-f7 _____ Qb6-c6

- H1S4O: Do you have any other plans besides going there?

- Flowergirl_89: I think I'll go to Ueno Park the next day. Perhaps visit the zoo there or the International Library of Children's Literature. Maybe visit a museum or two.

65. Kf7-g7 _____ c3-c2

66. Kg7-h7 _____ Kd3-e2

67. Kh7-h6 _____ Ke2-d1

68. Kh6-g7 _____ Qc6-d6

69. Kg7-h6 _____ c2-c1Q

- H1S4O: Here we go again.

- Flowergirl_89: :)

70. Bg5xc1 _____ Kd1xc1

71. Kh6-g7 _____ Qd6-g3

72. Kg7-f7 _____ Kc1-d2

73. Kf7-g7 _____ Kd2-e3

74. Kg7-f7 _____ Ke3-f4

- H1S4O: I'm not making progress here.

75. Kf7-f6 _____ Qg3-d3

76. Kf6-e6 _____ Kf4-g4

77. Ke6-f6 _____ Kg4xh4

- H1S4O: My king's feeling kinda lonely now.

78. Kf6-e6_____Qd3-c4+

79. Ke6-f6_____g6-g5

- H1S4O: You know, that kind of reminds me of that trip we were supposed to make to Edinburgh last year.

- Flowergirl_89: Haha, you thought so too?

- H1S4O: Yes. Anyway, it sounds like an interesting two days. It's a real shame I won't be allowed to accompany you. Maybe some other time.

80. Kf6-e7_____Kh4-g4

81. Ke7-f6_____h5-h4

82. Kf6-e5_____h4-h3

- Flowergirl_89: Yes. I've also been thinking that we could maybe visit Lilly afterwards. Plan these days in between the stay at your place and the stay at Lilly's.

- H1S4O: Sounds like a good idea.

- Flowergirl_89: Okay.

83. Ke5-f6_____Kg4-f4

84. Kf6-e7_____Qc4-c7+

85. Ke7-e6_____h3-h2

86. Ke6-f6_____h2-h1Q

- H1S4O: Nail, meet coffin. Please make it quick. :cry:

- Flowergirl_89: Awww.

87. Kf6-e6_____Qh1-e4+

88. Ke6-f6_____Qc7-e7#

- H1S4O: You were quite relentless this time. Well done and congratulations. Great game.

- Flowergirl_89: Thanks. :) Great game. Shall we play again?

- H1S4O: Sorry, but I still need to get lunch. Another day, maybe.

- Flowergirl_89: Okay.

- H1S4O: Bye. Miss you. :)

- Flowergirl_89: Aww, me too. :) Bye.

H1S4O has logged off.

02

Sapporo4ever has logged on.

Flowergirl_89: Hi Akira!

Sapporo4ever: Yo Hanako! Didn't expect you to be online.

Flowergirl_89: Huh? I'm often online around this time.

Sapporo4ever: Yeah, when you're at Yamaku. But aren't you, Lilly and Hisao in Hokkaido right now?

Flowergirl_89: We are. But your mother has left her laptop here for us to use and I was just using it to check my mail when you came online. Lilly was actually planning to call you later.

Sapporo4ever: Uh yeah, about that...

Sapporo4ever: She's not gonna be able to reach me for a day or two.

Flowergirl_89: Are you going on a trip?

Sapporo4ever: No, my phone's broken. I'm gonna get a replacement at work the day after tomorrow.

Flowergirl_89: Oh no! What happened?

Sapporo4ever: I left it in one of the pockets of my pants and then forgot about it. Until my washing

machine started making a terrible noise.

Flowergirl_89: :shock:

Sapporo4ever: Yeah. :(

Flowergirl_89: I'll tell Lilly not to try calling you until then.

Sapporo4ever: Thx. So, how are things over there? Having a good time?

Flowergirl_89: Yes, very much. We've mostly spent time taking walks in the surrounding area and shopping in the nearby town, but it's been a very relaxing stay here.

Sapporo4ever: I heard you went to Disneyland in Tokyo last week without anyone else? How was that?

Flowergirl_89: It was nice at times, but also stressful. I think it might have been a lot more enjoyable if I could have made the trip with friends instead of alone. I was completely exhausted after half a day and accidentally fell asleep on the train ride home. Luckily I woke up in time to get off at the right station.

Sapporo4ever: Too crowded for your taste?

Flowergirl_89: Some rides had fastpass systems so you didn't have to wait in line, but not all of them and being in the middle of masses of people felt very suffocating at times, despite my precautions.

Sapporo4ever: Precautions?

Flowergirl_89: I bought a Goofy cap at one of the shops near the entrance to hide my features a bit. It looked a bit silly, but there were many people wearing hats like it, so I didn't really stand out much.

Sapporo4ever: LOL! That must have been one helluva sight. Do you still have it?

Flowergirl_89: Yes.

Sapporo4ever: I'd love to see you wearing it.

Flowergirl_89: I haven't made any photos of myself.

Sapporo4ever: Maybe the next time I drop by here.

Flowergirl_89: Maybe.

Sapporo4ever: So how are things with you and Hisao right now?

Flowergirl_89: I've had a lot of fun last week and this week too. I'm starting to think the two of us will actually be able to make it through this year without our relationship suffering too much.

Sapporo4ever: That's the spirit! :D

Flowergirl_89: Akira?

Sapporo4ever: Yeah?

Flowergirl_89: You have experience with long-distance relationships, right? Do you have any tips for us?

Sapporo4ever: Hehehe, my relationship wasn't exactly a long-distance relationship. It was simply us being apart for some time until he could finish the arrangements and come over. Still, I think I can empathize with your situation a bit.

Flowergirl_89: So, no advice? You do have relationship experience.

Sapporo4ever: Heh, that really doesn't say much. Every relationship is different. What works for me might not work for you. Heck, what works for me is almost guaranteed to not work for you. ;) But, eh...

Sapporo4ever: If I had to give advice, I'd suggest keeping in contact as much as possible, though I hear you two are already playing online chess against each other on a daily basis.

Flowergirl_89: Not every day, but we try to play a game every 2 or 3 days. It's really helped me feel better about our relationship.

Sapporo4ever: Keep that up. Also, try to make plans to go and see each other on a regular basis. Not just to be together, but also to have something to look forward to.

Flowergirl_89: We're trying. At least until exam season comes up again.

Sapporo4ever: I think the most important thing is to stay positive and remind yourself that this separation is a temporary thing. That worked for me. Also, don't forget to make the most of the time you do have together. In fact, why are you even sitting here chatting with me right now??? Shouldn't you be doing lovey-dovey things with your boyfriend instead? ;)

Flowergirl_89: :lol:

Sapporo4ever: Anyway, I don't think you really need advice. Things seem to be going well. And even when school starts again, a little separation from time to time can keep things interesting. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Flowergirl_89: I'll remember that.

Sapporo4ever: Attagirl. You'll give Lilly my regards, won't you?

Flowergirl_89: I could ask her to come here and you could talk.

Sapporo4ever: Naw, no need for you to act as interpreter. Just tell her I said hi and let her know that I'll drop her a call the moment I get a new phone. With some luck my SIM card will have survived the ordeal.

Flowergirl_89: I will.

Sapporo4ever: Talk to you later. :)

Flowergirl_89: Bye. :)

From: Karla Satou

CC: Akira Satou, Hanako Ikezawa, Olivia Ferguson, Amy Taylor, Charlotte McMillan, Rebecca Johnston, Sarah Gray, Andrew Munro, Shizune Hakamichi, Caitlin Graham, Murray Hamilton, Stella Sutherland, list_SMT_Management_UK

Subject: New job

Date: Fri, 5 Sep 2008 19:05:55

Hello everyone,

I wanted to share some exciting news with you all. Many of you have asked me over the months what I've been up to, and I acknowledge that my answers have often been a tad vague. I've spent the initial few months in Japan getting settled in our new home and helping my husband get back on his feet. After Lilly's graduation I've also spent some time helping her get settled in her new apartment where she now lives by herself.

I've been doing my best to keep in touch with everyone even after moving back to Japan. That hasn't always been easy due to being limited to the internet most of the time, but I'm happy to report that my efforts have paid off.

I might have dropped the name Emily White to some of you already. She's a former colleague of mine I've worked with back in the time I was still working for the Herald. We got back in touch with one another through LinkedIn and decided to meet up at a local business conference a little while back.

It turned out that Emily recently received an opportunity to work on a biography for a retired businessman and philanthropist living in Edinburgh and was still looking for a partner to take part of the workload off her hands. Deciding that with things pretty well in order back at home I was ready to explore new ventures I accepted the offer. I'll still be in Japan most of the time with Emily doing most of the resource gathering and me concentrating on putting the piece together. This is quite a step up from the small columns and articles I used to submit when I was still living in Inverness, and I'm very much looking forward to it.

If you're interested in more details, please don't hesitate to contact me or, for my friends in Scotland, arrange a get-together the next time I'm in Inverness.

Yours sincerely,

Karla
H1S4O is online.
You have issued a challenge to H1S4O.

- H1S4O: Hey.
- Flowergirl_89: Hi.
- H1S4O: How are things?
- Flowergirl_89: I'm doing okay. Thanks. And you?
- H1S4O: I'm good too.
- Flowergirl_89: Great.

You have issued a challenge to H1S4O.

- H1S4O: Sorry I haven't clicked the accept button yet, but I'm supposed to meet some classmates in a couple of minutes, so there's not enough time for a quick match.
- Flowergirl_89: :(:(:(
- H1S4O: Oh, come on, not the sad smilies. You know they make me feel horrible.
- Flowergirl_89: Hahaha, okay. I'm always happy to hear from you even if we can't play.
- H1S4O: Hey, Hanako, I was wondering if you're busy this weekend.
- Flowergirl_89: No, I'm not. Do you want to meet up?
- H1S4O: Yeah, it's been a little while. I'd like to come over. You good with that?
- Flowergirl_89: :D :D :D
- H1S4O: Hehehe, okay. Looking forward to it. :D
- Flowergirl_89: Me too. :)
- H1S4O: Great. We'll mail about the exact time.
- H1S4O: Hanako, you still there?
- Flowergirl_89: Uh, Hisao? I just remembered...didn't you say something about a class activity this weekend last week?
- H1S4O: Oh, you remembered that?

- Flowergirl_89: Yes. I thought you were thinking of going.
- H1S4O: It's not an official class activity. Just a little outing organized by a few guys in my workgroup. It's not exactly mandatory.
- Flowergirl_89: But since you don't live on campus, it's a good opportunity to hang out with classmates outside of school hours, isn't it?
- H1S4O: Yeah, but I'm not sure about the activities. So I'm gonna pass.
- Flowergirl_89: What activities?
- H1S4O: Well, one of the guys arranged one of those large semi-professional grills, so we're gonna have a grill party. Everybody who participates has to put in some cash for the food.
- Flowergirl_89: That sounds good.
- H1S4O: Yeah, it's the other activity that worries me. The organizer's a member of the baseball club and arranged for us to use the baseball field on campus. We're supposed to split into two teams and have a baseball match to work up an appetite.
- Flowergirl_89: And you're worried about your health?
- H1S4O: Yeah. I'm probably fit enough to throw balls, but most of the guys are novices at baseball and it's not meant to be a serious match, so we're probably gonna have a couple of collisions, accidental or otherwise. I don't want to risk dying there.
- Flowergirl_89: You're not going to go?
- H1S4O: Indeed.
- Flowergirl_89: So that's why you want to come over?
- H1S4O: Hey, don't be like that. I really do want to see you. But if I just sit at home, I'd probably feel conflicted all day long.
- Flowergirl_89: Hmm.
- H1S4O: I do enjoy our time together.
- Flowergirl_89: Me too. That's not it. I just feel bad that you're going to skip something you might enjoy. I'm not sure I like being part of that.
- H1S4O: You think I should take the risk?
- Flowergirl_89: If it's just the baseball game, can't you say you're not up for it? That you're not in good shape?
- H1S4O: Half the class isn't in peak physical shape. I have several folks with Taro's physique here. If I said I was in bad shape, they wouldn't believe me.
- Flowergirl_89: Then how about sticking to the less risky parts? You could pitch or catch. You could let your teammates do the runs. And you could attend the grill party afterwards.
- H1S4O: Yeah, but I'd still need an explanation.
- Flowergirl_89: They don't know about your heart?
- H1S4O: No. There's never been a real need to tell anyone.
- Flowergirl_89: And now?
- H1S4O: I dunno.
- Flowergirl_89: Maybe you could consider confiding in them?
- H1S4O: I'm not sure.
- Flowergirl_89: If your classmates know and something happens, them knowing what's going on and what to do could save your life.
- H1S4O: I guess so.
- Flowergirl_89: It would be reassuring for me too.
- H1S4O: You really want me to tell them, huh?
- Flowergirl_89: I can't force you.
- H1S4O: You know Lilly had to deal with a lot of awkwardness with her classmates, don't you?
- Flowergirl_89: Whenever I ask her about it, she always brushes it off and changes the subject. I'm not sure if she's embarrassed about it or if she simply doesn't want to scare me.
- H1S4O: I guess I should feel lucky I've actually had the option of not telling people about it until I feel it's the right time, so far...
- Flowergirl_89: Lilly never had that option. I won't either. I'm trying really hard not to think about how it'll be for me.
- H1S4O: Yeah.
- Flowergirl_89: But when I attend university...IF I manage to get in...I'll have to deal with the same.

Probably worse. And I don't think I'll be as graceful as Lilly about it.

- H1S4O: You don't know that yet.
- Flowergirl_89: It might help to remind myself that both you and Lilly went through the same.
- H1S4O: Misery loves company, huh? I guess you want me to come out?
- Flowergirl_89: I don't want to force you into it. But if you were to do it, consider it a favor from you to me. To keep things fair.
- H1S4O: Fair?
- Flowergirl_89: It's not really fair that Lilly and I don't have a choice, but you can just choose not to deal with it if you don't like it.
- H1S4O: Okay, okay. I can see how you see that as unfair.
- H1S4O: Things might be pretty awkward.
- Flowergirl_89: I'll be there for you if you need me.
- H1S4O: Thanks.
- Flowergirl_89: So, this weekend's meeting is off? I would have loved to see you, but it's okay if it's for a good cause.
- H1S4O: Some good cause. I hope I won't be too worked up over this.
- Flowergirl_89: It'll be fine. I'll be there for you too. Just let me know if there's anything I can do.
- H1S4O: Hmm, there might be something.
- Flowergirl_89: What is it?
- H1S4O: Is it okay if I show my classmates your picture?
- Flowergirl_89: MY PICTURE??? :shock: :shock:
- H1S4O: Yeah, I always have one in my wallet.
- Flowergirl_89: Why? And how does this relate to that event with your classmates???
- H1S4O: It doesn't directly. But several of my classmates know that I have a girlfriend and they've been bugging me for a picture for quite some time now.
- Flowergirl_89: I'm not really fond of people looking at my picture.
- H1S4O: I know, which is why I've been blowing them off so far whenever one of them brings it up. But they keep asking about it. Blame it on the fact we're pretty much an all-male faculty. Since you said you wanted to support me...
- Flowergirl_89: By making me as anxious about the upcoming weekend as you are?
- H1S4O: Misery loves company. I don't think it'll be as bad as me having to come clean about my condition. I can't keep brushing them off forever anyway. This might be a good opportunity.
- Flowergirl_89: You're not coming clean about it for me, but for yourself.
- H1S4O: True, though my classmates knowing about it also feels reassuring to you. You said it yourself.
- H1S4O: Hanako? You're still there?
- Flowergirl_89: Which photo is it?
- H1S4O: The one Lilly's mom took of us at the ruins near Loch Ness.
- Flowergirl_89: I don't have my photo album with me right now.
- H1S4O: For the most part your left side is facing the camera. It's actually a very pretty picture and I think you look very good in it.
- Flowergirl_89: You promise to tell them?
- H1S4O: I promise.
- Flowergirl_89: Then...it's okay. Just a little peek.
- H1S4O: I'll treat you the next time we meet up.
- Flowergirl_89: Okay.
- H1S4O: Thanks Hanako. Let's both try not to get too worked up about this.
- Flowergirl_89: Okay.
- H1S4O: I have to get going. We'll have a little match the next time.
- Flowergirl_89: It's a promise.
- H1S4O: Great.
- Flowergirl_89: Hisao?
- H1S4O: Yes?
- Flowergirl_89: Good luck this weekend.
- H1S4O: Thanks. :D
- Flowergirl_89: Kiss? :)

- H1S4O: Kiss. :)
- Flowergirl_89: Haha.
- H1S4O: Bye.
- Flowergirl_89: Bye.
From: Hisao Nakai
Subject: You're cute
Date: Sat, 13 Sep 2008 23:03:55

Hey Hanako,

I'm sure we'll catch each other later, but for now I just wanted to let you know that the verdict was "cute". I actually felt really proud.

Talk to you later.

Love,

Hisao

03

From: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Computer aptitude
Date: Sat, 13 Sep 2008 22:31:14

Dear Hanako,

How have you been doing at Yamaku lately? I trust life as the school's librarian is still treating you well? It seems a job you are most suitable for.

I apologize for bothering you with this matter, but you seemed the most suitable person to ask. From what I have heard from my wife, you are or have been acting as one of the editors of the school's newspaper club, which would indicate you are fairly capable with the use of a computer. May I inquire about your aptitude with the troubleshooting aspect of computers? And how quickly do you pick up new software when you are forced to use it?

Do you believe you would be capable of assisting someone with less experience in the use of a computer if that person were to run into trouble?

I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou
To: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Re: Computer aptitude
Date: Mon, 15 Sep 2008 8:13:37

Dear Mister Satou,

I apologize for not responding sooner. Your mail arrived just after I left the library last Saturday and I failed to check my mail yesterday.

I think I've been doing rather well. I'm slowly getting the hang of the librarian business. I'm not sure if I'm as suitable for it as you imply, but I do know that I enjoy the activities. I received a 3rd quarter catalog from the publisher you work at a few days ago with some hand-written check marks in the content section. I assume you were the person who sent it? Thank you very much. There seem to be some very nice offers.

About your question regarding my aptitude with computers: I'm nowhere near as good with them as my friend Jun who has assembled her own laptop, but I do work with a computer on a daily basis nowadays, and I'm comfortable with its use. If something goes wrong I can usually figure out a way to get things working again without having to contact the system administrator. I'm not exactly a computer expert, but I'd probably be able to offer a bit of help to someone having trouble with his or her own computer. I can't give any guarantees though. Is this about Lilly? I know she doesn't like computers very much.

By the way, congratulations on your wife's new job. She seemed really happy with it. I'll be sure to read her book when it comes out.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: The library received three copies of a certain book last week. It's an autobiography written by a certain Mister Jigoro Hakamichi. Shizune used to be a classmate of mine, so I was curious whether the author is related to her or not. There was a photo on the back, but I certainly couldn't see any family resemblance. Do you know if he's related to Shizune?

From: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Computer aptitude

Date: Mon, 15 Sep 2008 22:02:44

Dear Hanako,

Thank you for your kind words regarding my wife. It is true that this job is something that is right up her alley, and she has been in a very excited mood lately because of it, which makes me quite content as well.

Your guess about the catalog was correct. I was indeed the one who had it sent to Yamaku. The check marks on the first page highlight my personal recommendations. I tried to go for variation. It would be an honor for us to contribute to the worthy cause of having Yamaku's library maintain a varied and high-quality selection of reading material.

Regarding the original question; this is indeed about Lilly. My wife and I have been thinking about arranging a laptop for her in order to assist her with some everyday tasks. We have had talks with SMT's system administrators who have told us that it would be possible to set up a laptop with a microphone and voice recognition software that would allow its user to operate the system almost entirely through voice-activated macros. The accompanying scanner and text-to-speech software would also allow her to read her own incoming mail if necessary. We feel this would benefit her greatly in everyday life.

We suspect that Lilly does not feel quite the same way at this point. We felt a sense of reluctance coming from her when we brought up the subject. The system administrator at SMT let us know that it was possible to connect two computers through the internet and have a person on one end

control the computer on the other. This would allow other people to help her solve whatever issues she'd run into while using her laptop. Obviously she can rely on SMT's system administrators in case of severe problems like viruses, but for more minor issues it would be good if there were some people closer to her she could approach for assistance. While my wife and I can help her if needed, we thought she may be less reluctant to call on you for assistance in case of problems. You are, of course, under no obligation to go along with this.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: Three separate copies for a school housing about three hundred pupils is about one copy more than I would suggest a library like Yamaku's carry for our best-selling titles. Either the man has a warped vision of the quality of the book or the supply exceeds the demand to such a degree that he is taking drastic steps to get rid of whatever copies he can.

About your question: part of me would like to tell you that the figure in the photo on the back is just the publishing company's rather silly mascot, but I will not insult your intelligence with such a claim. The answer to your question is an affirmative one. The man you spoke of is my brother-in-law and Shizune's father. Please forgive me my rather inappropriate tone. The man and I have not been able to get along very well. I will not stop you from reading it if you are curious. In fact, I imagine I piqued your curiosity, and a good librarian should be as well-read as possible.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Computer aptitude

Date: Tue, 16 Sep 2008 19:38:02

Dear Mister Satou,

I'll be allowed to order another batch of books in three weeks. I'll be sure to keep your recommendations in mind. Thank you again for the catalog and the suggestions. I'll do my best to keep up the good fight for the worthy cause you mentioned earlier. 😊

About Lilly, I'm not surprised she's reluctant. She's not very good at handling computers and as a result isn't very comfortable with their use. I wouldn't at all mind helping her get better at them, assuming it's also what she wants. I wouldn't be very comfortable going along with something that Lilly's doesn't fully support.

Lilly invited me over to her apartment for the upcoming Sunday. Maybe we'll get to talk about it.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I'm sorry if I opened up old wounds with my question. That wasn't my intention. I must admit that I am rather curious now, although I also feel a bit reluctant since I feel I'd be prying into the private life of one of my former classmates. Maybe I'll give it a try this weekend, if for no other reason than to be a good librarian. 😊

From: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Computer aptitude

Date: Wed, 17 Sep 2008 22:48:42

Dear Hanako,

That is good to hear. If you would like a copy of any of our titles for previewing purposes, please do not hesitate to let me know. I could leave some of them at Lilly's place when my wife and I drop by next Saturday.

I am very grateful for your offer to help regarding the issue of Lilly learning to use a laptop. I think it goes without saying that it would serve little purpose to take part in something that does not involve Lilly's full cooperation, but learning the basics of computer use is also something that Lilly wants, even if she herself does not know it yet. It may involve some adaption on her side at first, but it is sometimes necessary to endure some short-term hardships in order to make a positive difference in the long run, and the long run is what is important here.

Lilly has stated a desire to be independent, but technological progress will go on whether it is convenient for her or not. If she cannot adapt to changing times, her independence will be a mere temporary thing. She also wants to be an English teacher, but it is unlikely that next generation's school children will take their teacher seriously if that teacher gets uncomfortable when anything more technologically advanced than a typewriter is brought up. Expecting her to become an expert would not be reasonable, but she should know the basics. Can you imagine life without a phone? We might be in a similar position regarding a computer in less than a decade. With that in mind, one could argue that Lilly indirectly desires to keep up with the times as well. Anything else would be a contradiction.

My wife and I will be sure to bring the subject up this weekend. Perhaps she will talk to you about it when you visit. Your reassurance might help.

Thank you once again.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: Do not worry about old wounds. Your question was not unreasonable. If you wish to form your own opinion there is no need to be afraid of many 'spoilers'. If you do decide to read it, do not be afraid to share your opinion of the piece.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Computer aptitude

Date: Thu, 18 Sep 2008 7:57:26

Dear Mister Satou,

You make some good arguments and I can't really think of any way to refute them. Let's hope Lilly feels the same way about things. If she does, I'll do my best to help her. If she brings it up next Sunday, I'll be sure to tell her.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I think I'm going to give the book a try. It gives me something to do during the train ride. I'll let you know my impressions.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Computers continued

Date: Mon, 22 Sep 2008 7:20:52

Dear Mister Satou,

Lilly and I had a talk about the laptop issue yesterday, and she has decided to give it a try, meaning I'll do whatever I can to help her out. Please let me know what I can do.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I've read the book we discussed earlier during my trip to and from Lilly's apartment. I'm still not completely sure what to think about it. I started reading the book with the expectation of getting a little glimpse into Shizune's family life, but the book focusses almost completely on the author's career, and his family is barely brought up at all. That disappointed me a little bit. The book feels... a bit odd. There's something... over the top about the person it's about. I can't really explain it very well. When I first saw the picture on the back, I thought he worked in the business of manufacturing katanas instead of consulting. After finishing, the picture strangely seems more fitting. I'm still trying to figure out what exactly to think about it, but I think the word 'unique' is very appropriate here.

From: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Computers continued

Date: Mon, 22 Sep 2008 22:15:11

Dear Hanako,

Lilly has also let us know that she is indeed willing to give our proposal a trial run. My wife and I were planning to send the laptop to Yamaku so you can take your time getting to know how the device operates. Since Lilly will be largely operating it with her voice, it is probably worth your time getting familiar with the speech recognition software. The software requires you to go through a few 'training sessions' in order to let it get used to your voice, tone and inflection. I suggest creating a profile for yourself and see what it is like to operate the computer through the microphone as well as going through documents or internet sites using the text-to-speech feature.

Good luck and thank you once again.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: Over the top is actually a very apt description of both the book and its author. The fact that his home life is somewhat left out actually worked in the book's favor in my opinion. Words can tell you many things, but sometimes the absence of words can speak volumes as well, and some things are simply better off away from the public spotlight. As for the sword; he apparently hails from a rather upstanding and well-regarded family, and if I recall correctly, the katana is a family heirloom. It is, however, also my belief that the man uses it as a compensation mechanism.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Computers continued

Date: Thu, 25 Sep 2008 12:20:38

Dear Mister Satou,

Good news. The laptop arrived at noon. I'm eager to play around with it a bit. I think I'm going to ask my friend Jun to look at it together with me. She's really good with computers, and if there's something I can't figure out, it's very likely that she'll know what to do.

The only question I still have is how long I have before I'm expected to return the computer. Did you have a specific moment in mind?

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: You make a good point about Shizune's family life. I was hoping for a few amusing or interesting pieces of information, but if there was anything bad about it, I wouldn't want to read about it in a book. I'd want her to let me in on something like that herself, or else I'd rather not know it at all.

From: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Computers continued

Date: Thu, 25 Sep 2008 22:27:30

Dear Hanako,

Good to hear that the system arrived safely. The system administrator mentioned to me that an e-mail account has already been set up and that a complete list of voice-triggered macros is present in the documents folder on the hard drive. I apologize for asking this of you, but would it be possible to print out the contents of the documents folder at Yamaku's copyshop as Braille versions? Regrettably we do not have conversion software or a Braille embosser at hand here or at work and some printed instructions may be of great help to Lilly.

As for how long you can take; I have no timeline in mind although it would probably be best to have everything over and done with by the time your mock exams are set to take place. A busy time is coming up for you and your assistance to Lilly should never come at the expense of your performance at school. You should not ever allow yourself to lose sight of your priorities.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: I realized after my last mail that my previous postscript may have been open to misinterpretation. I did not mean to imply that the man uses that katana as a compensation mechanism for a lack of... physique. To clarify: the part of the book that I considered the most offensive is the part where he voices the expectation of his book having inspired 'Tomorrow's Japan' to be the best they can be, presumably addressing those of your generation.

Our country has a rich culture and many proud traditions that today's youth could use as inspiration. If someone were to ask me what I would consider some of the most valuable Japanese traits, I would name politeness, good manners, respect for one's elders and humility. Someone

with a true Japanese soul displays impeccable behavior and politeness towards others, does not run one's mouth, remains humble even after great accomplishments, does not boast, is respectful towards his or her seniors and does not go out of one's way to draw attention to oneself.

The author unfortunately possesses none of these traits (a true Japanese would not even consider tooting his own horn in print, especially not at that age) and so he compensates for that lack of traditional traits by parading a katana around like the neighborhood's oldest otaku. I would hazard a guess that my own wife has a stronger Japanese streak than he does. I apologize for my uncouth assessment of the man, but you would probably agree if you met him in person.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Computers continued

Date: Thu, 25 Sep 2008 22:35:48

Dear Mister Satou,

I don't think printing out the documentation in Braille will be a problem here, seeing how much we print out in Braille on a monthly basis at the club. I'll be sure to make a note of it so I won't forget it.

As for my schedule; Jun and I intend to start studying for the mock exams near the end of October, at which time I'll also start toning down my activities on behalf of the library. That means we'll have about a month for this, though I expect we won't need more than a week if we really dive into it during the upcoming weekend.

I'll let you know how things go.

Best regards,

Hanako.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Lilly's laptop update

Date: Mon, 29 Sep 2008 12:35:11

Dear Mister Satou,

Jun and I have spent several days and most of the weekend getting to know the laptop and we're now at a point where we can (with some effort) perform some basic tasks without looking at the screen even once. (which is good since it remains a bit awkward to use the keyboard with all those Braille stickers on top of the keys) We've had a lot of fun working with this. 😊

I wanted to know what you wanted to do now. Am I supposed to send the laptop and documentation back to you? Please let me know how you want to go about this.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I've almost finished a new order for the library that includes several of your recommendations. I now have additions to the fantasy, science fiction, thriller, romance and drama sections, but I'm still trying to find some new material for the comedy section. Is there anything you can suggest, even if it's not part of the most recent catalog?

From: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Re: Lilly's laptop update
Date: Mon, 29 Sep 2008 22:02:44

Dear Hanako,

That is truly good to hear. Thank you for getting it out of the way this quickly. Be sure to extend my thanks to Miss Yamazaki as well.

My wife and I would like to take the opportunity to spend a few days to also familiarize ourselves with the computer. My wife has an appointment at Yamaku later this week and will be able to pick up the laptop while she is there. While the computer is at our home we can simulate a remote session with you as well and see how easy it will be to address computer problems from a distance.

Let me know if this will work for you.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: Regrettably, no suitable titles from my company came to mind for the section that you spoke of in your last mail. We are expecting a title that you would probably like at the start of November. In the meantime, something from another publisher will have to fill that space. In fact, you have just given me an idea. May I ask if you have already categorized the three copies of the book we discussed in our earlier mails? If not, perhaps you should consider adding them to the library section that obviously still has space to spare, hmmm?

To: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Re: Re: Lilly's laptop update
Date: Tue, 30 Sep 2008 7:27:08

Dear Mister Satou,

Sure, that will work perfectly. Please let me know if she'd be willing to stay for dinner, so I can keep that in mind the next time I go shopping. I'm looking forward to her visit.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I haven't categorized the books yet, but it might be difficult to put autobiographies in any of the fiction sections. A librarian is supposed to keep the library well-organized and I don't think I'm supposed to put books in sections they don't belong in.

From: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Re: Re: Lilly's laptop update
Date: Tue, 30 Sep 2008 7:27:08

Dear Hanako,

I am certain that my wife will be more than happy to have dinner with you, and feel free to invite Miss Yamazaki along as well. This one will be on us, so please do not trouble yourself with the act

of cooking, and let us return the favor. The idea is for her to stop by the day after tomorrow around 14:00 though she has no idea how long her appointment will take.

Please enjoy your dinner.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s.: One could argue that the comedy section would be the perfect place for the book. Did you yourself not describe it as 'over the top'? When looked at from a satirical point of view, the book's protagonist may actually be seen as amusing, rather than obnoxious since the reader no longer takes him seriously. People might actually enjoy the book more. It might be an interesting experiment. I think you should take some time to consider giving it a try for a week or so. There would be little harm in that.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Lilly's laptop update

Date: Tue, 30 Sep 2008 7:40:55

Dear Mister Satou,

I feel a bit bad about your wife visiting and me not being the best host I can be, but if you insist...

I don't think Jun would mind hanging out with us since she already knows your wife from before. I'll be sure to ask her if she has free time that day.

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I gave in and placed one of the books in the section you mentioned, just for a few days, but I feel rather bad about it as if I'm cheating on a test or stealing a cookie from the cookie jar.

To: Hiroyuki Satou

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Lilly's laptop update

Date: Fri, 3 Oct 2008 7:21:34

Dear Mister Satou,

Jun and I had a really good time together with your wife. Please be sure to thank her for me again for taking the two of us out to dinner. It was really tasty, and it was also good to see her again.

She said that you're planning to visit Lilly at her apartment this weekend and that we were invited as well to help you familiarize Lilly with her new laptop. Unfortunately, Jun already has plans to visit her home this weekend, but I was wondering if it would be okay to invite Hisao instead. He doesn't live too far away from Lilly's place, and it's been a while since I've last seen him. Is that okay?

Best regards,

Hanako

P.s.: I'm not sure if you'll believe this, but the president of the literature club came by three days ago, and he ended up borrowing *that* book. When he returned it yesterday I asked him how he liked it, and he said it was cleverly written and a fun read. I was flabbergasted.

Anyway, your wife said yesterday that the Hakamichi family is one of the school's donors as well. With that in mind, I don't think I can afford to do anything that might cause the school trouble. If it were found out, I'd have no excuse, so I put it back in the non-fiction section. I hope you don't mind.

Oh, by the way, I finally got around to reading 'Sputnik Sweetheart'. Isn't that one of your favorite books? I liked it a lot.

From: Hiroyuki Satou
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Lilly's laptop update
Date: Fri, 3 Oct 2008 22:29:18

Dear Hanako,

You can certainly invite Mister Nakai too. It would seem like a wasted opportunity not to go and see him while you are in town. Having a long-distance relationship must be tough enough as it is.

We will be in town rather early, so if you give my wife a call when you are about to arrive, we will be able to pick you up at the train station.

Best regards,

Hiroyuki Satou

P.s: Very interesting what you said about the book. Very interesting indeed. It would almost be tempting to let the publisher know what gold mine he is ignoring. I do understand the school's position though, so perhaps what you did was for the best.

About Sputnik Sweetheart, it is indeed. I am glad you enjoyed it. Funny that you mentioned it. I recently finished 'Dance, Dance, Dance' by the same author. You liked that one, did you not? It was quite a good read if I say so myself.

From: Lilly Satou
Subject:
Date: Mon, 6 Oct 2008 19:17:01

Hello Hanako I am trying to get my first male to you has this one arrived safely love Lilly

To: Lilly Satou
Subject: Congratulations
Date: Mon, 6 Oct 2008 20:01:27

Hi Lilly,

Hurray! Your first e-mail. I'm really proud of you! And I'm very honored to have been its recipient.

I have to mention that you forgot to add punctuation and carriage returns though. The software doesn't put those in place automatically. You're supposed to say things like period or new line in order to add them.

Also, the program seems to mix up homophones sometimes. It thinks you're trying to send men, rather than messages. It's supposed to recognize context, but it looks like it's not completely flawless yet. You can probably get around this one by using the word e-mail rather than mail.

Keep up the good work, and don't let these little errors discourage you. Nobody's perfect at something the first time.

Love,

Hanako.

To: Lilly Satou

Subject: Hi

Date: Tue, 7 Oct 2008 21:50:51

Hi Lilly,

Are you getting a lot of mails already? I imagine that suddenly getting an e-mail address with your social circle would result in a literal flood of mails. I hope you're not overwhelmed.

I've been overwhelmed today. And rather stressed too. In fact, I'm having a bit of a headache right now. Yesterday, Miss Yumi gave me a rather drastic assignment for today. Another one of those challenges and a rather sadistic one this time. I had to wear my hair clip throughout my entire working day in the library. Miss Yumi argued that most people frequenting the library are already familiar with me by now and that my hair clip wouldn't make that much of a difference, but it did to me. I felt naked the whole time. I didn't get any shocked reactions from people, but things were awkward. Then again, maybe that was because I was awkward.

I suppose the point of today was that in the end nothing really happened, and I'm still alive and not suffering from a nervous breakdown. But I'm still feeling like I'm having a hangover.

Sorry, I'm just venting a bit.

Love,

Hanako.

To: Lilly Satou

Subject: Hi

Date: Wed, 8 Oct 2008 12:23:15

Hi Lilly,

Thanks a lot for the kind phone call last night. I really did feel better afterwards, and I'm doing okay now. Things went back to normal a lot faster than I imagined. Also, about what you asked about yesterday; I haven't received any mail from your mother, but she did say last Thursday that she wanted to talk about something with Jun and me. Maybe something related to that mysterious appointment she had at the school. Jun offered to give her an account to our private forum, so maybe she'll talk about it there.

Love,

Hanako

From: Lilly Satou

Subject: Re: Hi

Date: Wed, 8 Oct 2008 20:18:59

Hello Hanako.

You are most welcome and it was good to talk to you. I also felt better after our phonecall so we both got something out of it.

Also I'm sorry if I sound spoiled to you but can you and I swap back to regular mail for our actual correspondence. I intend to keep practicing on the computer but you're the only person with whom I used to correspond in Braille and your letters are very special to me. I always imagine your voice in my head as I read your letters and now it feels jarring to hear your words spoken by a voice that is not yours. If possible I would like to keep receiving letters from you instead of just e-mails.

I hope that is okay with you.

Love

Lilly

04

Karla Satou wrote: I'd like to thank Jun for creating an account for me here. I hope a fourth account on these forums won't cause bad luck around here. 😊 For Naomi's information; I visited Yamaku last Thursday and had dinner with Hanako and Jun. I asked them if they'd be willing to help me out with something I'm working on.

I have a confession to make. I wasn't merely at Yamaku last Thursday to pick up Lilly's laptop, but also to have a little interview with the principal and several staff members. I'm currently working on an article about Yamaku and schools just like it. It will eventually be submitted to a magazine that has agreed to publish it when it's finished. Part of the research involves asking students and alumni of these schools a few questions.

I've attached a document with some questions to this post. If you'd be willing to look it over, fill in the questions and send it back to me either through mail or by posting it here, that would be greatly appreciated.

Questionaire.doc

Naomi Inoue wrote: Whoa! Karla! 😳 That's unexpected. Nice to see our sponsor here. 😊

Hanako Ikezawa wrote: Hello Karla and welcome! 😊 You seem to be keeping really busy, between this article and that biography you're working on with that co-worker in Scotland. Don't you get overwhelmed sometimes?

Karla Satou wrote: Hi Naomi. Nice to talk to you again. I hope you're doing well. And Hanako, believe it or not, but I enjoy keeping busy. Back in my days as a journalist I was juggling multiple projects all the time. I'd like to think I have a fairly good idea of where my limits for work-related stress lie. I think a little bit of hecticness makes me feel alive. Weird, huh? 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote: But not particularly inconvenient for a journalist. 😊

Naomi Inoue wrote: I'm doing pretty well. Cram school isn't Yamaku, but there's still some nice people there. I caused my fair share of awkward moments already though. 😊 We've spent the last few months experimenting with my medication in preparation for exam season. It hasn't

always been pretty. I hope we can come up with a definite 'diet' before the end of the year. I know the school is a bit worried about that. Anyway, I'll take a look at your questionnaire tonight.

Karla Satou wrote:Naomi, if it's okay with you I'd like to hear more about your experiences. You

can put it under 'additional comments' near the bottom. Or we can talk about it directly.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:The results of those questionnaires won't be included in the article directly, will they?

Karla Satou wrote:They won't be. They're merely for my own information.

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:I've filled in the form and sent it.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Me too.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Make that three. Though I kind of expected the question list to be longer.

Karla Satou wrote:It's easier to get people to participate if they don't have to spend an entire evening filling in the form. I can only cram so much information into one article anyway. Anyway, thank you very much. I appreciate the time the three of you took.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:It was my pleasure. It's a shame we can't do more. This is essentially an article about us, isn't it?

Karla Satou wrote:I guess in a way it is.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Isn't there anything else we can do? Maybe we can help out with the writing in some way or another. 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Naomi, she's a former journalist. I think she'll manage without our help. 😊

Karla Satou wrote:I'm honored by the offer, and I would have let you girls come along for the ride if it wasn't for the fact you have mock exams coming up in about a month. It's important that the three of you focus on your studies.

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:You really would have let us help?

Karla Satou wrote:Uhuh. I'm always willing to help inspire people with whom I share an interest in writing. But your school comes first.

Naomi Inoue wrote:But some additional inspiration might help us study better and do better on our exams. 🎓

Karla Satou wrote:But you won't be doing better on your exams if you spend the majority of the upcoming weeks helping out with something that's not related to any of the things your exams will be about. 😊

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:Spending all our time on this wouldn't be smart, but if you'd welcome our help then how about we pick one day to help you out and focus on our studies the rest of the time?

Karla Satou wrote:Just one day? Well, I guess that can't hurt, though I should stress that I'd reserve the right for myself to have the final word on all content.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:That sounds fine to me. Please let us know what you want us to do and post the material we have to work with here.

Karla Satou wrote:I usually prefer not to do this sort of thing online unless there's a continent between me and my co-workers. If you're only going to spend one day working with me, we should go out of our way to be as efficient as possible. What I'd like to propose is this: I'm going to focus completely on collecting as much data as possible during the upcoming 1.5 weeks, and during next week's weekend the four of us can work on sorting and processing all the data and get a basic outline done. The three of you can catch a train after your classes on Saturday and have dinner at our place. We'll try to get the outline out of the way that evening so we can do the data processing and perhaps make a start with an early draft on Sunday. Since my husband will be visiting with Lilly on Sunday, we'll have the place to ourselves most of the day. After dinner on Sunday, the three of you can catch a train and dive into your studies with new-found motivation.



Jun Yamazaki wrote:That's quite an offer. I'm up for it if the rest is as well. So we'll be spending the night at your place? Is that okay?

Karla Satou wrote:Don't worry about that. We have enough space to accommodate you. I set up our attic as my own private office where the four of us can work. I have my own desktop PC, my laptop and a typewriter we can work on. Let me know if you're going to bring your laptop, Jun, or if I should try and arrange one.

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:This sounds like it'll be fun. Thank you for having us, Karla. 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:I'll bring my own laptop along. No need to accommodate us further. Thank you.

Naomi Inoue wrote:W00t!!! Slumber party! 😊😊😊😊😊😊

Karla Satou wrote:It's a deal then. Don't forget to study hard until then, okay?

Naomi Inoue wrote:YES MA'AM!!! 😎😎

Naomi Inoue wrote:Whoohoo! Looking forward to it! 😊

Naomi Inoue wrote:Comeback time for The Broken Quills! 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Naomi, you know you can edit your posts, right? No need to triple-post.
05

Sapporo4ever has logged on.

Sapporo4ever: Yo!

Flowergirl_89: Hey Akira!

Sapporo4ever: How are things?

Flowergirl_89: I'm well.

Sapporo4ever: Busy?

Flowergirl_89: I'm playing online chess against Hisao right now. 😊

Sapporo4ever: How is he? And should I come back later?

Flowergirl_89: No need. The game is almost over. And he's doing pretty well. Apparently he's been asked by his teacher to take part in some special activity next month together with a few others in his class. It's a real honor, and I'm happy for him.

Sapporo4ever: When I asked whether you were busy, I was actually wondering whether you were busy these days rather than busy right now. Exam season is getting closer, isn't it?

Flowergirl_89: 😕

Flowergirl_89: I'm slowly phasing out my librarian work. This month I'm having Wednesdays off. I use them to keep up with my studies. I also spend most of my evenings studying nowadays.

Sapporo4ever: I heard that my family's been keeping you occupied as well.

Flowergirl_89: Oh, the laptop? It wasn't that bad. We picked it up fairly quickly, and I haven't had to take over Lilly's computer so far. I think the documentation we printed out for her was pretty helpful. She's already sending her first mails.

Sapporo4ever: Yeah, I got one myself a few days ago. It was still kinda unrefined, but that's to be expected when you're just starting out.

Flowergirl_89: Yes. It'll be okay as long as long as she keeps practicing. Do you know of any other people she's already mailed?

Sapporo4ever: Not really, and I haven't given her e-mail address to anyone else either. Lilly's probably still a little insecure about her mailing skills, and she probably wants to practice with the people she's closest to rather than risk sending overly rough mails to people she doesn't know that well and leave a bad impression on them. I think just trying this out with you and me is already taxing on her pride.

Flowergirl_89: I think so, too. I've been trying to give her constructive feedback while keeping a neutral tone.

Sapporo4ever: Good call. Imagine what would happen if Shizune got her hands on her e-mail address and sent her a snippy 'Welcome to the 20th century.' message. My poor sister would probably lose sleep over that kind of interaction.

Flowergirl_89: Awwwww. 😊

Sapporo4ever: By the way, do you think that text-to-speech software understands smilies in mails or would it just get confused?

Flowergirl_89: We didn't test that. I think it would be confused, but you could try it sometime. Just tell Lilly in advance what you're going to do.

Sapporo4ever: I'll keep that in mind.

Flowergirl_89: My chess game has just ended. I lost. 😞

Sapporo4ever: Shame.

Flowergirl_89: It's okay. It was still fun. At least now I'm able to send quicker answers.

Sapporo4ever: You're not gonna keep chatting with your boyfriend?

Flowergirl_89: We don't really chat a lot during games. Just small talk most of the time. I think we do our actual bonding through the game itself and not through the accompanying chat messages. That's just the way things work for us.

Sapporo4ever: Ah, okay.

Sapporo4ever: I also heard that you and your writing club will be staying at our folks' place for a weekend.

Flowergirl_89: Yes, your mother invited us to spend a day helping her with an article she's writing.

Sapporo4ever: Excited?

Flowergirl_89: A little bit. This is much bigger than a school newspaper.

Sapporo4ever: I hope you'll have fun. I'm sure I'll hear about it afterwards from either you or from Mom when she comes over.

Flowergirl_89: Your mother's coming to Scotland again?

Sapporo4ever: Yeah, a few days after your excursion. To visit head office and write a report for Dad with her view of the state of affairs here, to see her Scottish friends, to work on that biography together with her journalist friend and to engage in a pub crawl with me. 😊

Flowergirl_89: Pub crawl?

Sapporo4ever: To 'bond'... or something. You can be my witness. If she gets carried away, then I'm NOT dragging her hammered ass back to my apartment. Her friends can take that one.

Flowergirl_89: Hahaha. It'll probably be fine. She's Scottish. She can hold her liquor.

Sapporo4ever: I've learned that that's a bit of a generalisation, but who knows... 😊 Anyway, I don't expect anything to come out of it, but it's against my core convictions to turn down free beer even if it means I have to put up with my old lady crashing on the couch in my apartment.



Flowergirl_89: 😊

Flowergirl_89: Speaking of your apartment; did you end up making a decision about getting a new place?

Sapporo4ever: It turned out to be a harder decision than expected.

Flowergirl_89: You and Yuichi weren't sure yet whether you were ready to move in together?

Sapporo4ever: It's not really that. We decided our relationship was stable enough to give it a try. But between the two of us we earn enough to get ourselves an actual home, rather than a mere apartment. That's one thing I've come to like about the UK. Houses are cheaper, and there's more space than the residences in Japan. We can actually have people over now. But getting a home means we'll have to decorate and furnish the whole place, too, since our current sets of furniture clash a bit style-wise.

Flowergirl_89: So lot's of shopping ahead then?

Sapporo4ever: Yeah. I've been getting lots of spam lately with offers for kitchens here. For a little while I'm not gonna delete that stuff on sight.

Flowergirl_89: Were you hesitant to make the move out of practical concerns?

Sapporo4ever: Not too much. It's mostly that when you get your own place and furnish the whole thing, it means you intend to be living there for at least a couple of years. It felt a bit awkward setting our lives in stone like that.

Flowergirl_89: But you're happy living in Scotland, right? I didn't get the impression you and your boyfriend had a lot of trouble acclimitizing.

Sapporo4ever: We've had our share of faux pas and misunderstandings from time to time, but they fortunately weren't all that common despite the fact that Japanese and Western culture are pretty different from one another.

Flowergirl_89: I suppose having a Scottish parent gave you an edge. 😊

Sapporo4ever: I used to think so too, but now that I've lived here for slightly over a year I don't think that's really the case anymore.

Flowergirl_89: Lilly told me once that your parents made sure that you two knew your Scottish side.

Sapporo4ever: They taught us to speak English, sure, and Mom used to read us Scottish folk tales and stuff, but our upbringing itself was decidedly Japanese. I found out that I'm not really any less prone to cultural missteps than my boyfriend despite having a Scottish parent. What made the biggest difference in the end has been the fact that many people at the office were already fairly familiar with Japanese culture through Mom and Dad and have been doing their best to be accommodating towards Yuichi and me.

Flowergirl_89: That's good.

Sapporo4ever: I suppose, though it gave me a very mixed feeling.

Flowergirl_89: Why? Were they being patronizing?

Sapporo4ever: No, not at all. They were treating us... like Japanese who moved here. Which was perfectly logical and Yuichi seemed fine with it. But it made me feel weird.

Flowergirl_89: Huh?

Sapporo4ever: I think that for a large part of my life I've been 'American', 'English' or 'Scottish' to most people, depending on the topographical savvy of those around me. I came to feel that way too at some point. I certainly didn't feel Japanese. I used to wonder if I'd fit in better if we had been living in Scotland instead. But when I moved here and started working at head office, people immediately started viewing me as a Japanese. In Japan, you're a Scot. In Scotland, you're a Japanese. Weird, huh?

Flowergirl_89: Is that why it was hard to make a decision on settling down there?

Sapporo4ever: Kinda. Don't get me wrong, I do like it here in many ways. I like my job, my colleagues, my friends and my relationship, but there are still some times when I feel like a fish out of the water, even after all this time. I'm just not sure whether I can unequivocally call Scotland a real home, despite my initial expectations.

Flowergirl_89: Did you talk with Lilly about this?

Sapporo4ever: I did. With Yuichi too.

Flowergirl_89: What did they say? Lilly's a bit in the same boat as you are, isn't she?

Sapporo4ever: Yuichi said that I should just hang back and let things fall into place of their own. Kind of a non-answer, but I can't expect him to solve this particular puzzle for me. As for Lilly, I don't think she's quite in the same boat. She never wondered what part of her heritage contained the real her. She's a Japanese in heart and soul. Always been that way. She said that she thought I was simply looking for a place to belong, and that I already had such a place. I'm not sure if I share her optimism.

Flowergirl_89: Is she talking about your family?

Sapporo4ever: Yeah. I don't think she's trying to nudge me into moving back, but she IS trying to convince me not to give Mom the silent treatment when she comes over.

Flowergirl_89: Just doing a bit of bar hopping probably can't hurt.

Sapporo4ever: A buncha pints isn't exactly good enough to compensate for years and years of screwups. I like beer, but not to THAT degree. 😊

Flowergirl_89: But it's a start. 😊

Sapporo4ever: I guess so.

Flowergirl_89: Let me know how it goes, okay?

Sapporo4ever: Sure thing. See ya around.

Flowergirl_89: Bye! 😊

06

Monday October the 27th

Dear Lilly,

I promised to write you about last weekend as soon as I got the opportunity. It's Monday morning as I'm typing this, and I hope I can get this letter printed and mailed before my shift starts. (yawn) With luck it should arrive the next day.

First of all, I hope you had a good time last Sunday with your father visiting. I'm going to take his word for it that this visit was indeed already planned, and he didn't merely leave because he didn't want to get in our way.

Jun and I took the train to your parents' town immediately after Jun's last class. I fortunately managed to arrange for someone to watch the library in my absence. The three of us arranged to

meet up at one of the stopover stations so Naomi wouldn't have to take the whole trip by her lonesome. After our meetup we had a quick snack and then took the train to your parents' home. Your mother was waiting for us at the usual place when we arrived.

We had some very tasty dinner, courtesy of your mother, and we had a bit of opportunity to catch up. Naomi had some interesting news. She's considering taking the Center Test and her entrance exams at Yamaku this year. Apparently her cram school's been voicing concerns about her due to her still having seizures from time to time even though she's changed her medication to something that decreased the frequency of her episodes. They brought up the possibility of taking her finals at Yamaku and offered to look into that. Your mother rather scathingly noted that the cram school's probably less worried about Naomi's well-being than they are about the hit its reputation might take if one of their students ends up disrupting an official exam. There's probably some truth in that, though personally I wouldn't mind at all if she came here to take the exams.

After dinner, Naomi and Jun were given a quick tour of the house that culminated in us getting settled in your mother's attic office, that was quickly dubbed the 'editorial office'. Your mother first spent some time telling us what exactly she would and would not cover in the article and giving us a brief look at the materials she gathered. Then we spent about two hours getting an outline ready before calling it a night. Your mother said she'd often pull all-nighters when writing articles, but Naomi's supposed to maintain a steady day-and-night rhythm, and we decided not to disrupt that.

Our stay hit a bit of a bump when Naomi said she wanted to take a soak in your parents' bathroom. Naomi's not allowed to bathe unsupervised because she'd drown if she had a seizure, and Jun's not allowed to be the supervising person because a thrashing Naomi could injure her. So the idea was thrown into the group to take a soak with the three of us, and I had to decline. I felt like a real spoilsport even though Naomi and Jun acted understanding.

In order to make up for it, I agreed to let Naomi and Jun sleep in my room for the night. (we put three futons on the ground for that purpose) I think we spent nearly two more hours talking, or rather it was Naomi talking with Jun and me occasionally chipping in, before we went to sleep. It probably wasn't very responsible, but it was rather fun. My very first slumber party.

After having breakfast the next day, we spent nearly six hours working non-stop to sort out and categorize all the information, and at the end we had a rough draft version of nearly half the article already. It was hard work, but it was nice to work together on something again after nearly a year. It felt a lot like the old newspaper club meetings or those nights the three of us spent working on pieces to submit to writing competitions. I've definitely had my nostalgic fix from this weekend for the time being.

We concluded our stay with another dinner and having to swear a solemn oath to your mother to give our upcoming exams a full 200 percent. (no pressure) We spent the first part of the train ride travelling together before saying goodbye to Naomi. And now I'm back at Yamaku, watching the mock exams slowly get closer and planning to get at least five hours of studying a day this week. One consolation is that it'll be almost impossible to do worse than I did last year.

Wish me luck.

Love,

Hanako

P.s.: Your mother briefly mentioned that you might be getting an opportunity to take part in an activity at your faculty, but she didn't want to elaborate when I asked what it was about and seemed quick to dismiss the subject. Can you tell me more? Or is it still a secret?

07

Karla Satou wrote:I thought I'd post a quick thank you to everyone for their efforts last weekend. I hope you all had fun. I know I did. I think your participation has contributed to the quality of the final version. I hope you will show the same dedication in the preparations for the upcoming exams.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Hi Karla. I had a blast this weekend. 😊 Very motivated right now!

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:Hi Naomi. It was really fun to see you again and work together again last weekend. I had a really good time. 😊 Have you already heard something about your exams?

Naomi Inoue wrote:Apparently Yamaku had no issue with it. It seems it's not the first time alumni with special needs return to do their entrance exams there.

Karla Satou wrote:I don't want to start a rant here, but I feel very mixed about this. If they're so worried about you getting a seizure during exams, why don't they ask the nearby university where you're set to take the tests to let you take the exams in a separate classroom with a teacher to keep an eye on you and instructions about how to deal with seizures on hand? It can't be that hard.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Maybe they feel embarrassed about making that kind of request from the university. Or maybe they'd need to request a second official proctor just for Naomi.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Hey Karla, I get what you're saying, but I don't really mind myself. A lot of people I know from the newspaper club will be doing their exams this year, including Hanako and Jun. I think it's cool that I can be there to wish them good luck. In fact, I was wondering if I'd be able to get away with doing the last stretch of studying there too.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:That might get you into trouble since you're not a student here anymore and most teachers probably still remember you.

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:But it's not like she'd be doing any harm by studying together with us. It could be just an extended visit. And we could see to it that Naomi gets enough sleep per day.

Naomi Inoue wrote:I'd need a place to sleep though. Are you offering me your room? What will your boyfriend say? 😊

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:If you brought your own futon then maybe.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Naomi having to spend the night in Hanako's room. That brings back memories. 😡

Naomi Inoue wrote:Screw you so much, Jun. 😊

Karla Satou wrote:Well, you already slept in her room last weekend. 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:It'd probably be okay for you to use my room from time to time as well, just so Hanako can maintain a bit of privacy.

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:We could use the library as a cramming room in the evening. I've already been using it for that purpose for months. The beanbags are also just large enough to comfortably curl up on.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:And I thought you actually sleeping in the library from time to time was just a silly rumor. 😅

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:There are rumors? 😕

Naomi Inoue wrote:BUSTED! 😂 😂 😂

Jun Yamazaki wrote:So is this a serious idea, Naomi?

Naomi Inoue wrote:I like it. I'll talk to my parents about it. I hope they'll agree. I could spend January and February studying with you guys. We could make our graduation an official Broken Quills project. 😊😊

Naomi Inoue wrote:BTW guys, Natsume says hi. 😊

Karla Satou wrote:Are you still in contact with her, Naomi?

Naomi Inoue wrote:Yup. 😊 We try to have one phone conversation a week to keep each other in the loop. By the way, she pointed something out last night that made me think. She said that if I were to bring my friends over to her house, her parents wouldn't just let me spend the night there with you guys, even though they know me fairly well. I never thought much about it, but not many people I know would just let a friend of their daughter bring along their friends and sleep over without the daughter even being present. And I think Mister Satou referred to the room we slept in as 'Hanako's room'. What's up with that? Is it Scottish hospitality? 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:To be honest I was wondering about that as well.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Anybody?

Naomi Inoue wrote:Hello?

Naomi Inoue wrote:Suspicious silence. 😊

Naomi Inoue wrote:Very suspicious.

Jun Yamazaki wrote:^ Edit button! Do you see it? 😡

Karla Satou wrote:Sorry for the delay. I'm in Scotland right now and staying at my oldest daughter's place. The trip took me an entire day, and I didn't get around to setting up my laptop yet. Anyway, I'd like to say that last weekend was simply due to me being an honorary member of your club (or that it's Scottish hospitality 😊), but Hanako is also in a special position. You could say that she's an official friend of the family. I hope that answers the question. Anyway, I might not be able to reply for some time. I'll be here for less than a week, and I have truckloads to do while I'm here. I'll be finishing up our article while I'm in Inverness, and I'll be sending it to the publishing magazine through mail. When the next issue comes out, I'll be sure to send the three of you a copy.

Naomi Inoue wrote:Great, thanks. 😊

Jun Yamazaki wrote:Yes, thank you. 😊

Hanako Ikezawa wrote:Thanks. 😊

08

Sapporo4ever has logged on.

Flowergirl_89: Hi Akira! 😊

Sapporo4ever: Hey

Flowergirl_89: How are things?

Sapporo4ever: My head hurts. Good thing it's Saturday morning right now, and I don't need to work.

Flowergirl_89: Oh dear.

Flowergirl_89: Is this a result of your 'pub crawl' with your mother? That was yesterday, wasn't it?

Sapporo4ever: Yeah. We had dinner after I got off work, and then we went into town. Man, the old lady can really hold her liquor. Maybe Yuichi being such a wuss with alcohol caused me to let my guard down.

Flowergirl_89: So she beat you? 😅

Sapporo4ever: Dunno. She left early this morning because she still had a lot to do. Her flight back is only three days away. If she's feeling the way I'm feeling right now, it might still be a tie. I don't think it's just the alcohol though, but also the evening itself.

Flowergirl_89: So how did it go? You didn't get into a fight, did you?

Sapporo4ever: Dunno. Somewhere along the line. It was mostly talking. It was probably somewhere around the third pub that we got into an argument about the usual stuff. She said she wanted to have a serious talk with me. We bought a bottle of Scotch to go and took a walk. We ended up at the marina where we sat down on a bench facing the bay.

Flowergirl_89: And you had a talk there?

Sapporo4ever: Not sure if it was a talk. It was mostly her talking and me listening.

Flowergirl_89: About you and her?

Sapporo4ever: About lotsa stuff. Mostly about our family.

Flowergirl_89: I see.

Sapporo4ever: You know, while we were there she

Sapporo4ever: apologized.

Flowergirl_89: She apologized?

Sapporo4ever: For being such crappy parents... for leaving Lilly behind in Japan...

Flowergirl_89: 😳 😳 😳

Flowergirl_89: I don't know what to say.

Sapporo4ever: I'm not sure either.

Flowergirl_89: This is a good thing, isn't it?

Sapporo4ever: Not sure. I mean it doesn't really change all that much. What happened happened and no apology is gonna change the past, is it?

Flowergirl_89: No.

Flowergirl_89: Miss Yumi told me many times that I shouldn't let the past get in the way of the future.

Sapporo4ever: Miss Yumi?

Flowergirl_89: My therapist at Yamaku.

Sapporo4ever: I think I remember her. The old granny with the violet shawl? 😊

Flowergirl_89: That's her. 😊

Sapporo4ever: And your therapist would want me to forgive Mom and Dad? 😊

Flowergirl_89: She's never that direct with me. She usually tries to nudge me towards certain actions instead of telling me to do things. Unless I have those assignments.

Sapporo4ever: Assignments?

Flowergirl_89: Like attending the school festival or visiting some tourist attractions on my own. That or spending a day behind the library desk without my hair obscuring the right side of my face. That was kind of bad. She said that I'll get another assignment at my appointment tomorrow. I'm kind of nervous about it.

Sapporo4ever: Given that last one, I can imagine.

Flowergirl_89: She says it's to stretch my comfort zone. She believes that some of the best changes in my life came to be whenever I stretched my small comfort zone.

Sapporo4ever: I think I know what she's talking about. The reason Yuichi and I got back together and are now about to move in together is because I apologized to him for dumping him without giving him an opportunity to make a choice for himself. That was hard, and it really, really bruised my ego, but I think I wanted our relationship to be mended badly enough to ignore my pride for a while. It was worth it.

Flowergirl_89: It was probably even harder for your mother to apologize, but I think she wanted a better relationship with you badly enough to also put her pride aside for a moment.

Sapporo4ever: I suppose so. She insisted that history doesn't always repeat itself and that things are different now. But forgiveness isn't that easy to get. Even Lilly confided in us last year that she still hadn't completely forgiven our folks yet.

Flowergirl_89: But Lilly's still trying to improve her relationship with them. It's easier to forgive people you feel close to. And I think they've made a sincere effort this year to be better parents to Lilly. I don't think you need to forgive them, but maybe you can reciprocate in a smaller way.

Sapporo4ever: I dunno. Maybe. Mom invited me to come and celebrate New Year with them again at the end of the year. I'll already be with Yuichi's parents during Christmas, but New Year's day is still free. Maybe I could come over and make an effort to simply have a fun day. As in a real effort.

Flowergirl_89: I think that would be a very good start. 😊

Sapporo4ever: Did you already get an invitation?

Flowergirl_89: Huh, me? 😊

Sapporo4ever: Well, you were there last year, and it wasn't all bad, was it? There were some awkward moments, but I don't think I was the only person who was glad that you were there as well. I expect Mom and Dad will invite you too sooner or later. You should give it some consideration.

Flowergirl_89: 😊

Sapporo4ever: I, for one, would be happy to have you there. Think of it as an additional motivator for me to go there as well. 😊

Flowergirl_89: That's cheating. 😊

Sapporo4ever: 🍔

Flowergirl_89: I need to disconnect. I still have an hour of studying on my schedule, and I can't sleep in tomorrow because of my appointment.

Sapporo4ever: Oh right, no problem. I'll just go and have a BLT sandwich. They're good hangover cures. And I'm keeping my fingers crossed the assignment won't be anything stressful. Maybe she'll just tell you to do well on your mock exams. They're less than two weeks away, aren't they?

Flowergirl_89: Indeed. That would be a relief. I hope so. 😊

Sapporo4ever: Well, good luck with your studies. I know you'll do well, but I'll still keep my fingers crossed. 😊

Flowergirl_89: Thank you. 😊

Sapporo4ever: See ya. And good luck with the mock exams. You're gonna make it this year, mark my words. 😊

09

Chapter 58 ([Hanako](#))

01

As I pass through the school gate, I stop for a moment and take a few deep breaths. Even though it's been two months since I started attending university here, the sheer size and especially the crowdedness of this campus still manage to overwhelm me. I kind of long for the quiet and cozy atmosphere of Yamaku at this point, but high school is a definite thing of the past now and something I can never return to.

Not wanting to be late, I pick up a steady pace and make my way to the journalism faculty.

"And that's all for today. Remember that this material will return in the upcoming tests, so study it carefully."

As the teacher walks out of the room, I take one more opportunity to compare my notes with the contents of the blackboard. After confirming that I've got all the important points down, I put my books and notebook away and my thoughts dwell on where to spend this lunch break. I'll probably settle for the area near the sports field again. As I'm making up my mind, I pick up pieces of conversation from the other people in class.

"Man, I'm glad it's lunch break. That guy just drones on and on."

"Hey, when are you going to return that book that I lent you?"

"Relax. I'll have it with me the day after tomorrow."

"Wanna stop by the shopping center later today?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Will we be staying here this lunch break or head down to the cafeteria?"

"I didn't bring my lunch today, so how about heading downstairs?"

"You already know what you want to eat?"

"I do. And how about having you-know-who get us some? To make up for the other day."

"You mean about the day before yesterday? You were really bugged by that? It was pretty obvious the teacher was just going through the motions. When we told him it was a misunderstanding and she simply took it the wrong way, the whole thing was quickly dropped."

"I know that. It's just that that silliness caused me to miss the bus I wanted to take, and I was late for an appointment in town."

"What a pain."

"It was. Shall we?"

02

Just as I'm about to get up from my seat, several of my classmates suddenly crowd around my desk, causing me to startle and quickly avert my eyes.

"Hey!"

"Y-Y-Yes?"

"Do you already know where you're gonna have lunch?"

I hesitantly shake my head. Even if I knew for sure, I still wouldn't let my classmates know where I go during lunch break.

"So you have no plans? Why not join us in the cafeteria? Also, could you buy us lunch today?"

"L-L-Lunch?"

"Well, you kind of owe us something from two days ago, remember? If you buy us something to eat for today, we'll call it even."

"I... d-d-didn't d-do anything."

"Huh? You're not trying to weasel out of this, are you?"

"I r-really d-didn't..."

"So the answer's no? I'm shocked."

"Ummmm..."

I get four stares that seem to suggest I'm crazy for having to think about such a 'bargain' and I start feeling more stressed by the second. If I refuse, I'm not sure what'll happen. I look around the classroom, but the few people who are still here aren't paying us any attention. Eventually I sigh and manage a soft nod with extreme effort.

"Great. Just get us today's special. We'll be right there."

One of the others frowns.

"Today's special? How can you be so sure all of us will like that? Did you even check what it is today?"

"Hey, don't worry. I checked this morning. Trust me, you'll like it."

"Well, okay."

Their attention turns back to me.

"So... four times today's special. Got it? Attagirl."

I receive a playful slap on the back that causes me to let out a surprised yelp, resulting in a few amused looks.

"Hey relax. Didn't mean to startle you. You have ordered from the cafeteria before, haven't you?"

I manage another soft nod, pick up my stuff and quickly leave the classroom. As I walk down the hallway leading to the cafeteria, I realize that being pressured into paying for someone else's lunch gives me a feeling of *déjà vu*.

I just hoped that those days like at middle school were a thing of the past.

03

They're not.

The four people who were at my desk just now were all people I already met before enrolling here, though I didn't know it at the time. They were there at the open house day two years ago as well and probably flunked their entrance exams the first time around just like I did. They did remember that spectacle though as well as the one who caused it.

I'm not even sure how they got my phone number in the first place. The first time my phone went off in the middle of class, I instantly had a flashback, lost my nerve under the attention and ran out of the room.

I initially thought it was just a one-time prank, but then it happened again. I stopped taking my cell phone to school with me, but someone then had the bright idea of setting up his or her cell phone with the same ring tone I used and letting it go off in class, causing all gazes to immediately focus back onto me.

Those were just the first few weeks.

That was just the start.

I don't know for sure what's going on, but I think some of my classmates got into trouble with the teacher over something like this. I told them the truth just now when I said I didn't do anything. But I think I know what happened.

Lilly probably called the school again.

Even though I begged her not to.

And now I'm being punished for that.

I wonder why they even waited a full day before retaliating.

I'm not sure if they're serious about dropping this if I just buy them lunch. It seems too easy, but if there's a chance to avoid more trouble, then I should probably take it.

At the cafeteria there's already a line forming at the counter, so I quickly join the queue while trying to avoid as much attention as possible.

"Can I help you?"

When it's finally my turn, I try to quickly place my order while blocking out the stare coming from the man behind the counter.

Just place the order. Get them their damn food and then get out of the building.

"T-T-Today's s-special, p-please. F-Four t-times."

"Fried shrimp?"

"W-W-W-What?"

My heart nearly leaps out of my throat, and my eyes grow nearly twice as large as I stare at the person behind the counter, wondering if I really heard that right. The man merely rolls his eyes.

"Today's special is fried shrimp. Would you like some?"

I swallow the lump in my throat and fight back my tears as I painfully nod my head. I can see the corners of his mouth twitching as he tries to maintain a neutral smile, but his eyes show amusement at my reaction. I shiver as I hear a few soft chuckles around me. They probably think this is pretty funny. Maybe it actually is pretty funny, and I'm just too messed up to 'get the joke'.

Now I know why they waited a whole day before pressuring me into this.

It truly is like middle school all over again.

The time it takes for my order to finish feels like forever, and the whole time I can feel several gazes piercing my back as if looking right through my clothes.

The meals eventually arrive, and I quickly pay for them, desperate to get out of here as quickly as possible. I walk around the cafeteria in search of my classmates, trying to steady my shaking legs. If I lose it here in the middle of the cafeteria, things'll be even worse. I'll just drop off these meals and then leave here. I need to be alone. Away from all this.

WEEEOOOOWEEEOOOOWEEEOOO!

Just when I approach the place where I saw my classmates earlier, a loud noise coming from somewhere very close by startles me and causes me to promptly drop my tray. The noise itself was loud and distinct enough to draw gazes, but with the mess in front of me I'm immediately at the center of everyone's attention.

Again.

WEEEOOOOWEEEOOOOWEEEOOO!

I need to get out of here!

I manage to keep myself together for long enough to realize that the sound is actually coming from my bag and frantically reach into it. The source of the noise turns out to be a cell phone.

That's not my cell phone. I don't even take my cell phone to school anymore. How did it get in there? When did they sneak in in there?

The second thing that pops into my mind is the thought that everyone staring at me is probably already thinking.

What kind of person uses a siren as a ringtone? Is it an ambulance's? Or something else's?

I try to flip open the phone to switch it off, but the phone's lid is kept shut with a strip of adhesive tape and my hands are shaking too much to scrape it off.

I need to get out of here!

WEEEOOOOWEEEOOOOWEEEOOO!

The pressing atmosphere here is starting to suffocate me and in a fit of panic I hurl the source of the ruckus as far away from me as possible and dart out of the room and out of the building.

When I finally stop running, I find myself near the small substation building close to the sports field. Exhausted, both mentally and physically, I slump against the far side of the building and wait for my heart to stop racing. It does so eventually, but the utterly miserable feeling that comes in its wake isn't much better.

I should probably get back to clean up the food I dropped, but I don't have the nerve to do that in front of half the faculty.

I don't think I have the nerve to return there regardless.

I'll just wait until lunch break is over and then head back to the apartment.

Suddenly I hear voices, and when I peek around the corner I discover to my horror that my classmates

have followed me here. I turn around and make an attempt to run, only to nearly collide with another of my pursuers who must have circled the building. Moments later the four of them have me surrounded and one of them gives me a quasi-jovial smile.

"You sure pick strange places to spend your lunch break."

"..."

"I thought we'd let you know that a cafeteria worker is cleaning up the mess you left right now. So no need to worry about that."

I don't think they came all the way here just to tell me that.

"Also, we've been thinking and maybe making that phone call while you were carrying that tray was kinda stupid. Heh, I might have dropped that stuff myself if I had been in your place. We really should have thought that through. So we decided not to hold the wasted food against you, and we won't expect you to buy us another round. I mean, it's just food, right?"

Somehow this is not putting me at ease. Despite the jovial tone of this one-sided conversation, the situation feels very threatening to me and I realize with dread that my decision to pick an isolated spot to retreat to is now working against me.

"We're not gonna hold the food against you, but there is another problem..."

"OW!"

I let out a cry, more from surprise than pain when my left arm is suddenly grabbed and twisted behind my back. The already artificial smile in front of me grows colder. Then, something is held out in front of me. It's the cell phone that was hidden in my bag. The one that I threw away in a panic and is now obviously no longer functional or even in one piece.

"We could have called it even back there, but you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you? Fine, we played a little prank. It was just a harmless little joke. Anyone who has a sense of humor would have understood that. What do you think is worse? Startling someone for a bit in good humor or wrecking a cell phone worth 16000 yen?"

"I....I...."

"Don't you think your reaction was a little disproportionate?"

"I....I....j-just..."

"Because everybody else thinks it was."

"I....I...."

Before I can finish thinking of a reply, the broken phone is put away, and another object is held out. Something that turns my anxiety from mere fright into pure terror.

It's a small lighter.

My classmate then takes out a pack of cigarettes, pulls one out and lights it.

"Do you know what your problem is?"

I start struggling, but then the hand holding my arm tightens its grip and I let out a soft whimper.

"No...n-no..."

"Your problem is you're overreacting."

The cigarette is raised slightly, and I press myself back instinctively.

"You're always overreacting. To every single thing. From the time you first set foot here until several minutes ago in the cafeteria."

The cigarette is raised again until it's at eye level. The slightly glowing tip has to be one of the most frightening sights I've ever seen. My brain tries to insist that they wouldn't go this far. Something that'd leave marks like this would destroy the plausible deniability they've been hiding behind so far. But my gut tells me that I already have so many scars that most people wouldn't even notice a few extra ones. My breathing becomes frantic, and I start trembling as the person in front of me takes a drag and then dangles the cigarette in front of my face.

"In fact, you're overreacting even now."

A cloud of smoke is blown in my face, causing a heavy coughing fit.

"Hanako?"

I suddenly become aware of someone in the distance faintly calling my name, but none of my tormentors react.

"Bring 16000 yen for a new phone tomorrow."

"I...I..."

"Hanako?"

"I don't care where you get them."

"Hanako."

"Or else... We might be forced to start overreacting too."

"Hanako!"

Just when the lit cigarette is less than five centimeters from my cheek, my vision turns blurry and my mind fogs up. The only thing that remains is the voice.

"Hanako, are you alright?"

"Mmmmm?"

The clouds in my head slowly start clearing up and I notice someone in front of me. It's dark all around us, but the voice and the silhouette are familiar.

"Are you okay?"

04

"Uhhh... W-what? H... Hisao?"

"You were getting kind of restless in your sleep."

"Oh..."

I squint as the lights are suddenly turned on. My thoughts are still a bit jumbled as my boyfriend sits down on the nearby couch and gives me a concerned look.

"You okay?"

I manage a soft nod, but don't say anything.

"Can I get you something? A glass of water perhaps?"

I give another dazed nod, and my boyfriend walks off towards the kitchen area to fetch me something to drink.

"What... time is it?"

"Nearly half past two."

I hear Hisao rummaging through the cupboard, and moments later I hear the sound of water running from the tap. Hisao walks back, hands me the glass of water and then sits down next to me. Before I can take a sip, I hear another voice from across the room.

"Hanako? Hisao? Are you two... awake?"

"Oh, Lilly. I'm sorry, did I wake you up?"

"I wasn't asleep, Hisao. When I heard the sound of running water, I realized that at least one of you two wasn't either."

"I was just getting Hanako a glass of water. I think she had a bad dream just now."

Lilly walks up to the futon we're sitting on and sits down next to me. There's a concerned look in her eyes.

"Another bad dream, Hanako?"

"I... I think so..."

What exactly happened during the dream I just had is already becoming a blur in my mind, but it has nevertheless left a lingering feeling of severe depression and a faint feeling of dread.

Hisao sighs.

"I kind of wonder if it's a good idea for you to go to Kasshoku tomorrow to begin with."

Lilly looks very uncomfortable at Hisao's suggestion.

"I don't think that giving up at this point is the right thing to do, Hisao. We've already come this far. Maybe after tomorrow, things will get better. Don't you think so, Hanako?"

"I'm... not sure."

If there was one thing that probably caused me to flunk my entrance exams the first time, it had to

have been the dreams like the one I probably had just now. Most of the time I didn't exactly remember what they were about, but they always left me with a profound feeling of fear and anxiety whenever I thought about my time after Yamaku. I first started having them right after that incident in the lecture hall, but they lessened a bit after I started taking sleeping pills. After I passed the Center Test however, the nightmares came back with a vengeance, and they got worse the closer I got to the entrance exams and graduation day. The dosage of sleeping medication I was allowed to take didn't help anymore. I was terrified of going to sleep every night.

After Miss Yumi took me back to Yamaku and enrolled me in the ronin program, the bad dreams stopped. Until last week when Miss Yumi gave me my latest assignment. When I chatted with Akira earlier, we professed the hope that she'd simply tell me to do well on my mock exams, which are only a few days away. But it turned out that my therapist had other plans. This year, like last year, Kasshoku University is holding an open house day. In fact, Hisao will be one of the students participating in the workshops held at his faculty. Miss Yumi's assignment was straight-forward. Go back to the very place where I screwed up so badly last year, and attend the open house day once again.

Like a criminal returning to the scene of the crime.

I haven't had a peaceful night's rest ever since.

Eventually I ended up asking my friends for help, and Lilly invited me to stay at her apartment the night before the big event and also asked Hisao to stay over. She offered to accompany me on my upcoming ordeal and give me emotional support, which was probably what ended up convincing me to take the leap and come here. She only had one spare futon that we put in the living room for me to use while Hisao slept on the nearby couch. Last evening I could tell that Lilly was trying her best to make the atmosphere relaxing and comfortable for me as we spent time hanging out together, but I fear that by that time I was already such a nervous wreck that no friendly get-together would have been enough to ease my mood.

I'm seriously doubting my ability to make it through the upcoming day without having a nervous breakdown. With my luck I'll probably suffer one at the worst time and in the worst place possible.

Hisao rubs his forehead.

"Either way, it's probably best if we try to get a bit more sleep soon. We can't sleep in tomorrow."

Even though I feel tired, exhausted even, the prospect of going to sleep again and possibly having another nightmare is so unappealing that I can't resist a depressed sigh.

My boyfriend gives me an awkward smile that's probably meant to be reassuring.

"Maybe it would help if I sleep next to you instead of on the couch? You know... The Takawa remedy?"

Despite my despondent mood I can't resist rolling my eyes at Hisao using that term.

"You're... s-still calling it that?"

"You never came up with alternative descriptions."

Lilly lets out an amused giggle.

"You named the practice of sleeping next to each other after Hanako's therapist? How did that come to be or am I better off not knowing?"

"Don't get any weird ideas. It's nothing dirty. I had a conversation with Miss Takawa once and she mentioned to me that if Hanako was stressed or panicking, the best thing I could do was hold her close. Activities such as cuddling cause oxytocin to be released in the brain and help Hanako relax while lessening sensations like stress or fear. Oxytocin is a hormone that..."

Lilly grins playfully.

"I think I understand the general idea, professor Nakai."

"Uh yeah, anyway... We eventually started calling it the Takawa remedy."

"I... usually d-don't c-call it that."

Lilly gives us an amused smile.

"And is this... Takawa remedy... very effective?"

"It usually helps... a little bit. But... I'm not sure if it'll help this time."

"If it even helps a little bit then that's still better than nothing, right?"

"O-Okay then."

"Lilly, we're going to try and get some more sleep. It's probably best if you do the same. We all have a big day ahead of us, and if we stay up for too long we're certain to oversleep. We already have to get up rather early."

"Alright, Hisao. Sleep well, you two."

"Goodnight Lilly. Could you switch off the light on your way, please?"

"I will."

"Goodnight... Lilly."

05

I hear a soft snick as the lights in the room are turned off. I lie down on my futon again and turn on my side. My boyfriend feels his way over to me and lies on his side behind me. I feel an arm wrap around me, pressing my body against his own. I take a deep breath and slowly exhale in an attempt to relax as much as possible. He places a gentle kiss on my cheek, and I feel his fingers tenderly stroking the side of my face.

"Hanako?"

I suddenly become aware of Lilly's voice nearby. She's kneeling right next to the futon Hisao and I are lying on.

She didn't return to her room after switching off the lights?

"L-Lilly?"

"Would it... be okay if I sleep here as well?"

"H-Huh?"

"Would it be a problem?"

"N-No, I don't t-think so."

"Thank you."

"L-Lilly!"

I let out a surprised gasp as Lilly, instead of lying down on the nearby couch as I was expecting, gets under the covers and snuggles up to me.

"Hey Lilly, I get that you want to do your part in giving Hanako support, but don't you think this is a little bit inappropriate?"

"Didn't you yourself say that there was nothing dirty about the Takawa remedy, Hisao?"

"Uh..."

"H-Hisao... I think... it's okay. Just this once."

"If you say so."

We fall silent, and I feel Lilly's hand briefly stroke my hair before settling down on my shoulder. Then she gives me a quick kiss on the forehead. This feels a bit strange, but also a bit familiar. I'm suddenly reminded of that last day in Scotland, when Lilly and I took a bath, had a heart-to-heart talk and eventually shared a hug. Lilly's presence feels similarly soothing now. As the closeness and warmth of my best friends slowly causes my anxiety to change into weary comfort, I find my eyelids slowly growing heavier. As Lilly's and Hisao's breathing slows down to the steady rhythm of slumber, I close my own eyes and sink into a deep, dreamless sleep.

06

TRIIIIIIING!

"Mmmmm?"

The sound of something, a phone or a doorbell, shakes me out of my slumber. I'm not sure if I had another bad dream or not, but I still feel a bit tired. I don't feel quite as bad as last night, but maybe that will change once my brain has woken up completely. I wearily open my eyes only to let out a soft cry at the sight of Lilly's face being a mere ten centimeters away from my own.

"Oh!"

After a moment of confusion I remember going back to sleep last night, and I giggle awkwardly. Lilly's action was very sweet, but a little bit embarrassing too.

I don't hear a reaction from Hisao, so he's probably still asleep just like Lilly is.

Before I can doze off again, I hear a door opening, followed by the sound of voices.

"Hmmm..."

"Hiro? Lilly's not in her room. I wonder if she's taking a bath, and that's why she didn't open up when we rang. Shall I check the bathroom?"

"Not necessary. I have already found her. It appears that she is still asleep and... hmmmm... perhaps you should come and see for yourself."

"Huh? She's asleep in the living room? Is there a boy with her or something?"

"A boy... and a girl..."

"No way!"

I feel an uneasy sensation in the bottom of my stomach. I'm already awake enough to recognize those voices. They belong to Lilly's parents, and it seems that her father has already discovered us here. This is probably going to be awkward.

I decide to do what's probably for the best: pretend to be asleep and let Lilly handle all of this.

"Hahaha. Oh my, it seems we just stumbled into something scandalous."

"The actual scandal would be the fact that they are still asleep. This is an important day, and our daughter here is sleeping through her responsibilities."

"Then lets wake them up, shall we? My own mother often used the good ol' ladle and frying pan combination to get people out of bed. It never failed to do the job. I've always wanted to wake someone up that way. This would be a perfect opportunity."

"It may be effective, but it is also a bit coarse and unrefined. I prefer a simpler approach."

I hear him clearing his throat.

"Lillian!"

I instantly reel a little, and I feel Lilly immediately stirring as well. Mister Satou didn't even raise his voice all that much, but his tone was one of an angry boss who just caught one of his underlings napping during crunch time. It's the kind of tone that would probably cause me to start stammering apologies before I even knew what I did wrong.

I open my eyes and throw a quick glance at the people standing in the room. Lilly's mother has an amused grin on her face, but Lilly's father looks a little dismayed. Behind me, Hisao rises up as well, and I hear him fidget.

"Mister and Mrs. Satou. Uh... This isn't what it looks like."

Lilly's mother gives my boyfriend a teasing wink.

"You know Hisao... When people say those specific words, it's often *exactly* what it looks like."

"Hanako had a nightmare last night, and we just wanted to...uh..."

Lilly's father gives a prolonged sigh.

"My wife is merely teasing you, Mister Nakai. Your sleeping arrangement is of less concern than the fact that Lilly was about to sleep through her obligations for today. Do you know what day it is?"

"Yeah, it's open house day at school. *yawn* I'm supposed to help out with a workshop at the faculty. Uh... What time is it anyway?"

Hisao looks around, only to remember that Lilly doesn't have any easily readable clocks in the apartment. Mister Satou checks his watch.

"It is almost a quarter past 8."

"What? Damnit! I'm supposed to be at the faculty in half an hour!"

"So... You too..."

"Huh?"

"Never mind that. Mister Nakai, why not pay a quick visit to the bathroom and freshen yourself up? Do not take too long. You can hitch a ride with us and still be at the university in time."

"Really? Thanks!"

Hisao gets up and quickly leaves the room. Next to me, Lilly's slowly rising to her feet as well, yawning as she does so. Something her father just said is bugging me, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around the Satous' sudden appearance. Lilly didn't mention that they'd drop by this morning.

Lilly's father gives his youngest daughter a scrutinizing look.

"Is it still too early in the morning for a proper greeting, Lilly?"

"I... apologize, Father. I'm happy to see you and Mother. Welcome. It's just that your appearance here caught me off guard. Weren't we supposed to meet up this evening?"

Lilly's mother smiles playfully.

"We changed plans and decided to attend your little performance... or performances. Hehe... maybe I'll write a review afterwards. No pressure, of course."

"A good thing we did or you might have overslept."

So it wasn't just Hisao who got involved in a faculty activity for today. But Lilly never mentioned this. Why not? Didn't she promise to accompany me today? What's going on?

"Ummm... L-Lilly... What p-performance?"

Lilly grimaces and suddenly looks cornered.

"The truth is, Hanako, that I was originally scheduled to participate in an activity at my faculty as well. When you called me earlier this week to tell me that Miss Takawa instructed you to visit the open house day today, and you mentioned you didn't want Hisao to come with you because he already had a workshop activity that you didn't want him to give up for your sake, I... decided not to bring up my original plans for today. I'm sorry."

"Y-You... c-canceled something f-for m-my sake?"

"I called a classmate and told him that some personal circumstances came up. I asked him if he'd be willing to fill in for me and he said that was okay. I'm sure he'll do a very good job in my place. Being here for you today is more important to me than the activity I was initially planning to help out with. This is my own choice."

I feel guilty about Lilly having made such a decision for my sake, though part of me also feels good that she's so committed to being by my side. Mister Satou, on the other hand, gives his daughter an angry scowl.

"And how much time did you take to carefully consider that choice, Lillian?! Do you realize what it is that you are so casually dismissing after all the effort that was put into it? Do you realize what your classmates will probably think of you afterwards? What effect this will have on your reputation?"

Lilly cringes at every word from her father. I'm a little taken back by how fierce his response to the news of Lilly's change of plans is and the same is probably true for her. After fidgeting a bit, Lilly recomposes herself.

"I... I am hoping that they will be understanding, Father. I was... hoping that you would be understanding as well."

"I am understanding. But I still insist that you call your classmate and tell him that you have changed your mind. I do not think Hanako would want you to do this if she knew the whole context of the situation."

Huh?

"But..."

"L-Lilly... I... I think I'll... b-be okay on m-my own."

Lilly's mother gives me a concerned look.

"I don't think that sounded very convincing, dear."

Mister Satou's look softens a bit as he addresses his daughter again.

"Lilly, nobody in here doubts your ability to function as a pillar of emotional support to others, but what if something happens that... triggers Hanako's apprehensions? Will you be able to quickly get her out? Will you even notice in time? For whose benefit is this really?"

"..."

While there's no accusing tone in Mister Satou's voice this time, Lilly looks more hurt by his words this time than during the scolding she received moments ago. As much as I hate to admit it, I can't deny that there's probably some truth to his words. If something happens, and I start panicking and need to get away, Lilly's usual pace would be a hundred times too slow for me, and from the looks of it, Lilly also realizes this and it stings her.

A painful silence follows, but Mister Satou eventually exchanges a long look with his wife. Just as I start wondering what's going through their minds, Lilly's parents share a short mutual smile and Karla gives her husband a brief nod, which is promptly returned. Then she turns to me.

"Hanako... I think it's still a good idea if someone comes with you to offer a bit of reassurance in case you need it. Would you mind if I came along with you instead of Lilly?"

Lilly looks genuinely baffled.

"Mother?"

Lilly's father nods.

"Yes, I will attend the activities at the English faculty on behalf of both of us, and my wife will accompany Hanako for today. Hanako, do not be afraid that you are imposing on her. It is a journalistic faculty after all, so she will probably enjoy the experience."

"How about it, Hanako? Can I go with you for today?"

I give Lilly an unsure look.

"Uh... Lilly?"

A tiny smile is visible on Lilly's face.

"I'm okay with it if you are, Hanako. I... I have faith in Mother."

"Uh... Okay then."

Lilly's mother gives me an excited smile.

"Alright then. Just leave things to me, okay?"

Lilly's father gives an approving nod.

"It is decided then."

He walks out of the room and returns a few seconds later with Lilly's cell phone which he places into his daughter's hand.

"Lilly, call your classmate, and tell him that the circumstances have changed and that you will be fulfilling your obligations after all. Be sure to apologize profusely to him for the confusion you have caused."

"Ah... Yes, Father. I will."

"Good. Let us make haste. If we hurry we can be on the road in 15 minutes."

Lilly's mother heads to the kitchen and starts rummaging through the cupboard.

"I'll go and get some food ready for breakfast."

"That is a good idea. They can eat on their way there."

Things suddenly become hectic around me. As Hisao, fully dressed now, walks back into the living room, Lilly's father looks at me and gestures towards the bathroom.

"You should go and tidy yourself up too, Hanako. A proper lady does not go out in public with a head of disheveled hair."

And with that, the morning suddenly kicks into overdrive.

Against my own expectations, we manage to finish our preparations for the day in record time although it's obvious that Lilly, who is always a slow starter in the morning, has trouble keeping up. After refreshing and dressing ourselves, we get in the car and feverishly wolf down the seaweed-wrapped pieces of fish that Lilly's mother found in the fridge and hurriedly prepared for us. I hope none of us is going to get a stomach ache half an hour into the event.

We're still finishing the final remaining pieces of food by the time we reach the campus terrain. As the car approaches the parking area, Lilly's mother turns to her husband.

"Hiro? Since Lilly and Hisao are in a bit of a hurry and the English and science faculties aren't really close to the entrance, why not stop right in front of the gate and get out there? I'll park the car for you. Since it'll probably still take a little while for preparations to finish and the actual events to start, Hanako and I still have plenty of time."

"Very well. If we get out close to the entrance we should be able to still make it in time as long as we pace ourselves a bit."

Lilly's father stops the car in front of the entrance gate and turns around to face us.

"Lilly, Mister Nakai...this is our stop. Mister Nakai, be sure to do your best today too."

"Don't worry, sir. I will. I'm not sure when I'll be back. Probably some time after the activities at my faculty end. Fortunately there are already other people scheduled for cleaning duty. I'll come to the journalism faculty afterwards."

Hisao turns to me and gives me a quick kiss.

"Hanako... Good luck today. I'll be rooting for you."

I feel Lilly briefly taking my hand in hers.

"Yes, good luck, Hanako. You'll be in my thoughts today. Hang in there."

"Let us be on our way."

Lilly's father gives the car keys to his wife and then gives her and me a quick nod.

"Karla... Hanako... Good luck."

"Thanks, Hiro. We'll do our best."

"Y-Yes..."

Lilly, her father and Hisao get out and head towards the entry gate at a brisk pace. Lilly's mother gets into the driver's seat and motions me to take a seat next to her. As I get in the front seat, Karla starts the engine and navigates the car to a secluded corner of the parking lot. Then she looks at me.

"We should probably go too."

"A-Already?"

"If you really want to stay in the car for a little while longer, that's fine with me, but there's not a lot we can do here. They're probably still busy with preparations at the journalism faculty building, but I was thinking we could have a brief walk around the campus. To acclimatize to the place a bit. It might ease your nerves a little. You're looking a little tense right now. Staying here and doing nothing might only make things worse."

"I..."

'A little tense' is hardly an accurate way to describe how I'm feeling right now. I'm extremely nervous, and I'm getting uneasier by the minute. Funnily enough I felt okay this morning. We got off to such a rushed and hectic start that I was completely preoccupied with getting ready and making sure Hisao and Lilly wouldn't be late. I had no opportunity to think too deeply about today. But after Hisao, Lilly and her father got out of the car and the pace slowed down again, my brain was quick to remind me how horribly wrong things went the last time I was here. And now it wants to know whether I'm really ready to go back for more of what I endured last year.

07

Karla seems to notice my nervous fidgeting and gives me an awkward smile.

"You know... I'm... probably not as good at this as Lilly is, but I do think I understand how you're feeling right now. Last year things went terribly wrong, and you haven't been back here since. Your gut tells you that if you go now, things'll just turn out the same way."

I nod sullenly. That's pretty much the gist of things.

"Whenever you're getting particularly nervous, I'd like you to tell yourself something. I'd like you to remind yourself that history doesn't always repeat itself."

"History d-doesn't always repeat itself?"

"Uhuh. There's nothing strange about the way you're feeling right now. There's a saying that says: 'Once bitten, twice shy.' It wouldn't be a saying if what you're feeling is anything out of the ordinary. But sometimes a situation isn't completely the same. Sometimes it's merely similar, but beneath the surface things are different enough to result in a completely different outcome altogether. I think this is one of those situations."

Despite my anxiety I manage to smile for a moment. There's something strangely familiar about what Karla is saying.

"Uh... Akira said... that you told her something like this too."

Karla's look turns slightly curious.

"What exactly did Akira say that I said?"

"Just that... history doesn't always repeat."

"It was probably as appropriate then as it is now. Like I said, there's nothing unusual about how you're feeling. It's completely human. Just for the record; what I said were originally my husband's words. Heh, as a journalist it's important to name your sources when quoting someone."

We smile a little at that.

"Speaking of which, shall we go?"

I let out a deep sigh.

"O-Okay then."

We get out of the car and start walking back towards the campus entrance. I make certain to keep walking on Karla's left side so I can quickly turn towards her a little if we get too close to other people. By the time we reach the gate, I have already slowed down to a fraction of our starting pace. And

when we get close to the journalism faculty building, a shiver goes through my body that even Karla seems to notice. She gives my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"It's probably kinda early to go in already, so why don't we go find ourselves a spot where we can take a load off for a while? I know a place that's fairly peaceful."

I give a weak nod and follow Lilly's mother until we reach a garden-like area some distance away from the faculty. As I sit down on a nearby bench, Karla gestures back towards the building.

"I'm going in there really quick to get us some snacks for lunch. The cafeteria's probably open for business already. Can you think of anything in particular that you like?"

"N-No. Anything's fine."

"Good. I'll probably be back in ten minutes or so."

She turns around and hurries off in the direction we just came from. I've noticed before that Karla's usual pace (and not just her walking pace) is quite fast. I feel bad about making her slow down so much for my sake.

08

I shoot an uneasy look at the faculty building in the distance. It sounds crazy, but when we were near its entrance just a few minutes earlier it felt like the building itself loomed over me like a faceless bully, and I could almost picture it throwing a mocking greeting my way.

Hey there! Remember me? Good, because I certainly remember you! Did you come back to cause more trouble?

I shiver again.

"History d-doesn't always repeat itself."

I softly repeat Karla's mantra to myself. It doesn't really do much to put my mind at ease.

"History doesn't always repeat itself."

That implies that at least some of the time it does. It sure feels like it'll do just that. I can still recall the summer of last year. Getting into a relationship, strengthening my bond with Lilly and making some new friends, enjoying life for the first time in a long while despite the increasing need to focus on my studies, the approaching mock exams which I didn't think much of at first, visiting this place, feeling very uneasy from the moment I set foot on the campus and then having a panic attack at the worst possible moment and in the worst possible place.

Thinking about it, this year hasn't been all that different. 'Hanging out' with Lilly and Hisao at the festival, starting to play chess with Hisao again, my relationship with Hisao going through a bit of a rebirth, reviving my friendships, being fairly happy with my life, being fairly optimistic about the mock exams, visiting this place again and feeling very uneasy again. The only thing that's still missing is the panic attack - so far.

I'm certain that Lilly's not going to accidentally call me today, but the way I'm feeling right now I might not even need a phone call. Just being in the building for an extended amount of time might be a trigger. And then what?

I don't think I'll be able to stay at Yamaku for another year. Besides, I don't want to lag another year behind Lilly and Hisao. Deep down I want to move on as well, despite my anxieties. I could always apply to another university. I've learned this year that despite the physical distance I've still been able to keep interacting with the people who are important to me, despite my initial worry that my bond with them would quickly fade out after graduation day.

But a university isn't a high school for the disabled. They probably won't be as willing to accommodate my apprehensions the way Yamaku has done. I won't be one of many. I'll be the odd one out, no matter what school I'll end up attending. It'll be a major change in my life regardless. And exactly because of those inevitable changes that will inevitably be extremely difficult for me, I want part of my life to remain familiar and comfortable. Hisao, Lilly... maybe even Naomi. Having them as constants in my life in the background might just give me the strength to face the unknowns that are waiting for me beyond graduation day. They might make the difference between struggling through or breaking down after the first week.

I guess in the end this place really is the best thing I can go for.

If only I could be a little less... me.

"History doesn't always repeat itself."

No luck.

"Hanako?"

I jump a little at the sudden sound of my name. I was so occupied by my own brooding that I didn't even notice Lilly's mother making her way back to me. Karla gives me an apologetic look.

"Did I startle you?"

"It's okay."

She holds up a plastic bag filled with... something.

"I remembered correctly, and they were already open. I got us enough snacks to make it through the day. Now we can have our lunch break wherever we want."

"You r-remembered... correctly?"

Lilly's mother nods.

"I'm fairly familiar with this campus. I accompanied Lilly to school during the first few weeks of her college life until she memorized the layout of the place a bit. I used to take walks around the campus while Lilly was taking classes. I naturally visited the journalism faculty from time to time, out of curiosity."

She sits down next to me.

"I'm gonna assume we're not gonna lose sight of one another, but in case we do get separated I was thinking it'd be a good idea if we designate a spot or two to meet up."

In other words, we're going to pick a spot where to run off to if I suddenly lose it.

"We could pick this spot or maybe the bleachers facing the sports field. You can see the field's floodlights from here."

"Okay."

"Good. Like I said, it's just a little precaution. I doubt we'll lose sight of one another, but better to be safe than sorry."

"Y-Yes."

"You know... while I was leaving the building just now I could already see the first bunch of visitors making their way inside. It's probably best if we go there too. That way we can still pick a spot in the respective classrooms."

I guess this is it.

"While I was inside I already picked up two pens and notepads they were handing out. I also got today's program."

She takes out a pamphlet and hands it over to me.

Information sessions and presentations: (start every 45 minutes. 9:15 - 15:15)

- History of journalism (classroom 1-1)
- Journalistic writing (classroom 1-2)
- Research and analysis (classroom 1-3)
- Researching media and culture (classroom 2-1)
- Advanced reporting (classroom 2-2)
- Political reporting (classroom 2-3)
- The media and popular culture (classroom 2-5)

Closing session: (15:30 - 16:00)

- The internet, social media and the future of journalism (lecture hall 1)

I can't be sure, but I'm fairly certain the program isn't very different from last time. Maybe it's even exactly the same. Another case of history repeating itself. Not exactly reassuring.

Still, despite my uneasiness, I manage to take a deep breath and get up. Karla smiles at me.

"So, which one shall we attend first?"

Chapter 59 (Hanako)

01

Is my phone turned off?

"...and many of the people now covering our politicians have alumni from this school."

I think it is, but I'm not 100% sure. What if it goes off in the middle of class?

"There's also the matter of several political leaders in the Liberal Democratic Party as well as some in the Democratic Party of Japan and the Japan Restoration Party being graduates of this university. This creates a bond that can be used to your advantage to improve your working relationship with the politician you're assigned to cover..."

The thing's been dominating my thoughts for the last 15 minutes. I shouldn't check. It might draw attention. But what if it's still on? What if it goes off?

"Since Kasshoku has good ties with the five largest newspapers in the country, graduates of this school will have a good chance to get into the various kisha clubs you need to be part of in order to have direct access to the members of our legislature."

My eyes keep getting drawn to my bag.

What if it's still on?

I have to check.

I lower my hand into my bag while trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. It's still folded open, so the only thing I need to do is turn it around and look at the display. My hand is shaking a bit, but I manage to steady it enough to grab the phone.

It's turned off. Thank goodness. I drop it back into my bag.

I can breathe a little easier now.

At least until I notice that one of the other people is looking at me.

Did he see me checking my phone?

Was he here last year too? Did he recognize me?

"Trust will come with better access and more opportunities for stories."

I'm not sure if his gaze is still on me. I can't tell without looking behind me, but if I do and he isn't watching me then maybe I'll attract his attention.

"...and there's information about Japanese kisha clubs obtainable online for those of you who wish to learn more. That is all for today. There'll be opportunity for you to have lunch in our cafeteria downstairs. The next presentations will start in 45 minutes. I wish you good luck with the rest of the sessions."

People all around me start packing their things, and I shoot an uneasy look in Karla's direction who's sitting behind the desk next to mine. Lilly's mother makes a small gesture with her head towards the notepad in front of her before returning to her scribbling.

I guess that's not a bad idea. Look busy until the classroom has emptied out and the building's population has concentrated itself in the cafeteria on the ground floor. It'll give us an opportunity to leave the building without having to wade through the crowd.

The teacher who was holding the lecture just now gives us a brief glance, and I reflexively raise my notepad a little. Karla gives the teacher a friendly nod.

"I apologize for taking so long. We'll be done in less than a minute. Please don't mind us."

The teacher returns Karla's nod with one of his own and leaves the room. We wait until the din in the nearby hallways has settled down and then prepare to leave the classroom ourselves.

"The sky's kinda cloudy, but if we get rain today it probably won't fall until later. Do you want to go outside and eat lunch there?"

I give a tired nod. I don't think we're supposed to stay in the classrooms during lunch break and the cafeteria will be way too crowded. We might as well go outside and get some fresh air. I could certainly use some. We've only been in the building for about three hours, but it feels like three days to me. My head hurts from having been on my guard almost non-stop, and I feel exhausted. A little unsteadily, I follow Lilly's mother down the stairs and through the still rather crowded entry hall, sticking as close as possible to my companion in order to prevent the people hanging out there from getting a good look at me. The bench we sat down on this morning turns out to be occupied, so we head towards the sports field and find the bleachers still empty. I let out a worn-out sigh as I slump down next to where Karla's sitting. Lilly's mother gives me a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"Tired?"

I just nod. I know better than most people how much of an energy drain stress can be. I doubt 45 minutes will be enough to get my bearings back, but it'll have to do.

"Here, have something to eat. After having only that three-minute breakfast in the car this morning you're probably hungry again by now."

Not really. I've always had a diminished appetite whenever I'm stressed, and today is no exception. But I don't want to worry Karla, so I take some sweet breads from her hands and start nibbling on one of them.

"So..."

Karla gives me a sympathetic look.

"...things aren't going too badly, are they?"

I don't know. Last year I was anxious, but it wasn't a lot worse than it usually was whenever I was in an unfamiliar place full of unfamiliar people. I know for sure that my emotional state right now is one hell of a lot worse. Just about every time someone looks at me for longer than a second I'm expecting him or her to point at me and shout something like: 'Hey! You're that girl with the scars that caused such a disturbance last year.'

"I... d-don't know. I'm... p-probably a whole lot w-worse right now than I was at t-this point l-last year."

"But what really matters won't be whether you're feeling worse right now, but whether you'll be feeling worse than you did last year at the end of the day, right?"

"I... s-suppose so. I d-don't think I p-picked up anything f-from the lectures though."

Lilly's mother suddenly breaks into a wide grin.

"Hehehe, about that..."

With a hint of excitement she pushes a notepad into my hands, and I let out a pleasantly surprised cry as I read it.

"Oh!"

Written on the pages are three surprisingly thorough summaries of the lectures we've attended so far, all of them ending with a neat bulleted list containing the main points of each of the presentations. Looks like *somebody* was paying attention. I'm impressed. And here I was thinking that Karla was just doodling.

"W-Wow. You're... r-really good at this."

"Heh, think nothing of it. I figured it might be useful. There was quite a bit of stuff in those lectures that was worth remembering."

"What... d-did you think of them?"

"The teachers seem to know their stuff. I don't agree with everything that was said, and don't even get me started on the subject the last lecture was about, but all in all I still think that if you can make it in here, you'll get a solid education that'll serve you well for what you intend to do afterwards. Good credentials are very important."

"That's w-what they s-say at Yamaku too."

"Yeah..."

Karla nods, and suddenly a very grim expression appears on her face. I give her an awkward glance, but I have no idea how to react. Eventually, her grimace turns into a sad smile.

"Hanako, Lilly didn't tell you anything about the activity she's participating in today, did she?"

"N-No. I think... she was planning to tell me, but when I t-told her about Miss Yumi's assignment, she d-decided to k-keep it from me and offer to g-go with me instead."

"The activity in question was a public recital of various English poems and pieces of literature held by the first year students of Lilly's faculty. It's considered a pretty big honor and a pretty big responsibility since you're essentially representing the school in front of potential newcomers, and the works that are recited are not exactly beginner's material, so they only pick the best candidates. The people chosen for the event are the students who have scored the highest on their tests during the last trimester. They pick one student per class. You may have heard that Lilly's been taking her studies very seriously, and she's been at the top of her class for some time."

"She... said something like that the last t-time I asked her."

Karla nods.

"Imagine the surprise when one of her classmates was chosen to represent their class instead."

"Despite Lilly having higher m-marks?"

"Yeah. Someone in the committee that's organizing the event apparently made that call. The official excuse was that the reading material may end up being changed at the last minute and they most regrettably wouldn't be able to arrange Braille versions in time if that happened."

I feel my stomach twist itself into a knot.

"That's... n-not what the real r-reason was, was it?"

Karla's eyes become distant for a moment.

"It was a load of mince, of course. Events like these are always meticulously prepared and staged. They wouldn't change stuff at the last moment and risk one of the students messing up in front of potential freshmen and their parents. I don't think we were meant to take that reply literally anyway. It was all about hint-dropping without coming across as openly dismissive."

That must have been a shock to Lilly. I wonder why she never mentioned this to me. Was she afraid that I might start getting second thoughts about applying here? After all, this kind of thing can probably happen to me too, though fortunately I don't have any craving for any tasks that put me in the public eye to begin with, so in my case they'd actually be doing me a favor.

"B-But... they changed their m-minds?"

"Lilly was really lucky that she had a supportive class. Particularly the person who was picked instead of her felt really bad about the situation and he told her that if she wanted to take it up with the faculty staff, he'd support her all the way. Several of her other classmates encouraged her not to give up either, so eventually the guy who got the assignment wrote a letter claiming he was passing up on the offer and Lilly wrote a letter asking for a second look-in. I recall the rest of the class put together a third letter with signatures of support that started with a few but eventually consisted of most of the class. The organization committee replied that they'd consider their options. Lilly eventually managed to get us the names of one of the committee members and Hiro and I dropped him a phone call to try and work things out. Well, I'm saying 'we', but it was mostly Hiro and that man exchanging pleasantries while politely phrasing their arguments. A few days later they relented. And a few days after that, Lilly called the boy who first got the assignment and asked him to fill in for her."

Ugh! No wonder Lilly's father was so angry this morning.

"So... t-that's why..."

"Yeah. This wasn't just a minor gig. It was *the* opportunity for Lilly to prove herself, and if she had passed it up today, she wouldn't have gotten a second chance later."

If I had known, I might have been even more upset with her than her father was.

"I... wouldn't have w-wanted her to... g-give up that for m-my sake."

"We know that, dear. But please try not to hold it against her. This was a very important event for her, but you're even more important to her. And I think that deep down she still feels awful about what happened here last year. I've noticed that even nowadays her smile falters for just a moment when you and your ronin year are brought up. Maybe an opportunity to make amends was more important to her than an opportunity to represent her school. To be honest, I'm not sure how I would have acted in her situation."

I'm not sure what I would have done either. I probably would have handled it much worse than Lilly has. I once rushed to break up with my boyfriend out of guilt. I might have been unable to convince myself that Lilly didn't secretly hate me and might have started avoiding her. Lilly never gave up on me or our friendship.

"It's okay."

Karla gives me a weary smile.

"You know, the support Lilly received from her class really surprised me. When she first came here, many of her classmates were awkward around her. When that other student was nominated people could have looked the other way or voiced some silent support while otherwise keeping quiet. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time social justice was sacrificed on the altar of social harmony. But in the end they picked Lilly's side. Heh, I think my faith in humanity has been given a little boost. I just hope this event won't be an exception to the rule."

"An... exception?"

"If she continues doing her best and keeps up her current grades, I don't think she's going to have a lot of trouble making it through university. It's what comes afterwards that worries me. School administrations might have people in them with a similar mindset to the people on the open house committee. And even if they don't, a handful of complaining parents might still cause them to retract their benefit of the doubt."

"You worry that s-she w-won't find work after g-graduating?"

Lilly's mother gives me a bitter smirk.

"When it comes to providing the disabled among their population with opportunities, or even publically acknowledging their presence, this country is still lagging behind many other developed nations. The extent to which both schools and workplaces are segregated is... rather jarring. It's not unheard of for people who attended a school like Yamaku to end up in a segregated workshop for people with disabilities, initially as part of a transitional phase into the regular job market, only to end up staying there permanently. That's why Yamaku has been pushing you guys so hard to aim high and build up a solid educational record."

She seems lost in thought for a moment and then smiles awkwardly.

"One of my husband's motivations used to be to try and ensure Lilly's financial future to the best of his ability under the assumption that she probably wouldn't be able to find work that she liked anyway. That way, she'd still be able to live her life the way she wanted to and be happy. Of course, knowing what we do now, a job she liked and living her life the way she wanted to seem to be very strongly connected."

Something about this feels familiar. Karla has recently spoken about this subject before. Suddenly a realization hits me.

"Ummm, w-was this the r-reason you started writing that article?"

Lilly's mother smiles.

"You're sharp, Hanako. I got the idea for my article when this whole thing started. The idea behind it was to do my part to raise public awareness of this kind of thing. I didn't know back then how this whole deal was going to play out, but..."

She gives me a brief disapproving look.

"...if the school had insisted on excluding Lilly, I very likely would have added a little exhibit A to my article."

She grins.

"Now I can end it on a slightly more positive note that'll hopefully inspire people and give them hope for the future. That includes you too."

I'm not really sure how to reply to that, so I simply nod. Part of me insists that her class helping Lilly out was simply due to the fact that she's pretty and socially adept rather than a strongly developed sense of justice playing any role and that it's highly unlikely that any classmate of mine would come to my aid like that. I consider myself neither pretty nor sociable. In fact, now that Karla has brought it up, I wonder if I'll ever be able to find work myself. Who would hire a person with facial scarring like mine.

Karla must have noticed my expression and frowns.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes."

She checks her watch.

"It's almost time to go back. Today's program ends at four o' clock. That's less than three hours from now. Or less than 180 minutes, if that feels shorter to you."

That actually feels like an eternity.

"Three hours..."

"It's probably gonna be tough, but I think that if you make it through all of this you'll sincerely feel better. Usually the situations that are the most uncomfortable have the highest payoff. Even if that payoff isn't immediately obvious."

My thoughts briefly return to my last chat session with Akira. Karla apologizing must have been agonizingly uncomfortable, and Akira's immediate reaction seemed luke-warm at best. But I nevertheless felt a slight change in Akira and she promised to come over for New Year and make a sincere effort to make it a fun day. Maybe this situation is similar.

I let out a pronounced sigh and then get back on my feet. Only 180 more minutes of hell left.

I try to take a casual glance at my watch without making it too obvious that I'm checking the time and then take a quick peek in my bag to look at my phone. It's probably been the fifth time I've checked the time the last 15 minutes. And it's probably been the tenth time during this lecture that I've checked to verify that my phone's turned off.

It's 15:10 right now. Only five more minutes. We arrived fairly early, but Lilly's mother insisted we'd take a seat near the front of the class. I've been hunched over my notes while the other people in the room were coming in. I can't shake the feeling that at least some of the people here recognized me as they passed me by.

It's 15:12 right now. I'm almost positive that the person sitting in the row behind me, a slightly thin-looking girl with a gold-colored hairpin is staring past my bangs. She was probably here last year too. In fact, I can almost swear half the class is watching me, but I'm afraid to turn my head and look around. I consider covering the right side of my face with my hand, but that will only make the scarring on the back of my hand more noticeable.

It's 15:14 right now. I wonder what the point of all of this is. Even if I make it in here, I'll just be a nervous wreck each day. I'll break down before the first week is over. Why am I even here?

"In 15 minutes, the faculty head will close off today's events with one last presentation in the hall one floor down. We are hoping to see all of you there."

My thoughts are interrupted by the teacher finishing up and people start getting up. Lilly's mother has already gathered her things and motions me to follow her. Looks like she wants us to get out of the classroom before we're caught in the middle of the crowd. I feverishly shove my pen and notebook into my bag and follow Karla into the hallway which is already rapidly filling up with people exiting the classrooms. I hurriedly follow Karla down the stairs, occasionally hiding behind her whenever someone else gets too close.

"Karla. Hanako. I was hoping to find you here. Well timed."

Startled by the sudden mention of my name, I recoil in surprise. Karla turns towards the source of the voice that greeted us and smiles.

"Hello, Hiro. I didn't expect to see you here already. Is Lilly with you?"

Mister Satou shakes his head.

"Her activities have already ended, but she is still talking to her classmates at her own faculty. I did not think my presence there was contributing any longer, so I decided to come here ahead of her. She assured me that she knows how to get here on her own."

"How did she do today?"

"I think if you had been there today you would have been quite proud of her."

I'm a little taken back by the way he phrased it, but Karla simply smiles cheerfully.

"That's great, isn't it Hanako?"

"Ah... Y-yes."

"And how are things over here?"

"Still hanging in there. Just one more lecture to go and we're home free. We were just on our way there, weren't we Hanako?"

"Ah..."

"The closing speech in the lecture hall?"

Lecture hall...

"That's the one. Seeing that you're already here, why not come with us? There's no point in just standing around in the entry hall for half an hour, right?"

"If neither one of you has any objections."

"Not me. Hanako?"

Lecture hall...

"Hanako?"

Realizing that they're waiting for my answer I reflexively shake my head, but my mind is elsewhere.

"Good. Then let us be off."

I've been anxious and on edge ever since we set foot here on campus, but to my extreme surprise there hasn't been a moment so far where I felt an actual panic attack approaching. However, part of the reason may have been that for most of the day, I've been actively trying to block the possibility that I'd end up where Karla said we're heading right now from my mind.

That strategy's usefulness has obviously worn off, and as I follow Karla down the hallway towards... that place... my feet start feeling like someone's filling my shoes with lead.

I feel like a condemned person being lead to the execution chamber.

What am I doing?

What was I thinking?

We've reached the double doors that lead to the hall. Lilly's parents turn around to face me, and I notice an expression of concern in their eyes. I'm probably as pale as a ghost right now. Eventually Karla gives me an unsure look.

"Hanako, this is probably very intimidating to you, but if you decide to go ahead with this then the two of us will just stick close, okay?"

"..."

"Hanako?"

"I... I..."

"We won't force you if you really don't want to go in."

Please don't tempt me. It's already hard enough to just be here.

But what choice do I have? In the end this is just a lecture hall. If I'd end up enrolling here I'll have at least some of my courses in this place. If I freak out each time I go in here, I might as well not attend this faculty at all.

I haven't really changed at all this year. My mind is still as frail as ever.

Last year, after I screwed up in here, my whole life fell apart again. I don't want to go through that again. I can't go through that again.

I really want to be stronger. I want to follow in Hisao's and Lilly's footsteps and join them here. I'm tired of lagging behind. I want to move on. I'm really, really afraid, but I also want to move on, and I don't think I can move on without going in here.

But I'm probably fooling myself. If I set foot in there, my mind will probably snap under the pressure. Maybe not immediately, but definitely before the lecture's over. I'll probably end up sprinting out of there again in a panic. And then what?

Then I'll also cause Lilly's parents to look bad in front of everyone. How would they take that?

"I... d-don't w-want t-to create t-trouble for you."

"Huh?"

"If... If I c-can't l-last in there and r-run away again, I'll m-make you l-look bad in front of everyone h-here too."

"You don't have to worry about us, Hanako. This is about you, not about us."

"B-But..."

04

"Hanako, if we were to get involved in a public spectacle then that would be... bad, but attending this lecture was probably meant to be part of your therapy so it may be worth taking the risk. If... If something happens... despite our best efforts to prevent it, then... it was something that was probably meant to happen and... we... will not hold it against you."

"Hiro..."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. You have my word. "

I look at Mister Satou and notice he seems almost as uncomfortable as I am. The idea of me panicking and them getting drawn into it is obviously making him uneasy.

"Y-You d-don't have to c-come along..."

Lilly's father lets out an indignant huff at my response.

"If you intend to go in there and tough it out then I can do no less. What is the worst thing that could happen? It certainly cannot be worse than a heart failure, and I have lasted through one of those."

Karla lets out a laugh that sounds surprisingly cheerful, even strangely happy.

"Hehehe, that's a very good attitude. I like that way of thinking."

She smiles proudly at both of us.

"Hiro... Hanako... Shall we go?"

I exchange one more glance with Lilly's father who slowly nods. And despite my terrible anxiety I find myself nodding back.

The die has been cast. No going back now.

I hope I won't end up regretting this.

We enter the double doors leading to the hall. Karla heads up the front with me following, partially hiding behind her. Hiroyuki follows close behind us.

05

The hall's already half-full, and a steady stream of people is coming in through the doors. How many people here were also here last year? How many people might recognize me?

Lilly's parents are already looking around for a suitable place to sit down.

"Hanako, where were you seated last time?"

"O... Over t-there."

"Then we will be sure to sit somewhere else this time."

"Karla, the row over there will probably be fine. If we sit too far away from the rest of the crowd we might attract attention."

"Uh, okay."

Lilly's mother gets into the row of seats her husband pointed out and gestures for me to sit down next to her. Lilly's father sits down on my left side afterwards, and I watch as the seats next to him and then the rows of seats behind us are slowly filled.

It feels like I'm standing in a giant tank that's slowly filling up with water.

In some ways, my current seat is in a better location than the one I had last year. At least people getting to their seats are less likely to notice me, and since Karla and Hiroyuki are both rather tall people they're doing a good job obscuring me from the people sitting on the same row.

On the other hand, I'm feeling more trapped than ever. I'd need to pass at least five people in order to get to the nearest aisle. If I break down now I'll literally have nowhere to go.

Lilly's parents assured me that if something happened, they'd escort me out of here with a minimum of fuss, but I wonder how well that'd go in practice.

I think there might even be more people in here now than there were last year. I shiver at the thought.

"Hanako?"

My thoughts are briefly interrupted by Lilly's father whispering my name. I try to look in his direction without turning my head too much and I notice he has his hand held out.

"Your cell phone please."

For a moment I'm confused but then I reach into my bag, get my cell phone out and place it in his hand. He briefly flips it open to verify that it's turned off, then closes it again and places it in his pocket after giving me a brief nod.

Maybe this is for the better. I turned my phone off on our way to the campus this morning, but I've nevertheless been almost obsessively checking it throughout the day. I really should have left it at Lilly's place.

The stream of people flowing into the hall has dried up, and one of the people standing near the doorway, probably the same person as last year, closes the doors and activates the large screen on the back wall before walking up to the microphone.

"I would like to welcome you all for taking time out of your busy schedule to visit us today. We hope you have been finding your visit educational and enjoyable so far..."

This sounds familiar and 'familiar' is a very bad thing right now.

"...and there are some who say that the rise of the internet will spell an end to newspapers and possibly even journalism. Let me say that one of these claims is an exaggeration and the other one is untrue. Newspaper membership is still extremely high in our country, newspapers will always continue to exist in some form or another and journalism maintains its role in society as it always has..."

20 more minutes to go. I notice that someone sitting a few rows in front of me briefly looks over his shoulder. Did they spot me? I press myself further into my seat and try to avoid his gaze to the best of my ability.

"...news organisations will have to get used to no longer being the ones to have the scoop on images of unexpected events as random passersby will often use their cell phone to take a picture of these

events as they witness them and upload it to their weblog. But there is more to news than a picture of an event as it takes place..."

15 more minutes. The atmosphere in here is starting to feel extremely oppressive, even suffocating, and I'm starting to feel slightly tight in the chest. This is bad. This place is getting to me. My eyes sweep over the crowd sitting in front of me. What if I lose it? What if I start hyperventilating or something? Everyone will see. I can't even get up and walk out of here.

"...it is up to the reporter to provide the big picture of events through investigative journalism. A random witness may help the world see the where and when of an event, but the public will always turn to the true journalist for answers on questions that eyewitnesses cannot answer such as why and how..."

06

10 more minutes. I'm starting to have difficulty breathing. My thoughts return to what happened last year. I was sitting in here just like I am now. Then suddenly my phone started ringing, I drew everyone's attention, and I completely lost it. I was too scared to even turn off my phone. Eventually I cracked, got up, started running and kept running... and running... and running. The fact that I drew even more attention to myself that way didn't matter. Nothing mattered except to get away from everyone and everything. I'm still not exactly sure how I ended up where Hisao found me. It's a blur in my mind. I remember running, like a maniac, my hands covering the right side of my face. At some point I nearly collided with someone, I tried to sidestep, lost my balance, fell down really hard, the pain didn't even register until later, everyone's eyes on me again, me scrambling to get up, even more frightened, running away even harder until I couldn't run anymore. Away from everyone. Far away.

The memories of last year's events start whirling around in my head and I slowly feel a sense of panic coming up. I'm starting to have trouble breathing despite my best efforts to keep a hold of myself. This is bad. This is very bad. This is... this is...

"Hanako?"

Suddenly I feel someone taking my right hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. I hear Karla's voice whispering to me.

"You're doing fine. Nothing's gonna happen. Just... take deep breaths... in and out... slowly. And go ahead and squeeze if you're feeling tense."

Breathe slowly. Breathe slowly.

In...

And out...

"That's it. Things are fine. Nobody's looking at you. Nobody's noticed you."

I struggle to keep my body from shutting down.

In...

And out...

"...of course, there is no need to take my word for it. If you take a look at the statistics of the last decade, you can see that they follow the trend that was just discussed."

The man in front of the microphone stops speaking and uses his remote control to show a series of slides containing graphs and numbers. He slowly and quietly runs through the slides, pausing after each one to give the information time to sink in.

The slides! This was the point where... it happened. After running away... after causing a spectacle in front of this entire hall... I somehow ended up near the place where we had lunch that day and hid away behind a small building so nobody could find me. There, I curled up until the panic started subsiding. But what came afterwards was no better...

"Nothing's gonna happen. Just breathe slowly. We're almost there."

...it was in fact much, much worse. With the panic disappearing my mind became coherent enough to realize what just happened... as well as all the implications that came with it. When I realized that I probably just burned the one bridge I couldn't afford to lose, a wave of despair came over me that was so powerful, so crushing, so all-encompassing that my mind promptly shut down again as that wave swallowed me whole. The whirlwind of horrible outcomes and scenarios didn't stop until much, much later.

I shiver uncontrollably at the mere thought of that moment.

"Only five more minutes, Hanako. Just hang in there."

"...and as with everything in life, things aren't handed to you on a platter. The only way to master a skill is to practice it since talent is often an unrefined gem at best. It is said that to truly master a skill, one needs to practice it around a 1000 hours."

"This is the last part, Hanako. He's finishing up."

Breathe slowly.

In...

And out...

"It's fine."

"Such a process takes a bit of talent and a little bit of luck, but above all it takes perseverance. The perseverance to see it all through."

"Just a little while longer, you're doing fine."

I close my eyes and try to keep my mind blank.

Breathe. Just breathe.

"My own headmaster used to say that it also takes a dull-witted mind that can weather such extreme repetition."

A polite chuckling can be heard throughout the hall.

"You're doing well."

"The Center Test and entrance exams are just ahead of you. Your perseverance, your talent, and that little bit of luck will be tested there. We at this faculty wish you good luck in the upcoming months and we hope to be able to welcome you as first years this upcoming spring. Thank you very much for coming here today, and we hope you'll have a safe journey home."

07

The speaker makes a quick bow, and the people in the hall erupt in thunderous applause that makes me flinch. Karla takes the opportunity to give me a quick pat on the shoulder.

"Hey, I guess this is it. The worst part is behind you now. We'll just wait for this place to clear out, and then we go back to Lilly and Hisao."

She smiles proudly at me.

"You've done well today, Hanako."

She grins.

"You kinda deserve an applause even more than that man in front does."

"N-Not really."

The applause around us slowly dies down and is replaced by a murmur as people start packing their things and getting up from their seats. I more or less keep my head down while the hall slowly empties out. The feeling of anxiety is still there, but the sense of panic I felt earlier has for the most part disappeared and right now I'm just feeling tired. Tired, but also baffled that I just sat through this whole thing, in this very place, without suffering a total breakdown.

Is it really over?

My mind still a jumble, I watch as the crowd forms two orderly lines and starts trickling out of the hall. As the lecture hall empties out, the oppressive atmosphere slowly disappears as well, and I let go of Karla's hand while breathing a long sigh of relief. Lilly's father lets out a soft chuckle as he watches his wife massage her hand a bit, and I realize with some embarrassment that I must have been squeezing it really hard.

"S-Sorry."

"Hey, it's okay. I told you you could squeeze if you were feeling tense."

"Let us know when you are ready to leave. We will... hmmmm..."

"Huh?"

08

Lilly's father cuts off his words mid-sentence and looks at the aisle on one side of the room. As I follow his gaze, the sense of relief I felt before is instantly replaced with a renewed feeling of terror. The man who gave the lecture this half hour has finished packing his things as well, but instead of leaving the now empty room he's walking up the aisle and is approaching us.

No...

No... no... no...

Not now... He'll recognize me... Don't get near me!

But before I can react I can feel a hand on my shoulder pressing me into my seat.

"Do not get up. Let us handle this."

Don't look at me!

I turn my head in Karla's direction in an attempt to keep my scars out of view as Hiroyuki gets up from his seat and walks up to the man approaching us, positioning himself between the speaker and me. He greets the man with a polite bow.

"Good afternoon and please excuse my niece. She has been... under the weather the last few days, and she briefly considered staying home before deciding that attending here was still more important. This day has been a bit taxing, so she is just taking some time to get her bearings back."

"I am truly sorry to hear that. If she is unwell then perhaps we could see if there's still a nurse on duty."

"I greatly appreciate your concern, but things are not quite so bad as to impose on you like that. A few minutes rest followed by a good night's sleep are all she needs."

"Then I will not trouble you any longer, and I am sorry that she couldn't experience this day the way we would have liked."

"Today may have been a bit draining on her, but it was still a most worthwhile visit. I believe this day has helped her to make an important choice regarding where she wants to go after the school year ends."

"That is encouraging to hear. Perhaps we will meet each other again at this very place during the welcoming ceremony next April."

"We may."

The man exchanges another bow with Lilly's father, and then he turns around and walks towards the exit. I watch him go, barely able to believe the confrontation I was dreading to have was averted just like that. Before he walks through the door he briefly turns around one last time, nods at us and then he's gone. Lilly's father turns to face us and gives us a satisfied nod.

09

"Well, that takes care of that."

"That was kind of close."

"Hmmm..."

With the last remaining source of my anxiety gone and the hall now completely empty safe for us, the realization that today's ordeal is now truly over finally sinks in. All the tension, anxiety and fear I've

kept bottled up inside the last several hours finally gets the better of me, and I break down, sobbing into my hands, the last of my resistance gone. I feel Karla putting a comforting arm around me. I hear Hiroyuki let out a sigh, and something soft is put in my hand. It's a neatly folded handkerchief.

"I will return to the building's entrance and wait for you there. Lilly and Mister Nakai have probably already arrived. I will let them know that things went well."

"Alright, Hiro. We'll be there soon as well."

Lilly's mother chuckles softly as her husband walks down the nearby aisle and then out of the door.

"Please don't hold it against him. He's always been a little uneasy with situations like these."

I just shake my head. I'm already grateful for him doing his part to get me through today. I feel embarrassed enough as it is that he and his wife had to see me this way.

It takes longer than I thought, but I eventually calm down enough to wipe my tears and put the pen and notepad (that were more there as a distraction than a genuine attempt to take notes) back in my bag. I feel a little awkward about the crying fit I had just now, but I have to admit it did feel cathartic. With all the tension and stress relieved I now feel a bit empty and more than a little exhausted too. We get up from our seats and walk up to the double doors leading to the hallway. As we pass through the doorway, I turn around and look back one last time. When we got here, entering these doors felt like entering an execution chamber. Now, with today's assignment behind me, the place being emptied out and the threat of a repeat of last year's fiasco no longer an issue, the lecture hall doesn't really look so intimidating anymore. Rather than the place of my nightmares, it's now simply a large empty room like Yamaku's gymnasium.

Still, I'm glad to be out of there.

Without a word, I follow Karla to the faculty building's entrance where her husband, Hisao and Lilly are waiting for us. The hard part of today is behind me.

"Hanako?"

"Hmmmm?"

"Hanako, wake up."

"Hmmm... L-Lilly?"

"Hehehe, did you hear that Hiro? If I'm being mistaken for our 19-year old daughter, I must look pretty young for my age."

"You do look rather young for someone approaching the age of..."

A sharp cough suddenly drowns out the end of that sentence.

"Okay, okay, no need to say the number out loud."

Still a bit drowsy, I open my eyes and examine my surroundings. I'm inside a car. A rather large car. As I rub my eyes I slowly become aware of the fact that I'm not alone in here. There are two people sitting in the front seats of the car and even though it's rather dark I think that both are currently looking at me.

"Hey there. Are you back with us, Hanako?"

I let out a yawn.

"Are we... there already?"

"We are. I have parked as close to the school gates as I could."

I take a look outside. Despite the darkness outside I easily recognize Yamaku's front gates. I never thought I'd be so happy to see these gates again even though I know deep down that it's not good to be this attached to a place.

After the activities at the journalism faculty ended, Karla and I headed for the entrance where we were greeted by Hisao, Lilly and her father. We drove back to Lilly's apartment where we had a quick meal, and we went our separate ways afterwards. I initially planned to head back to Yamaku by train, but after we left the campus the side effects of the intense stress I endured all day long finally caught up with me, and even at Lilly's place I found myself dozing off every ten minutes. The general consensus was that it wasn't a good idea for me to travel by train, so Lilly's parents offered to drive me to Yamaku and personally drop me off. I felt guilty after all they had already done for me today, but I was too tired to keep up a four-against-one argument and relented after only a brief protest.

I don't remember anything about the trip back so I must have slept like a rock until we finally reached the school gates.

"Well, I guess this is where we part ways. I'll drop you a mail or call later this week to wish you luck, okay?"

"Uh?"

Luck? Oh right, mock exams.

"Oh... ah... T-thank you."

I probably should say goodbye here. Lilly's parents are probably eager to get home as well.

On the other hand...

They still have quite a trip ahead of them. They've made a large detour just to drop me off here. And that's on top of everything else they've already done today. A simple thanks feels insufficient for all of that. I don't have much I can give back, but...

"Uh... M-Mister Hiroyuki... K-Karla... uh..."

"What is it?"

"C-Can I... g-get you s-something to d-drink before you h-head back?"

Lilly's mother frowns.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Hanako? You've had a really intensive day and you're probably still tired. You don't have to stay up on our behalf."

"I know, but I... I w-want to d-do something back. To s-show my appreciation."

Karla and Hiroyuki exchange a long glance until eventually the latter gives a curt nod.

"We will be honored to accept your hospitality."

"Well, it's decided then. Lead the way."

During this year, Miss Yumi has told me several times that if others go out of their way for me, I shouldn't wallow in guilt when I can't return the favor, but I should focus on being appreciative of those efforts instead. I feel like I'm finally starting to get the hang of this.

We get out of the car and make our way to the girls' dorm. As we enter the building I take a quick peek into the common room. I had been hoping to claim a quiet corner there, but the place is a lot more crowded than expected. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised seeing that this is a Sunday's evening. Even some of the 3rd years seem to be hanging out here despite the rapidly approaching mock exams. I could check out the kitchen area. Or...

Maybe it'll be alright if I...

"Hanako? This place seems a bit rowdy, don't you think?"

"Umm... T-this w-way please."

Feeling a bit awkward, I lead the Satous to the hallway outside my room. This is the first time either of them sets a foot inside. The only times I spoke to Karla without Lilly around, which were the time she agreed to sponsor The Broken Quills and the time when she visited Yamaku to interview people for her article, we made use of the common room. I didn't count on having visitors when I left here yesterday. I'm a little uneasy about them seeing the inside of my room. On the other hand, Naomi and Jun were able to hang out in my room without being put off by its plainness.

I take a deep breath and unlock the door to my room.

"G-Go on in. I'll b-be right b-back."

I hurry to the kitchen without waiting for a reply and start boiling water for the tea. While the water's heating up, I realize that I may have just left a very poor impression by walking off just like that. I was able to avoid their initial reaction to my room this way, and they'll have some time to practice a polite 'nice place you have here', but it's not exactly the way a proper host would act. This is certainly not the way Lilly would have handled things. But then again, Lilly isn't as horribly socially stunted as I am.

It feels like ages until the water reaches boiling temperature, and after filling a tea pot from my cupboard with hot water, I hurry back to my room.

When I enter my room, I find Karla and Hiroyuki sitting on the bed. Neither of them says a word as I fill two bowls and hand one to each of them before sitting down in my desk chair.

"Uh... P-please enjoy.

Lilly's father gives an approving nod.

"Thank you."

"Yes, thank you."

"N-No, I... uh... I should b-be the one saying that."

"Hmmm?"

"Uh..."

I fidget, not sure how to go about this. After what feels like an eternity, I finally push myself to say what I've been wanting to say since we arrived here.

"M-Mister Satou... Mrs. Satou... T-thank you... f-for supporting me t-today. I'm... r-really thankful. It's b-because of you... that... I made it... through."

Lilly's father shakes his head.

"Our contribution was but small. I think that for the most part your own perseverance was what saw you through."

I shake my head.

"I... m-might h-have b-been able to attend... one lecture... on m-my own... or maybe t-two, but... I probably... w-would have g-given up afterwards."

Karla scratches her head.

"You know, all things considered, that therapist of yours did take quite a gamble in sending you there on your own."

"Perhaps she was never meant to go there on her own and today was not just about confronting her apprehensions. Perhaps another point behind today's assignment was that there was never the need to face this challenge all by herself. That her support was a mere phonecall or e-mail away."

"You really think so?"

"It would make sense. If I remember correctly, Hanako's ronin year was a one-time opportunity. Come next spring, Miss Takawa will no longer be able to jump in when Hanako is faced with a daunting situation like today. Perhaps this was also for her own reassurance to see if Hanako would be able to reach out to others when faced with a challenge that might be too much for her to face on her own."

"Hmmm. What do you think, Hanako?"

I never really thought about that. I simply assumed Miss Yumi had gone crazy when she told me to visit another open house day. She of all people should know how likely it was that something, an event or simply the place itself, would act as a trigger and cause an anxiety attack. She did seem extremely pleased when I told her about having called Lilly who offered to come with me.

"I... d-don't know. It's definitely p-possible."

"Hehehe, in that case you had passed her test even before this whole day started."

"I'm n-not sure. I d-don't really feel like I... p-passed anything today."

"Even though you made it through today without dropping out half-way through?"

"I won't b-be able to function as a s-student there if I k-keep feeling the way I felt today."

"I think it was perfectly normal for you to feel the way you did today. I mean, things went really bad last year so it's perfectly natural to feel anxious the next time you go there. Any person would be uneasy. But I think... no... I know it'll be easier next time."

"I... d-don't know."

"My wife is correct. It will be easier next time. As you focus on your exams the upcoming months, remind yourself that despite last year's incident, nothing has happened today. Nothing has happened today, and nothing will happen the next time you go there. It may be difficult to convince yourself of that right now, but you still have over four months to let it sink in. Give it some time."

I wonder if it's really that simple.

"I..."

I feel a lump in my throat that I manage to swallow with supreme effort.

"I was... l-looking forward to finishing elementary s-school at f-first. I... used to h-have friends t-there, but after my accident I... l-lost all of them. L-Life there b-became very hard. I thought... entering m-middle school w-would be like a... n-new start. But... once I s-started g-going there, it only t-took a week f-for me to...t-to realize that n-nothing had changed. The p-people were d-different, but everything else was... the s-same."

"Oh, Hanako..."

Karla looks heartbroken and even Hiroyuki gives an understanding nod.

"Your anxiety is understandable, maybe even logical. But what you should remember is that history does not always repeat. Sometimes a situation merely appears to be similar to one from the past, yet it is very different beneath the surface. I believe this is one of those situations. I recall my own middle school years, as well as my own high school years, as being very stressful. There was always intense pressure: To keep up, to stay on top, to do well on every test, to meet extremely high expectations, to never disappoint, to excel, to reach a place only the nation's finest could reach... Always. I was probably not the only one expected to uphold a legacy. Not everyone handles that kind of pressure well. It is not uncommon for people to take their own stress out on others. That does not excuse their actions, of course. University, on the other hand, was different for me."

"D-Different?"

"I fondly recall my own university days, and most people I've known at work consider those times the most stress-free times of their life. Without the pressure to get into a particular university and without

the pressure of a full-time job yet, people could - for a while - relax, be themselves and live the way they wanted. The atmosphere was always more welcoming and friendly. School uniforms were no longer required, so suddenly there was much greater diversity - and greater acceptance of diversity. The environment was very different from middle and high school. It will probably be different for you as well. You should expect to get some initial awkwardness and stares, as Lilly did when she started attending, but people might get used to you quickly enough."

Hiroyuki looks a little awkward.

"I will confess that when I first met you, I caught myself staring a little as well, despite Lilly's urging not to."

Karla smiles sheepishly.

"I kind of did too at first. But that doesn't mean people aren't interested in getting to know you."

Hiroyuki gives me a quizzical look.

"Did you not catch yourself staring at other students from time to time when you started attending here?"

I probably did. Especially when others had easily noticeable conditions like missing limbs. I guess I'm not that much better than everyone else.

Karla gives me a warm smile.

"You know... Your facial scarring may stand out a little, but you get used to it really quickly. I... don't even really notice it myself anymore. And it's not very easy to spot from a distance because of your hair. I get that you were probably worried that people would recognize you today, but I don't think anyone did."

"That... teacher might have."

Hiroyuki shakes his head.

"He did not. I assure you."

How can he be so sure about that?

Lilly's father looks pensive for a moment and then takes a deep breath.

10

"I know this because he told me so himself."

WHAT?

Hiroyuki's words hit me like a truck, and I reel back in shock. Karla lets out a gasp and gives her husband a bewildered stare.

"Wait, what? Hiro? You... talked to that man?"

"I did. I went after him after I left the lecture hall and I... apologized for last year's incident on Hanako's behalf."

"Why? It wasn't really Hanako's fault, was it?"

Lilly's father chuckles briefly.

"Karla, do you still remember the night we met in Inverness? There were quite a few questions you asked me during our first outing, but there was one that seems relevant right now."

Lilly's mother thinks for a moment and then nods.

"You were profusely apologizing for your colleagues' intoxication and the inconvenience they were supposedly causing me while I was driving you guys to your hotel."

She softly snickers a bit.

"I think you apologized to me every time one of them even let out a single burp. I asked afterwards why you were taking responsibility for things that weren't your fault. I... uh... was curious why the Japanese were always apologizing so much."

"And I replied by asking you why westerners apologized so little when something went wrong."

They both chuckle briefly at the memory before Hiroyuki continues.

"What we concluded that night was that westerners see an apology as an admission of guilt, so they often apologize only when they feel they were in the wrong somehow. To the Japanese, on the other hand, an apology has a much broader meaning. It is often not an attempt to shoulder the blame, but a simple gesture to say: 'What happened is most regrettable. Let us put it aside and move on.' That was the kind of apology I made today. I did not assign any guilt to any party. It was not expected either."

Lilly's mother thinks about that for a moment.

"How did he react? Did he...?"

"The apology was appreciated and accepted, of course. We spent some time talking, and I learned how he experienced that incident last year."

Lilly's father turns to me.

"As I said before, Hanako, he did not recognize you today. Things went very quickly last year. What he remembered was a cell phone going off and eventually a girl with long, dark hair running out of the room with another girl following her shortly afterwards. But girls with long, dark hair are extremely common in Japan, so he did not make the connection when he saw you today. I think most people in attendance there will fail to make the connection as well. It has been a whole year, people went through a stressful exam season, and human memory is a fickle thing. Do you still remember what the people sitting next to us were wearing? I myself have already forgotten even now."

"I'm... n-not sure."

"He was a bit put off by his lecture being interrupted and confused why someone suddenly ran out of the room, but in the end it was a minor incident. Things went back to business as usual and people's phones going off at inopportune moments is something that is not uncommon in this day and age. It is

not something he would forever hold against someone, especially not after an apology. When we parted ways he told me to wish you well with your exams."

I'm completely dumbfounded by what I'm hearing.

"They k-know and they... still w-want me to attend t-there?"

Hiroyuki chuckles.

"Of course. The birth rate in our country has been declining for some time, and as a result the competition for pupils between schools has intensified over the last few years. They would be crazy to refuse a competent student over such a minor incident."

A stern expression appears on his face and his eyes stare directly into mine.

"Hanako, the students and student hopefuls there obviously do not remember last year's incident in specific detail and the school is more than willing to let bygones be bygones. Everyone else, it appears, has already moved on. The one thing that remains is for you to do the same. You cannot allow this matter to distract you any longer."

"I..."

I'm not really sure how to respond to that. My mind is still trying to sort everything out, but I know what's being expected of me, so I give a meek nod.

"I'll t-try."

Lilly's parents give an approving nod, and we spend some time just sitting there and finishing our tea. After I barely manage to suppress a yawn, Lilly's father shoots a glance at his wife.

"I suspect our host is getting tired. It would be best for us not to wear out our welcome."

"Uh, Hiro...?"

Karla leans in and whispers something in her husband's ear. He gives her a puzzled look.

"Are you certain?"

She nods, takes the notepad out of her bag and hands him a piece of paper.

"For good luck."

"This once then. This paper is hardly ideal."

He takes the piece of paper from his wife and starts meticulously folding it. None of us say a word as the paper in his hands slowly starts taking a different form. Eventually, he gives it one scrutinizing lookover and then hands it to me.

I look at the origami figure in my hands with an unsure look. It's a bit rough, but still recognizable.

"A... lion?"

Karla smiles and nods her head.

"Where I come from a lion is considered a symbol of courage. It felt like an appropriate memento of today. Be sure to keep it close in the upcoming days as a source of inspiration and as a reminder of how brave you can be."

"I'm... n-not very brave at all. I'm s-scared of a lot of things."

Hiroyuki shakes his head.

"I think you are confusing being brave with being fearless. Being fearless is not a healthy trait. Fear is a human defense mechanism and those who know no fear tend to have their lives ruined by their own recklessness. Being brave is being afraid... and still going forward in spite of that because the end results are worth the anxiety of the moment. Being brave is facing your fears. You have shown that you can do that."

"..."

Karla and Hiroyuki get up from the bed and put their bowls on my desk.

11

"If it is okay with you we will be taking our leave. It is still quite a ride back."

"Shall I drive us back, Hiro? You can take a nap in the car. I don't have to get up early tomorrow morning."

"Very well. Hanako, thank you for your hospitality."

"Thank... you... too."

Karla gives me a little pat on the shoulder.

"Hanako, there's one more thing we'd like to ask you. Do you have any plans for the upcoming New Year's Day? If you don't then... we'd be pleased to have you over again."

Her husband scrapes his throat.

"You will be expected to study, of course, with the Center Test being less than a month away at that point. But whatever breaks you allow yourself that day can be spent celebrating the start of the new year with us."

"Akira's promised to come over as well. She'd be very pleased to have you too. We all would, actually."

I blush a bit. Fortunately, Akira already clued me in on the possibility, so the invitation doesn't come as a complete surprise, and it doesn't take me very long to answer.

"Okay."

"Really?"

"R-Really."

"Wonderful. Sleep well tonight and good luck this week."

"Thank you."

I accompany the Satous to the building's entryway where we say our goodbyes and part ways. Rather than immediately returning to my room, I linger near the door and watch Lilly's parents walk down the path to the gate until they're out of sight. They're an odd couple if I ever saw one. Hiroyuki's walking slowly and carefully, but in a dignified manner despite the fact that nobody can see him. Karla's trying to match his pace and his manner of walking, yet there's a spring in her step that she can barely conceal. Yet despite their differences, they seem capable of connecting with each other, like earlier this evening when they briefly brought up the day of their meeting.

12

I return to my room, take off my clothes and put on my nightgown. I suppose I should go to bed now. Three weeks ago I made a studying schedule that covered all days until the mock exams. If I want to do better than last year, I'll have to make an effort to stick to it.

I don't think I'll be able to sleep easily tonight though.

Something Karla said earlier today pops back into my mind.

What really matters won't be whether you're feeling worse right now, but whether you'll be feeling worse at the end of the day.

I'm feeling different alright. I'm not sure how exactly I'm feeling, but it's a lot different than the mood of crushing despair I felt at this point in time last year.

I think the best way to describe my mood would be 'restless'. Even though I feel tired, countless thoughts keep whirling around in my head.

- It will be easier next time. -
- Nothing has happened today. -
- Nothing will happen the next time. -
- History does not always repeat. -
- The atmosphere was always more welcoming and friendly. -
- A greater acceptance of diversity. -
- The apology was appreciated and accepted, of course. -
- Human memory is a fickle thing. Do you still remember what the people sitting next to us were wearing? -
- When we parted ways he told me to wish you well with your exams. -
- Everyone else, it appears, has already moved on. The one thing that remains is for you to do the same. -

- Move on. -

- The one thing that remains is for you to do the same. -

-...for you to do the same. -

"Ugh..."

I rub my temples in an attempt to slow the torrent of thoughts.

Did everyone else really move on the day afterwards? Can I really pretend that nothing happened last year? Will things really be different? It seems hard to believe.

- You still have over four months to let it sink in. Give it some time. -

Can it really be that simple?

I don't want to lose another year to this.

- Let it sink in. -

I look at the study schedule on my desk. I have six hours planned for tomorrow. Nothing happened today, so maybe I can stop fretting over this until the mock exams are over. Nothing happened today, so maybe there's no immediate need to worry over it. Graduation is still four months away. Mock exams are in four days. Maybe I can stop worrying about this for four days.

Nothing happened today.

I take a pen and write a big '9:00 a.m' in bold letters on my schedule.

I'm going to make an effort to do well on the mock exams this year and focus only on the immediate future for the time being.

Because nothing happened today.

With my resolution for the upcoming week made, the thoughts surrounding Kasshoku slowly start dissipating, only to be replaced with something else.

Something much more personal.

- Akira's promised to come over as well. She'd be very pleased to have you too. We all would, actually.

-

I didn't think I'd get through today's activities scot-free, but to my surprise that's how things played out. I think that for the most part I have the Satous to thank for that. They came all the way there to see their daughter participate in a literature recital, but when they heard of my predicament they quickly adjusted their plans, and Karla spent the entire day acting as my support. And after Lilly's activities came to an end, Hiroyuki joined us and then went out of his way to smooth things over with the faculty and get me a clean slate. Then they drove by Yamaku to drop me off and give me a pep talk.

They really went out of their way for me today.

I take the little origami lion from my nightstand and run my fingers over it.

I'm not really sure what to think about all of this.

I wonder what the Satous are to me.

Even Naomi and Jun noted that I don't just seem to be a mere friend of their daughter. Karla diplomatically referred to me as an official friend of the family when my friends asked about it. Hiroyuki called me his niece today, though that was probably because I don't look half-foreign.

I've known them both for over a year now. Karla has always been very friendly and kind to me. It's taken a little bit longer for me to warm up to Hiroyuki, but I think today proved that he has a good heart underneath his strict exterior.

Or is it simply the fact that they're still grateful about last year? I kind of wish that 'debt of gratitude' that Lilly's father spoke of in the past wasn't there anymore. All it does is muddy the waters. Are they still trying to pay me back?

I'm not sure.

They seemed really sincere today, but...

It kind of clashes with the way Akira has always felt about them. I'm having a difficult time picturing the people who were in my room less than an hour ago to coldly leave behind their own children, yet that seems to be what happened in the past.

But apparently Karla recently apologized to Akira, and Akira seemed pretty shaken despite her tough talk.

I'm not really sure what they are to me - or what I am to them.

I open one of my desk drawers, reach inside and pick up the piece of paper hidden underneath several books. The piece of paper they gave me nearly a year ago. I take it out and sit down on my bed.

With a single signature, I could trigger the biggest change my life has undergone in a decade. A few strokes of ink on this paper and I'd once again have a family.

A mother...

A father...

And two loving sisters...

At least on paper...

If something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

Would they be able to truly accept me as one of them, or would I always remain an outsider?

And more importantly: would I be able to truly accept them?

Would I be able to address Hiroyuki and Karla as Father and Mother?

It feels sacrilegious, and I feel a sharp pang of guilt just thinking about it. My thoughts dwell on the parents I once had. The ones I lost eleven years ago.

Mother... who loved to do my hair each day, always telling me how beautiful she thought it was. Who liked to cuddle with me in bed on Sunday mornings and who lost her life trying to protect me.

Father... who asked me for a new drawing each week to pin to his computer monitor at work. Who played games with me on Sunday afternoons and who taught me how to play chess.

Would they feel happy for me or would they be hurt and feel like they were being replaced?

It hurts me just to think about it.

I wish I could talk to them one more time.

I look over the form in my hands once more, sigh softly and put it back beneath the books in my drawer, away from where the people who've been in my room this year could find it.

I lie down on my bed and look at the starry sky outside my window. I think I'll keep the curtains open so I won't risk oversleeping tomorrow morning. Maybe counting stars will help me sleep.

I get underneath the covers, taking the nearby plush puppy and teddy bear in my arms. As I start counting, I start murmuring the words Hiroyuki spoke earlier.

- Nothing happened today. -

- And nothing will happen next time. -

- Nothing happened today. -

- And nothing will happen next time. -

This has to be the world's oddest lullaby, but strangely enough it seems to work.

- Nothing happened today. -

- And nothing will happen next time. -

My eyelids slowly grow heavier.

- History doesn't always repeat. -

- Nothing happened today. -

- And nothing will happen next time. -

Before I drift off to sleep, for just a brief moment, I feel something. Something I don't feel very often and never expected to feel after today.

- Nothing happened today. -

Before I doze off, I feel...

- And nothing will happen next time. -

...a sense of hope.

13

Chapter 60 (???)

01

"Mother, what time is it?"

I take a look at the display on the dashboard of the car.

"Nearly half past nine. Looks like we've arrived here right on schedule. They said they were going to call it a day around this time, didn't they?"

"Yes. When I called her earlier today, Hanako said that they're trying to limit their late-night studying because of Naomi. They started this morning around half past seven, and they've been cramming for most of the day. Naomi's supposed to stick to nine hours of sleep each day, so she'll probably need to go to bed soon."

"Well in that case let's not keep them waiting."

We exit the car and head through the parking lot to the front gate. I give my daughter a sidelong glance.

"You still remember how to navigate this place?"

"It's been a while since I've walked this campus, but I should be okay. I have spent three years of my life here after all."

Lilly smiles as she continues.

"That feels like such a long time ago already."

"Nearly a year. Time flies, huh?"

"It sure does. I feel a little nostalgic walking around here again."

"Ever felt like going back?"

My daughter flashes me a playful smile.

"Sometimes. Just not yet. And not as a student."

"Hahaha, point taken."

"University took some getting used to, but the way things are now I wouldn't want to turn back the clock. Besides, moving on is a part of life."

"Let's hope that Hanako feels the same."

My daughter remains silent for a moment and then nods.

"Hanako's situation is different from my own. Yamaku has been much more than a mere boarding school to her. I've been trying to put myself in her shoes, but I don't think I'll ever be in a position to know exactly how she feels."

"Well, the school's probably not going to allow her to stay for another year, so let's hope she's gonna pull through where she stumbled before."

"She has already made it through the National Center Test again. If she's... emotionally ready for it, I'm certain she'll do fine on her upcoming entrance exam as well. It's possible I'm engaging in wishful thinking, but I have the impression that she's a little more ready for it this time around."

"I got that impression as well when she dropped by at New Year's Day. Hey Lilly, I've been thinking... Maybe everything that's happened was meant to play out this way. Hanako's had a lot of baggage to sort out, and I can't help but feel that she needed the extra time. What do you think?"

"To be honest I've been considering this as well, Mother. Although it still doesn't change the way I feel about what happened last year."

"You know... My own mother used to tell me that God works in mysterious ways. It often involves bad things happening and people getting hurt, but in the end you find out that there's been a long-term benefits game played. Heh, kind of reminds me of your dad in that respect."

Lilly giggles.

"Isn't that blasphemy, Mother?"

"Hey, it's a compliment!"

I scratch my head as we reach the entrance to the main building.

"Lilly, this doesn't look like the girls' dorms. Heh, are you sure you still know your way around here?"

"Hanako still has her set of keys to the library, and she and her friends have been studying there after closing hours. She promised to keep the doors unlocked for us."

"Let's not keep her waiting then."

I follow Lilly into the main building, watching with a bit of fascination as she uses the nearby handrails and walls to navigate her way to our destination without breaking stride. I really shouldn't be impressed anymore by what's essentially a second nature to her, but sometimes I can't help myself. When we reach the door that leads to the library, Lilly delivers three measured knocks on it. We wait a moment, but there's no response.

"Unless they're sitting right in front of the door, I don't think they could have heard those, Lilly. Let's just go inside. Hanako said that the door would be unlocked, right?"

"Yes."

We quietly open the door and go inside. I notice that only one corner of the library is lit, and in that corner, sitting at one of the tables, are three girls. Even from this distance I can make out Hanako's long, flowing hair, Naomi's bleached hairdo and Jun's brown hair underneath a red cap. The table they're sitting at is almost completely covered with books, notes and writing implements. Only one corner is occupied by other things, namely a collection of bowls, thermos bottles, a few bags of snacks and the leftovers of a takeout meal. Near the table is a small electronic heater against the chilly temperature in the room. I whisper to my daughter.

"They're sitting at the table at two o' clock. You know, they look so busy, I feel a bit guilty for imposing on them."

We approach the table until Naomi notices us, gets up and gives us an enthusiastic wave.

"Mrs. Sponsor! Welcome!"

Hanako, who was sitting with her back to the door, gets up and walks up to us.

"Hi Lilly. Hi Karla. It's good... to see you again."

Lilly walks up to her best friend and gives her a loving hug.

"Hanako, congratulations once more on successfully passing the National Center Test again. You've done really well."

Naomi gives us a mock-offended pout.

"No congratulations for us? All three of us are still in the running, you know? Last year I already dropped out at this point."

I grin.

"All three of you did great. When the three of you spent the weekend at our place I could already see how well you all work together. All of you successfully passing the Center Test merely confirms this once again. You've brought great honor to The Broken Quills, and your sponsor is very pleased with all of you. Now all that remains is to finish what you've started. Onwards and remember: The quill may be broken..."

"...but it will never be silenced!"

Lilly giggles as Hanako, Naomi and Jun finish my sentence in perfect unison. This is probably the first time she's heard the club's official motto.

"Keep fighting the good fight, you three."

"YES MA'AM!"

In contrast to Naomi's excited cheer, Jun merely giggles.

"We'll do our best, Mrs. Satou. By the way, would you like some tea? We still have some left here."

"Umm... Jun? I'd... rather make some fresh tea for them."

"Here?"

"In the dorms."

"So we'll be calling it a day? Well, it'll be good to relax for a bit before Naomi has to take her beauty sleep. We'll need to be up early again tomorrow."

"I second that."

The girls load their supplies into their backpacks, and after Hanako has put the heater into the storage room and locked up the library we leave for the girls' dorm. Upon reaching the hallway outside the dormitory's kitchen, Hanako turns to us.

"Uh... p-please make yourselves comfortable. I'll go and make us some tea."

"Hanako? Would you allow me to assist you? It'll be good to relive some of the good old times while I'm here."

"Okay, Lilly."

As Hanako and Lilly enter the kitchen to prepare our drinks, I turn to Hanako's studying companions.

"So how are things holding up for you two?"

Naomi shrugs.

"Okay, I guess. I've had a few seizures over the last weeks, but they weren't as dramatic as the ones I had last year. They were more like blackouts than shortouts. I lucked out and didn't have any on the days of the Center Test itself. That nine-hours-of-sleep-a-day-schedule is a pain, but at least my seizures are much more infrequent now than they were the year before. I'll just have to try and study as efficiently as I can."

"That sounds like a plan. You know, this is just my personal opinion, but seeing how extremely focused Japanese exams are on rote memorization, I don't think pulling all-nighters is going to make much of a difference. When you're sleep-deprived the memory is often one of the first things to go."

"I still think nine hours is overdoing it, but for now I'm stuck with it. Hanako and Jun aren't allowing me to cheat, and if I don't follow my schedule then I think the head nurse is gonna have me kicked out of here before I can even make it to examination day."

"So the school has no objections to you studying here?"

"They probably wouldn't allow me to participate in any supplementary lessons, but they don't seem to have a problem with me studying on the school grounds. Good thing too. Gotta keep Jun and Hanako motivated."

Judging from Jun's obvious eyeroll at Naomi's last remark, her position of team motivator is a self-appointed one.

"So where do you sleep during your stay here?"

"Usually in Hanako's or Jun's room. I brought my own futon along with me. I usually switch every night."

"Usually?"

"Heh, don't tell this to anyone else, but I've pulled a Hanako a few times too."

I laugh. What a weird saying.

"You'll have to explain that term to me."

Jun grins.

"Pulling a Hanako is the practice of curling up on one of the library's beanbags and taking a nap there. Naomi and I have named the practice after its inventor - much to her embarrassment."

"Haha, I'll avoid bringing it up then. By the way, wouldn't it be safer to let Naomi sleep in Hanako's room all the time? Your... conditions... are not exactly compatible, are they?"

"It's not that bad. If Naomi has an episode while staying with me, I simply call a nurse and let her handle things. It's not like we're sharing a bed or something."

"Yeah, I also don't want to impose on Hanako too much. She likes her privacy, you know? I don't want to wear out my welcome just yet. I think I'm already stretching her hospitality enough as it is."

I give an understanding nod. Hanako's dorm room is the closest thing she has to a home. I get why she's usually reluctant to let people enter there.

"Yes, this seems like a good compromise. By the way, you're studying for different exams right now, aren't you?"

Jun nods her head.

"I'm aiming for a study in information technology. Its entrance exam involves a lot of mathematics, so it's radically different from the one Naomi and Hanako are studying for. I think I'm the only girl in school heading in that direction right now, so rather than seek out some guy I don't know very well but who's also into IT-stuff and spend nearly twelve hours a day in a room with him, I decided to join these two. They often can't help me when I don't get a mathematical problem, but the atmosphere's pretty good and that's very important too."

Naomi grins.

"Yup. If we screw this up it won't be due to a lack of drive. All we have to fear is a stroke of bad luck."

Given that the event that forced her to drop out last year could easily repeat itself this year, I admire Naomi's spirit.

"Perhaps I can help with that. Lilly and I bought some good luck charms today. I'd like each of you to have one. It's not much, but maybe it'll help a bit. Please take them."

I open my bag and take two charms out of it that I hand to Jun and Naomi. Both of them look quite surprised.

"Awww, that's so sweet. Thanks."

"You really shouldn't have."

"It's okay. Like you said, there's still a bit of luck involved. Hopefully it'll be good this year and all three of you pass your entrance exams."

"With the Center Test behind us, we're already half-way there. We'll just take it one day at a time, right?"

"Right."

Our conversation ends as we see Hanako and Lilly walking back into the room. Lilly has a tea pot in her hand, and Hanako's holding several bowls and some snacks. I throw another look at Naomi and Jun.

"Want to join us for tea?"

Naomi shakes her head.

"I can't go drinking caffeine this close to bedtime. Sorry. I'm gonna go and get myself a soft drink and then take a hot shower. Best thing to do before hitting the sack."

"I still have my mail and a few forums to check before bed, so I think I'll pass as well. Besides, I assume you came here to spend time with Hanako. It's probably more appropriate that you spend some time alone with her."

"Well, good luck in the upcoming weeks, you two."

Jun and Naomi give me a polite bow, exchange a few words with Hanako and then walk off. I turn to Hanako and Lilly.

"Do you two want to find a spot in the common room?"

"It's... a little crowded there right now. Can we go to m-my room instead?"

"I'm fine with that, Hanako."

"Me too. Let's go there. Do you want me to help either of you carry something?"

"It's okay."

02

We make our way to Hanako's dorm room where Hanako and Lilly sit down on the bed, and I take a seat in Hanako's chair. We take some time to relax, and I take this opportunity to give Hanako her good luck charm too.

"T-Thanks."

"To be very honest, I don't think that someone who has passed the National Center Test twice is in great need of it, but hopefully it'll still help."

Hanako fidgets a bit, still not really comfortable with praise.

"I'll k-keep it close."

As Hanako puts the charm on her nightstand, Lilly takes a sip of her tea and then poses the question that's probably been on her mind for some time.

"Hanako, it must be tough to spend so much time cramming once again. Are you... looking forward to the end of examination season?"

Most students around here would probably immediately say yes. But Hanako's situation's probably a little different from most. She's got a good head on her shoulders, that much is certain. Nobody ever believed her failure to pass her entrance exam last year was due to a lack of academic skills. The actual issue that became a spanner in the works had nothing to do with studying. That's both a relief and a worry. It means she has a good chance to make it in this year, but only if her heart is in it this time. If not, no amount of studying will help.

Hanako doesn't immediately answer. She closes her eyes and takes her time to think about Lilly's question.

When I accompanied her on that open house day nearly three months ago, I was worried that we were going to get a repeat of last year and that she'd be too worked up to focus on studying. But a few days later we received word that she passed her mock exams this time with an overall score of seventy six, and when she stayed at our home on New Year's Day, she seemed nervous, but not downright anxious or depressed. Maybe she managed to bounce back this time after all.

"I'm... not really sure. I'm trying not to think too hard about the f-future and just concentrate on studying. I think that's... best for now. I've been trying to take inspiration from Naomi."

Lilly looks puzzled at that.

"From Naomi?"

Hanako nods.

"Naomi was forced to drop out last year b-because of a seizure. She's had some seizures since she came here to study with us. N-Not all that many, but... j-just enough to remind us that the risk is still there. She says she's dealing with the uncertainty by c-concentrating on the present and just trying to get through this one day at a time without worrying about what m-might happen the day afterwards. I'm... trying to do the same. I'm... n-not sure how well I'd do at university, but... I want to pass m-my exam, and I'm t-trying not to look or worry about things beyond that. I'll have t-time to t-think about it afterwards."

"Hehe, you're a tough young lady, you know that? I think you'll do fine."

She fidgets a little again and softly shakes her head, but there's a small trace of a smile on her face.

I give Hanako a conspiring look.

"You know, you do make me wonder about something. Does focusing completely on the present and living from day to day mean you're not preparing anything for Valentine's Day? That's in two weeks, isn't it?"

Hanako blushes at my remark, then smiles and shakes her head.

"N-Not really. Hisao said... that the best Valentine's gift for him from me would be if I passed my exams and b-became part of his everyday life again."

Lilly nods.

"There's a lot of truth in that statement. Gifts are nice, but no gift could compare to simply having you there with us again."

"We... d-decided to not to do gifts this time and d-do something together after... everything's over. To celebrate both Valentine's Day and White Day. And... m-maybe my... exam r-results too."

"Like a vacation?"

"Maybe. We haven't really talked about it much yet."

I snicker.

"Lilly's already having a field day with all the courtesy chocolate for her male classmates. The fact that there are more males than females in her class means it's almost like a day job."

Lilly grins.

"At least that means that in a month, on White Day, I'll get plenty of presents back."

"Yeah, your first White Day at a new school ought to be one heck of an experience. Expecting any confessions or love chocolate?"

Lilly smiles and shakes her head.

"Not at the moment. Fortunately, courtesy chocolate is quite tasty too."

"You seem pretty sure about that. You're positive you're not going to get at least one box of special chocolate..."

I pause a moment for dramatic effect and then continue while throwing a sneaky wink in Hanako's direction.

"...in return?"

Lilly's cringe isn't as obvious as I was hoping for, but it's still noticeable enough to draw Hanako's attention and she lets out a gasp, followed by a broad smile.

"L-Lilly?"

"Mother... I think you may be jumping to conclusions."

"Maybe. But I notice that you're not telling me that I may be jumping to the wrong conclusions."

"I'm not sure how I'm expected to react to that."

I shrug.

"If you really want to keep tight-lipped about it, then I won't keep badgering you. But if there's anything you do wish to share, this might not be a bad time. What's probably not a good idea is to keep dancing around the issue. You're sharing a room with two journalists who have a nose for that kind of thing and being evasive is like putting up a big, fat 'investigate me'-sign that cannot be ignored."

"You certainly are curious."

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't have studied journalism, dear. But I don't think I'm the only one. Hanako looks kind of interested too."

Hanako fidgets a bit, not really happy to be drawn into the conversation, but obviously not ready to deny her interest either.

"If L-Lilly doesn't want to talk about it..."

"It feels a bit like I'm being ganged up on here."

Lilly sighs softly.

"I don't think there's a lot to tell, but if you want to speculate I will tell you whether you're warm or cold."

I turn to Hanako.

"When I came to pick Lilly up today, her cupboard was filled with little boxes containing courtesy chocolate. It's still kind of early, but I guess she wanted to get it out of the way. The amount of boxes happened to be the same as the amount of males in her class."

"I'm surprised you can recall the exact amount of boys in my class, Mother."

"Well, I did accompany you to school for a while, remember? Anyway, all that courtesy chocolate was standard store-bought stuff. But there was also a half-full box of cocoa powder in your cupboard and that's not on your usual shopping list. So I got curious, and while I was in your room I noticed a box partially filled with chocolates under your bed. I guess you're making those chocolates yourself, but you're not finished with them yet. I thought it was impressive, by the way."

Hanako smiles.

"I think so too. I'm sure it'll be appreciated by the... recipient."

"I take it that she didn't tell you that she was planning this, Hanako?"

"No. This is a surprise to me too."

I grin at my daughter.

"Warm or cold, Lilly?"

Lilly gives us a weary, almost resigned smile.

"You are rather warm, Mother. But like I said before, your conclusions might be a little premature."

Hanako turns towards her friend.

"You're... not sure yet whether to actually give them or not?"

"It's not meant to be a veiled confession. More like a sign of... above average appreciation. I'm still debating with myself on whether it's the right time or not. If it isn't, I'll make do with just the courtesy chocolate I have. Although... to be very honest... just courtesy chocolate wouldn't feel completely right either."

I rub my chin.

"So you also have courtesy chocolate for him, and if you decide it's 'the right time' then you'll give him your home-made gift somewhere in private, isn't that right?"

"Something like that."

"If the courtesy chocolate I saw on the table was all you have stocked for next week and you also have a batch for the person we're talking about then that person must indeed be a classmate of yours or the numbers wouldn't add up. I don't see you excluding one guy in class with this kind of thing. That narrows things down a bit. Heh, seeing that he's in your class, I've definitely already laid eyes on him before. Now I just need to determine what guy you'd be most likely to go for."

"..."

Lilly looks a bit uneasy at my deduction and doesn't answer. This is probably going way too fast for her. Hanako, on the other hand, suddenly gets a tiny sparkle in her eyes.

"Lilly? Is it *that* boy?"

Sounds like Hanako is in on some information I don't know about.

"Assistant-reporter Hanako, if you have some exclusive information that could help us solve this mystery then now would be a good time to share it. Lilly did say that we were free to speculate, didn't she?"

Hanako giggles a bit at the way I addressed her, but still looks to Lilly as if waiting for permission.

"Um... L-Lilly?"

"To be honest I already regret saying what I just said, but go ahead, Hanako."

After a moment of hesitation, Hanako turns to me.

"During the... open house day, you told me that one of Lilly's classmates was chosen to... represent their class, but he threw his support behind Lilly instead. I believe that Lilly... invited him for dinner the week after. Now I'm wondering if they're... the same person."

"You invited him for dinner at your place?"

Lilly nods.

"I did. My participation in our faculty's events wouldn't have been possible without his support. I wanted to show him that I appreciated his efforts, especially since he's not the most extroverted person in class, and we hadn't really interacted much with each other prior to the ordeal with the committee. So I extended him an invitation into my home and cooked him dinner. I felt it was a good idea to get to know him a little better because I was curious about something."

Hanako almost immediately gives an understanding nod.

"You... wanted to know why?"

"Heh, you wanted to know if his actions were motivated by pity or by something else."

Lilly gives us a sheepish smile.

"I hope you two don't think any less of me for this kind of thinking."

"Seeing how your school year started with more than a wee bit of awkwardness, I can't really blame you."

"Fortunately my fears turned out to be unfounded. We've been on fairly good terms ever since."

"And now you're gonna give him some hand-made chocolate."

"As I said, I'm still thinking about it."

"You said earlier that you didn't know whether it was the right time or not. You think it's too early? I recall that Hisao enrolled at Yamaku in June and by the time you guys came to Scotland he was already in a relationship with Hanako. Things went pretty quickly between the two of you, didn't they?"

Hanako blushes a bit, but then smiles and nods.

"We started dating only six weeks after we first met each other. I... really surprised myself with that."

Lilly grins.

"You surprised me too. But it's not about that. It's just... there's an eventful time coming up, Hanako. Within just a little less than two months, you'll probably be moving in. I want to help you get settled and take some time getting used to life with a roommate. It'll be a change for me too, though certainly not a bad one."

"Uh... You really don't have to take me into account."

"Well, she does have a point, Hanako. Assuming you make it into the same university as Lilly, there's no guarantee of a smooth start. Things took some getting used to even for Lilly. If I were in your position, I'd appreciate the ability to have some peace and quiet in a private place with nobody but Lilly and maybe Hisao around. You don't know in advance whether things are gonna get stressful or not."

"B-But..."

"On the other hand, Lilly, it almost sounds like you're trying to keep some sort of schedule here. Which is pretty pointless because you can't plan stuff like this. Ever. Let's assume you go through with that Valentine gift. He might not reciprocate immediately or even not at all. He might bide his time to send you a gift of his own on White Day or he might decide that a month is too long a wait. He might decide to take things slowly and schedule a date or he might give you a confession on the spot. That's just a fraction of the scenarios that could take place. Which one is most likely in your opinion?"

Lilly looks sincerely flustered

"That's... difficult to say."

"Heh, get what I mean?"

"I think I do. But... even so, I'd like to think on it a little bit."

"Hmmm."

My gut tells me that this isn't all there is to it. Lilly seems more reluctant about this than I was expecting. Is it just because she wants to make sure she's available for Hanako at the start of the next school year. But even if Lilly were to get involved with someone I don't think it would really influence the amount of time and support she'd try to give Hanako. The guy would understand, wouldn't he? He'd better. After all, I don't think Lilly would be serious about someone who...

Right... that explains things.

"Lillian?"

"Ah... Mother, why are you addressing me with...?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can."

"What if you got involved with someone, and then it turned out that he and your upcoming roommate didn't mix very well with one another?"

"Ah..."

Hanako'd probably make an effort to keep her skittishness under control, but it took her quite some time to really warm up to Hiro and me. Probably over a year. I can imagine that not everyone would have the patience to deal with Hanako's awkwardness for months on end or longer. I see Lilly tensing up for just a moment. Looks like I hit the bullseye. Hanako looks very uncomfortable too.

"L-Lilly, you'd never... w-would you?"

"I really think we're getting ahead of ourselves."

"Yeah, we probably are, but I can imagine why it's tempting to just hold off the boat for the time being and not get too attached to someone before you know for certain he gets along well with your friends. It can save you a lot of heartache."

"I think the same is true for family, Mother."

Yeah...

I really wonder how things would have played out if Hiro and I had done things differently in the past.

"...I guess so."

I don't think I was entirely successful at keeping the melancholic tone out of my voice as Lilly's ears perk up and a concerned frown appears on her face.

"Is something the matter, Mother?"

03

"Nothing important. It's just... What you said just now made me wonder. What if you got involved with someone you really cared about, Lilly? And what if that person really cared about you? But your family wasn't happy with the person you were with? What would you do? Would you elope and try to forget your family, starting somewhere else with a clean slate? Or would you cut ties with the person you were with so you could continue living the life you had before you met that special someone?"

Lilly giggles awkwardly.

"That's a bit of a heavy-handed question, Mother. I toy with the idea of sending someone a Valentine's gift and you start talking about eloping almost immediately. Don't you think that's a bit of an overreaction?"

"Huh? Oh, there's no direct relationship. I'm just speaking hypothetically. I was interested in your point of view."

Lilly nods and takes some time to think.

"I think I've been in a similar situation not too long ago. When you and Father summoned me to Scotland, I was faced with the choice of abandoning the life and friends I had here or abandoning the chance to reconnect with my family and stay with Akira. It's not a choice I would wish on anyone."

How ironic that I ended up putting two of the people I care most about through a similar situation. History may not always repeat itself, but sometimes it does.

"I'm sorry, Lilly."

"It's okay, Mother. In the end, I do not believe that the choice was ever that black and white to begin with. There's often a third option between two extremes, and in the end, I'm really glad I took it. In the situation you described earlier, I could see myself doing the same. I would try to bring the two sides together, no matter how hard it seemed. Giving up on that would be giving up on who I am. I do not wish being forced to choose between loved ones ever again."

"No matter how hard it would be?"

My daughter gives me a playful smile.

"No matter how hard it would be. You have been warned."

Both Lilly and Hanako giggle at this. I'd probably do the same if the whole thing didn't feel so bittersweet to me.

"Heh, can't say I'm surprised at this. I'd be shocked if you had said anything different. And yet..."

"Mother... is anything wrong? You sound... almost sad."

"Just thinking about stuff."

"I don't understand why you asked me this question to begin with. Why dwell on such extreme situations?"

"Context, I suppose..."

"Context?"

"There's a promise I made to someone a little while ago. A promise to tell you a few things. What we just talked about fits into that."

"A few things?"

"Yes. This seems to be a good opportunity. Though I won't force you to listen."

Lilly's expression turns worried.

"If there's something you wish to share with me, I will listen. Is this about... you and Father?"

"Hehehe, don't worry, the two of us are doing fine. This isn't about anything that's happening now, but about something that has happened in the past."

Lilly nods.

"Very well then."

Hanako gives me an unsure look.

"Should I... leave you two alone?"

I shake my head.

"No, I think it'd be best if you stayed here. This is something you should probably hear as well."

Lilly looks puzzled.

"What's this about?"

"It's about what you said earlier. About bringing two sides together, no matter how hard it seems. About not being forced to choose between loved ones. It's an admirable mindset and not an unfamiliar one. Someone I know has always possessed the same mindset."

"Who?"

"Your father."

"Father? But..."

She thinks for a moment and then nods.

"Grandfather and Grandmother didn't approve of you when they first met you?"

"For a long time they didn't even know of my existence. Until we decided to get married, we kept our relationship a secret. When I first met your grandfather, your dad introduced me as a reporter planning to include the family company in an article. Your dad wanted to try the slow-and-steady method of introducing me, arranging initially 'coincidental' meetings and allowing them to slowly get to know me before taking the step of revealing our relationship. In the end, that approach was cut short before it could reap tangible results."

"They found out about you?"

"No. They merely became concerned with your father's ongoing status as an unmarried man and started taking steps to change that. They started planning meetings with bridal candidates for him. Your father was at a loss on how to deal with them. By the time he realized that stalling wasn't going to help, the fourth candidate had already been turned down."

"I never knew that. How did you and Father deal with this?"

"We knew that our options were limited, and time was running out. Your father didn't want to choose between me and his family, so we decided then and there that we wanted to get married. Hiro was faced with the intimidating task of confronting his parents and telling them about me, our relationship and our plans. He warned me that I'd likely be rejected, but promised me to give it his all. I promised in return that if his parents were to give in, I'd do my best to be a good and proper wife for him, even though it meant giving up a job I loved. And so your father went off to confront his parents - probably for the first time in his life."

"And apparently he succeeded or I wouldn't be here."

"I wasn't there when he spoke to them. But I talked to him on the phone afterwards. He sounded shaken and ill, but he said that his parents were 'considering their options'. I initially thought that was simply a polite way to refuse, but I later learned that your father's words were pretty much spot on when I got an unexpected visitor. Your grandfather dropped by to talk to me."

"How did it go?"

"When I was first introduced to him, your grandfather was very friendly and polite and quick to praise me to high heaven. When he visited me in my apartment though, there was something different about him. He was still smiling, but that smile didn't reach his eyes. It was kind of unsettling."

"At least he took the time to talk to you."

"He couldn't just ignore me. You see, over the course of our relationship I spent quite a bit of effort on scoping out business opportunities for your father's company whenever I was in the UK. I had a large network of contacts from my days as a business reporter that I was able to make use of. In fact, the company that was later bought by Satou Medical Technology and eventually evolved into what is now head office was a place I checked out and then recommended to your father who in turn passed it on to other folks in the company. His sense of obligation forced your grandfather to deal with me in one way or another."

Hiro was at first reluctant to bring it up, but I suppose he eventually decided to mention it anyway.

"I did my best to be hospitable and polite to him. Since he started his visit with an abundance of small talk, I thought at first that he simply came to get a better impression of me. But then he started to talk about how he heard that the company was in my debt, and he came here partially for the reason of settling that. He offered me a small part of his own shares as compensation for my efforts. I wouldn't be able to attend board meetings of course, but those shares would have still made me a nice sum of money if the company kept doing well."

I have no doubt that he was motivated by a real desire to settle a debt he felt he owed, but I also felt like accepting that offer would be akin to selling out.

"I argued that I wasn't interested in money and I simply did what I did because his son was part of the company, and I wanted it to do well because I cared about him. That led us to the main reason of his visit: his son. I was baffled when his own take on the situation came up. He described the situation as a crisis in the family that, if left untended, could turn into a crisis in the company. He felt like his son had turned into someone he barely even recognized, and he felt it was up to him to get his son back to his senses. I personally thought he was overdramatizing the situation, though of course I didn't tell him that."

Hanako frowns.

"A company crisis?"

"Uhuh. Hiro never told me how exactly his fateful talk with his parents played out, but I strongly suspect that things eventually escalated to the point where he at least suggested the possibility of eloping. That's probably what got his father so spooked. Well, that and the fact that Hiro never went against his parents before. He was pretty much the perfect son and successor: smart, a hard worker and well-regarded at the office. Suddenly dropping everything and walking out of his father's life would probably have caused quite a scandal."

"Would Father really have done that?"

"No, he wouldn't have. Ever since his second birthday he's been groomed to follow in his own father's footsteps someday. He spent nearly 25 years pushing himself to his limits to be the best he could. Throwing that away after all that time would have been like discarding a large part of his identity and would have made him feel like the first two decades of his life had no meaning. Also, every other person he knew was tied to his family or the company in some way. If we had eloped and it wouldn't have worked out, he would have had nobody left in his life. It's not something I would have ever asked him to do. But his own father didn't realize that. The fact that he didn't immediately recognize his son's bluff for what it was... was probably pretty telling of how well they really knew each other."

I take a sip from my tea before continuing.

"The fact that his son suddenly defied his authority wasn't nearly as big a problem as what he was planning to do. I was told that me marrying your father would almost certainly create problems and loss of face for the family."

Lilly looks uncomfortable.

"Because you're... not originally from Japan?"

"That's no doubt what it came down to. This has always been been a very homogenous country and not many foreigners take up permanent residence here. Intercultural marriages are still frowned upon in some circles, and one generation ago they were much more of a rarity than they are now. In a way I

could understand why your grandfather didn't like the idea. I just... didn't feel like it was an insurmountable obstacle. And the alternative would have been to just break up and walk away, because the proposal your grandfather offered was... not realistic in my book."

"A proposal?"

"Yeah, I was told that a marriage would be troublesome, but he was willing to acknowledge our relationship under a few conditions. Those conditions included... well... not visiting him at the office or at home, not calling him at home, no interaction with the people close to him, always using protection and when the time came - not saying bad things about his wife to him."

I roll my eyes at the mere memory of it and can't hold back a few chuckles at the absurdity.

"Ha ha heh, sorry. It's just... You have no idea how strange it feels to hear a man in his fifties, with whom you've only interacted a handful of times, lecture you about using birth control. He he, well... I was able to keep a straight face at the time, thankfully."

Lilly and Hanako aren't exactly chuckling along with me. In fact, Lilly looks downright distraught.

"Mother... Do you really mean you were offered to be Father's...?"

"Mistress? Yeah. The reasoning was that your father and I could continue our relationship and keep seeing each other despite the whole marriage business, and as I long as I told nobody, nobody would ask. The fact that your grandfather was completely serious just showed how extremely different - probably even incompatible - our mindsets were. To him, a romantic relationship and a marriage were things that he could easily picture as separate. In his mind, his proposal was a reasonable compromise to solve the situation and satisfy both parties and acceptable as long as it didn't become public."

I smirk.

"Except it wouldn't have been satisfactory for me. I'd feel terrible knowing that any time your father'd be spending with me would be time away from his wife and perhaps later even his children. Not to mention it didn't really solve anything. It just made the problem of your father having to choose between me and his family a permanent one. Our relationship wouldn't be able to work in the long run under those circumstances. So I declined the request, in the most polite way I could think of."

"How did he react? You and Father married, so how did you change Grandfather's mind?"

"I didn't. We spent the rest of his visit talking completely past each other. I just kept politely asking him for a chance to prove that I could be a good wife to your father, and he just kept going on about how we'd probably be able to see each other more and that things would be better for everyone if I went along with his offer. Eventually he got sick of going in circles, excused himself and left. But before he walked out the door, he told me that he didn't believe I could truly be a good wife to his son. That the best thing I could do was pretend. Heh, I've often wondered during the years that came after whether he wasn't partially right about that."

"I don't..."

"Anyway, a few days later I received a phone call from your father. He said he wanted us to meet after he got off work. He took me out to dinner, and he told me that your grandfather had changed his mind and that we were allowed to 'give it a try'. We took a walk in the nearby park afterwards, and it was there that your father officially proposed to me. I naturally accepted."

Hanako gives me a tiny smile.

"Parks are r-really good places for those sorts of things."

"Hehe, I think so too. I was really happy that night. I quit my job as promised and we got married soon afterwards. The wedding wasn't anything spectacular, just the two of us and a handful of family members in a remote location. We went to Scotland to celebrate our honeymoon. It seemed fitting to spend it in the location where we met each other. Those were some of the most wonderful days of my life. A few days before we were set to return, we took a long walk along the shores of Moray Firth and talked about the future. Hiro got a phone call earlier that day informing him that a promotion was waiting for him at the office. He was already due for promotion anyway, but he said they had decided to give him some extra responsibilities on top of the usual tasks. Things would get very busy for him after his return, and because he used all of his credibility with his parents in order to push our marriage through, he felt that he'd have to work hard to get back in their good graces. He warned me that my life was probably going to get pretty hard from now on and to persevere for both our sakes."

"Hard?"

"Yes. We'd be moving in with your grandparents after our honeymoon, and your father explained to me that the position of the oldest son's wife was... pretty much the lowest spot in the hierarchy. There was this tradition of the mother-in-law putting the person who'd one day replace her as lady of the house through a hazing period of some kind. Your grandmother herself went through the same thing apparently when she married into the family. Perseverance in the face of hardships was considered an admirable trait, and your father believed that I'd be able to win your grandparents' respect and acceptance eventually if I could just manage to weather the storm long enough. Believe it or not, at that time I still thought it wouldn't be that bad and that this was just another challenge to take on and conquer. Heh, it turned out your father wasn't exaggerating."

Lilly lets out a sad sigh.

"Was this... first period... very hard, Mother?"

04

"When I moved in with the Satou family, I was prepared for the life of a homemaker. I did my best to talk and act the way a good wife of an upper-class businessman was expected to talk and act. What I wasn't prepared for was the life of a slave. Which was probably a better description of my situation than 'daughter-in-law'. I was essentially expected to defer to my new mother-in-law in every way and she was set on micromanaging my entire day to a ridiculous degree. She did very little else all day long except ordering me around or criticizing my way of doing things. I had confidence in my homemaking skills before, courtesy of having lived on my own for quite some time, but they proved of little use to me because my way wasn't 'the right way' of doing things, so even if I did something correctly I'd still get criticized for it. Hmph... I even required her permission to be able to leave the house, which I didn't get very often."

"H-How did Father react?"

"Whenever things got bad enough, your father would usually try to mediate between us and things would calm down for some time, only to inevitably start up again a week or two later. I kept telling myself that things would get better. That I was being tested. And your father would echo those sentiments. But this wasn't a process of months. For years, I couldn't do a single thing right, no matter how hard I tried. It didn't let up until Akira started saying her first words. And there were... things... that were disquieting from the beginning."

"Things?"

"Like whenever the whole family was sitting at the dinner table on Sunday and your grandfather wanted to know something about me. He often wouldn't ask me directly. He'd ask your father, even though I was sitting right next to him. Or whenever your grandmother had visitors. Usually I wasn't

allowed to 'impose' on those meetings, but very often whenever those visitors and I were introduced to each other, I was introduced as a 'friend of the family'. That always felt very... wrong. Even though I was officially part of the family, I still very much felt like a stranger - sometimes even an intruder. I think that was the point."

Hanako gives me a pained look.

"That's... really horrible."

"In the end, what kept me going was Hiro's support. After his promotion, he got swamped with work, but every few days, especially after the bad ones, he'd leave a piece of paper beneath his pillow that either contained a nice quote from a book he read or was folded into an origami animal or flower. I'd in turn leave little notes of support in the lunches I made for him. He also tried to spend whatever free time he had with me, even though he was often exhausted from the long hours at work. Those little things gave me the strength to endure, even after I stopped believing that things would improve between my in-laws and me."

"Stopped believing?"

"For a long time I felt that if I could just keep giving it my all, the family would accept me. Until one of the family members broke that illusion for me. Your aunt Mayoi. She was still living at home as well when I moved in, but we never really interacted all that much. During the day, she worked as a secretary at a nearby company, and she often spent time with friends outside the home. She was nice enough, but always seemed to be wary of taking sides or getting too involved in the family drama. After my marriage to your father, I suspect a lot of pressure was put on her not to 'give the neighborhood anything else about our family to talk about' and I don't think she was happy with that. On the day before her wedding - at which point she'd quit her job, leave home and move in with the Hakamichis - she invited me on a nightly walk through the park. When we were there, she asked me if I was still planning to stick things out. I said I was, and she told me to look after her brother to the best of my ability. I asked her if she had any advice for me on how to improve my relationship with my in-laws. Even though your father and I moved into our own place a few streets away from the parental home, your grandmother would still drop by daily, and with Mayoi leaving she was getting more and more focussed on me again. She gave me a pitying look and said she didn't know what to tell me. I asked her if she was sure and she said she was. She then told me a story about something that happened at her work."

I sigh.

"Mayoi worked at a company very much like the family company's Japanese branch. A company with a very traditional business culture. Young men came into the workplace each April, straight out of university, and stayed there until they reached retirement age. For over 40 years, the company would be their world and their family. The relationship between the company and the employees was founded on mutual trust. The company would take care of them and wouldn't abandon them. If business would get tough, everyone would take a pay cut including the bosses, but there wouldn't be any layoffs. Mayoi couldn't even remember the last time someone was fired. In return for that life-time employment, the company expected loyalty and complete devotion. It worked for most people. But sometimes, there'd be an employee who just... didn't fit in. Who couldn't integrate into the team. Even though management wanted to get rid of him, they didn't like the idea of firing him because it would make the company look bad and the other employees might start worrying. So... other ways were often employed."

"Other ways?"

"Those kinds of employees would be asked to do more and more superfluous tasks. They'd have to write a report about the same thing twice or thrice a day only to have those reports trashed immediately

afterwards. They'd be put on dead-end projects that were too underfunded to ever get completed. Their invitations to company get-togethers would start getting 'misplaced'. Usually, such a person would eventually get the hint and resign on his own. Every once in a while, someone would just keep going no matter how unhappy it made him. Mayoi once met such a person at work. She asked me what advice I would have for such a person. She said she felt that her brother was in denial about the situation. Because if he acknowledged that I was in the same position as that employee, he'd also have to acknowledge that... there was no third option. And suddenly all the belittlements and putdowns I endured over the years started falling into place."

"Why? If they really didn't want you to be part of the family, then why didn't they simply oppose the marriage?"

"Because your grandfather was convinced that his son would elope with me if he didn't give his blessing, and he wasn't yet ready to write off the son whom he had considered his faithful successor for so long and in whom he invested so much. That offer he made me prior to the marriage should have clued me in on how he saw me and how he saw your father's feelings towards me. I was considered a temporary whim - a passing craze that his son would eventually grow out of. All that needed to be done was weather the storm until your father's common sense returned and things would be okay again, so he saw no need for permanent measures. If I had become your father's mistress then that would have worked out perfectly, but I rejected that offer, so your grandfather instead decided to treat me like a bothersome employee. He probably thought that enduring hardships like that was something only the Japanese could do. He correctly guessed that I didn't have the heart of a homemaker and that I'd struggle to get accustomed to a strict and traditional domestic life, so he approved the wedding under the assumption that I wouldn't last more than a month or two and that if I'd leave on my own accord, your father would be too disillusioned and ashamed to follow me. With luck, I'd be gone before people even discovered that your father got married."

I sigh and shake my head.

"And so we spent years unknowingly pushing against each other. I was continuously telling myself that I was mere weeks away from their reluctant approval, and they were continuously telling themselves that I was mere weeks away from being fed up and walking away. Every New Year's Day, when everyone was acting nice for a change, I told myself that this was a new beginning, only for things to return to the way they were the week afterwards. To be honest, Mayoi's revelation was one of the low points of my marriage and that was probably the one moment where I wondered if I shouldn't just run away and leave everything behind."

"But you didn't."

"I regret having married into the Satou family, but I never regretted marrying your father. He put his relationship with his parents on the line for me, and I didn't want that to be meaningless or punish him for his parents' attitude. But what stopped me more than anything else was Akira. I realized that if I walked away now, I might never see my daughter again. Japan has no joint custody and I wouldn't have won a custody battle against the Satous. Heck, I wouldn't have ruled in my own favor if I had been part of the family court. And even if I would win, Akira would have lost her father in the process. So I stuck around, promising myself not to let my in-laws get to me and not let them win."

"Oh Mother..."

"Things remained pretty difficult over the years, but eventually even my in-laws started realizing that I wasn't going anywhere, and your father - thanks to his tireless mediating - was able to negotiate somewhat of an uneasy truce over the years. Or maybe not a truce as much as an agreement to make your and Akira's childhood as carefree as we could make it and to not let you both grow up in a family environment permeated by hostility and resentment. It wasn't great, and it was still a pretty lonely and isolated existence, but resigned tolerance disguised as acceptance was still a step up from how things

were at the beginning. Things kinda limped on, the four of us always making sure that conflicts were out of your earshot, until the day your grandfather decided to announce his definite retirement and your father got his ultimate promotion and relocation to the Inverness branch, which had been changed into the company's head office not too long before."

"I remember the evening Grandfather announced it. You acted happy for Father."

"Smiling and acting happy while you're secretly feeling miserable is a skill just like any other, Lilly. You get better at it with practice, and by that time I had enough practice to be a pro. But that evening, it was harder than it had ever been before to maintain my composure. Your father was the one person who both knew and accepted the real me. He was the one person I could lean on for emotional support. And now he was moving to the other end of the world. I felt truly lost. It's funny because I used to be a very independent person."

"But then, soon after, he summoned you to join him."

"Yeah. Things were getting more and more difficult for me here. Your grandmother's health had been on the decline ever since your grandfather's surgery, and it deteriorated further after he retired. There were tensions between them, and your grandmother started taking out her frustration on the person who was designated to look after them, which was me. I started wondering how long it was gonna take before I'd start getting ulcers and high blood pressure too. Then your father visited Japan again. He told me that he needed me in Scotland and said that he arranged for me to be able to join him there. He told the board of directors, consisting of your grandfather and his two brothers, that he needed a close advisor he could trust who had intimate knowledge of western culture who could counsel him on how to run the company with a minimum of cultural conflicts. He said he wanted me to be that advisor for some time. Your grandfather was heavily opposed to the idea at first, stating that the wife of an oldest son was supposed to take care of her in-laws. That's how the custom went, and that's how things had always been. But his two brothers liked the idea and overruled your grandfather's vote. For once the tradition of the company taking precedence over the family worked in my favor. Eventually your grandfather gave in under the condition that if I was no longer needed there, I'd return here to look after him and his wife again, as per tradition. Your father accepted that compromise. We hired a nurse and housekeeping staff for your grandparents and I finally came to live in my homeland again - but without you, as much as I had wanted otherwise."

Lilly nods sadly.

"Father always said that I had to stay behind because of my education. But Akira felt that there was another reason."

"I know what Akira used to think. She thought that your father felt that a blind daughter could harm his image there. But Akira was wrong about that. Culture in the UK isn't quite as... uncomfortable... about the subject of disabilities as it is here. Your father could have paraded you around all day long and nobody would have thought of him as confrontational. I knew that, and so did he. That was never the reason. Your education... truly was the reason he decided you had to stay in Japan. There were just... a few details he omitted."

"Details?"

"About three years after Akira was born, we moved from the Satou parental home to a place of our own. It was still within walking distance from my in-laws, but I was still happy to at least have some breathing room. Your father mentioned that then would be a good time to make my 'park debut'. It's what they call the process of taking your child to the park for the first time and join one of the cliques of mothers hanging out there. Your father reminded me that our neighborhood was a very tight-knit community where everybody knew everybody, and the mother groups in the park were even more tightly-knit. He urged me to be on my best behavior, respect the hierarchy and defer to the mothers in

charge. I spent most of the evening practicing my introduction, but when the day of my park debut came, things went... really badly. I pulled off my introduction exactly the way I practiced it in front of your father, but I was almost immediately told that there was no place for me in the group. A few days later, I had tried with all the cliques in the area, but I was turned down wherever I went. At first I didn't really care. I first told myself that if those cliques wanted to have nothing to do with me then that was their loss. But then those same mothers started keeping their children away from Akira and wouldn't let them play with her. It turned out that joining a group wasn't as optional as I had thought. Akira was three years old at the time. For the first time I realized that even though I was no longer confined to the Satou home, the world outside its walls wasn't much different. I was still an outcast."

I later learned that several of those mom groups contained family members of the candidates that Hiro turned down. I doubt I ever had a chance to begin with.

"Your father and I met with your grandparents to discuss the situation. Your grandmother asked me why I was so surprised. I imposed myself on a tight-knit community and the community reacted accordingly. Your father reminded her that this was about Akira, not me and that she used to be a 'boss mom' of one of those groups herself. He said that she'd probably be able to smooth this over since the members would respect her seniority and name. I didn't think she'd go for it at first, but she agreed to help without any further urging. She said that she'd take Akira to the park in my place while I did chores at their house in her place. It wasn't an ideal solution and she'd often remind me of my failings as a mother after those park trips, but at least Akira was able to play with fellow children again. Still, your grandmother reminded us that she'd only be able to smooth things over with the mothers. If the children wouldn't accept Akira as one of them, there wouldn't be much she could do. She also reminded me that we were only fighting the symptoms of the problem and that due to our selfishness our children would probably never be fully accepted among their peers. You have no idea how much it hurt to hear that."

"..."

"L-Lilly..."

Lilly doesn't say anything, but the pain is evident in her expression. Hanako, ever thoughtful, wraps her arms around her best friend and holds her gently.

"Back at home, your father and I discussed the talk we had with your grandmother. I asked him if she was exaggerating or not. He admitted that it was true that Japanese with mixed blood tended to receive mixed treatment. Some were accepted without much trouble while others remained forever foreigners in their own land. He argued that it was our responsibility to limit the odds of the latter happening to our children."

"H-How?"

"We couldn't do much about the fact that you and Akira didn't look the same as full-blooded Japanese, but we could do our part to make sure you'd end up acting the same. We figured that if you didn't act any different from others, people'd be more likely to look past your foreign appearance and acknowledge you as one of them. Your father didn't think there was a problem in us teaching you to speak English on the side, but your upbringing had to be Japanese in spirit. We could make sure you could speak Japanese without an accent. We could make sure you'd behave with all the mannerisms and etiquette a well-raised Japanese was expected to show. So that's what we did. We picked schools for you that were well-regarded and I... I continued the act I started mastering while living with your grandparents, so I could set the best possible example for you and your sister - even if the person who was raising you wasn't... the real me and even if it would eventually make me feel like an outsider if everything went right. It was the best I could do."

"Mother....I..."

"When your father told me I could join him in Scotland, but that he wanted you to stay here, I was horrified. What kind of parents would leave their child behind while moving to the other end of the world? But your father reminded me that our move was temporary. A simple shift in the European or Asian market could mean he would be relocated. One of the executives in the Japanese branch unexpectedly dropping out would mean he'd be relocated. And even if nothing like that happened, the board would eventually appoint a successor and request him to join them back in Japan. No matter what happened, we'd eventually return here. And if we took you with us to Scotland, that meant you'd probably have to go back with us when the time came. But you were twelve at the time and still developing. Your father worried that if you spent all your teenage and most of your adolescent years in a western country, you'd also adopt the manners and the mindset. And when the time came to return to Japan, he was afraid that you wouldn't be able to sufficiently adapt anymore and that you'd truly be an outsider for the rest of your life. Heh, that's your dad - always thinking about the long game. One time I would have fought his decision tooth and nail, but given my own experiences, I... I... couldn't, so... we..."

I swallow a lump in my throat. The next part's even going to be harder.

"When I arrived in Scotland, your father told me why he had me come over. This wasn't just about someone giving him cultural advice. He wanted to make amends to me for the hardships I endured in the past... because he couldn't bear to give up his family and his legacy. He told me that while I was in Inverness, I should live my life to the fullest without worrying about him or let him or anything else hold me back. And when I felt rejuvenated and ready to face the challenges back home, I should return to Japan. So that's how my new life in the city of my birth started. We had cleaning staff to take care of the chores, so I had no obligations at our new home. I started working at the PR department at head office and quickly worked my way up to a managing function there through my efforts and dedication. The overwork I voluntarily put in didn't even tire me out, it invigorated me. I started getting involved in the local neighborhood committee. People paid attention to what I had to say and didn't dismiss my comments with a generic 'you say very interesting things' like at those blasted PTA meetings in the past. I started setting up a new network of journalistic contacts. I joined a cycling group. I started playing bridge with the vice-director's wife and her friends. I started writing and submitting articles in magazines and local newspapers. I started getting involved with charity groups. I started making friends. I... *sniff* I..."

I can't bear to finish my sentence, but then Hanako finishes it for me in a barely audible whisper.

"Y-You s-started... living."

I sniffle as I hear those words.

"I'm s-so s-sorry, Lilly. For everything."

"Mother, were you... happy there?"

"I'm not sure. It felt good, most of the time, as long as I kept busy. But the brief moments I didn't have anything to do, I was reminded of the fact that I bought this new life by selling out my family. You, Akira, even your father. I promised your father that whenever he needed my support or company, he just needed to say so and I'd drop everything for him. But he never took me up on that offer even once. Not because he didn't feel like a fish out of the water or lonely at times, but because he felt obliged to give me as much space and time for myself as possible. It wasn't until his hospitalization that I realized how much I must have neglected him over the years, even if it was with his own consent. We... slowly started drifting apart over the years even though I'd see more of him in a day than I used to in a week. Because..."

My stare shifts to the floor. Even though Lilly can't see me, I still can't look her in the eyes.

"I probably wasn't meant to stay as long as I did. There were several times when I was on the verge of telling your father that I was going back, but I always ended up chickening out at the last moment. There was always a company goal or a project or a commitment that I felt I still had to finish. There were always things I still wanted to do. So I never came through. Your father was aware of this too. I could see it in his eyes whenever we were alone, and I started growing more and more uncomfortable in his presence as a result as time went on. Ironic, considering the fact that he used to be a source of comfort for me. But even so, he never had the heart to tell me that I had to go back, so things limped on."

It's almost as if our roles had reversed when we took up residence in Inverness.

"Then your aunt Stella fell ill. When I visited her, she made a very unusual request of me. She said she wanted to see you and Akira again. I thought she was terminal, so I felt I had no choice. Heh, I later learned that while she really was in bad shape, terminal was an exaggeration. She simply did what she did because she felt that I was struggling with the family matters, and this was her way of trying to help me. She always was a bit of a busybody. It did make it impossible to ignore the emotional chasm that had grown between myself and my children, and while you were in Inverness I realized that something had to be done or else I'd return to Japan one day and find both my in-laws and my children hating me."

"I would never..."

"So I approached your father and asked him to reunite our family, even if it was for a little while, so we could mend the rifts between us and be a true family again. I eventually managed to convince him. He too felt the distance that formed over the years and the two of us agreed that Akira might actually be happier if she moved to Scotland."

"But what about Father's reason for having me stay in Japan?"

"Your father refused my request at first, even when I pointed out that you nearly finished your education already. He ultimately conceded when I upped the stakes. I swore to him that... if you moved to Scotland... and you couldn't adapt there or weren't happy... not only would you be allowed to return to Japan, but... I'd come with you. Either way, you'd have your mother back. That's what made your father change his mind. Heh, I think that in the end we were probably both betting on different outcomes, only for the referee to make a call that neither of us had expected. I was saddened by your decision to stay in Japan, but at the same time what you said about wanting to go out of your way to reconcile with us, even after everything that happened, made me really happy. I decided for myself that if we were only going to have brief periods of time to get reacquainted with each other, I didn't want you to reconnect with the person I had been pretending to be, but the person I truly was. And maybe - when you and your sister were ready - entrust you with my own perspective of everything, even if it might make you think less of me than you used to."

In the end, it was probably for the best. My promise to Hiro got the job done, but could have resulted in a whole new mess in the long run.

"..."

For a very long time, Lilly's silent as she lets everything I just told her sink in. Eventually, she gives me an unsure look that appears almost guilty.

"Mother? After you and Akira returned from America, I asked you and Father to return to Japan and both Akira and Father sided with me. I never knew... I mean, how did you really feel about that?"

"How I felt about it was likely how Hanako must have felt when she was told to go to that second open

house day. I felt really anxious, frightened even. I felt that way even during my trip to the US, before you asked us to consider moving. But, like Hanako, I think that what happened was really for the better."

"If I had known, I wouldn't have asked you to return."

"That's why it's good that you didn't know back then. I was uneasy about going back, but the day after I dropped you off at Yamaku, I had a meeting with your uncle Koji at the Japanese branch. He told me that your father confided a few things in him regarding our family situation and that, as a gesture of goodwill towards his new brother, he wanted to help. He mentioned that his wife wouldn't be accompanying him since she didn't speak English, but that she was okay with looking after your grandparents in my place. Koji and your father decided to keep part of the housekeeping staff on board to take most of the everyday chores out of her hands and split the costs between them. Koji also asked me to stay involved with the Inverness branch and act as his advisor and confidant in terms of dealing with the staff, like I had done with my husband. I told him I would be honored to help him run things smoothly in whatever way I could."

"And that's when you decided to come back?"

"I had a long conversation with your father over the phone. He told me that he also wanted to return to Japan and that he wanted me to make a new start there together with him. He said he also understood my reluctance, but he stressed that history didn't always repeat and that not all places were as traditional and conservative as the neighborhood where we spent most of our marriage. He said that we could go wherever I wanted and that if I agreed to move, he'd let me decide where our new home would be. After that phonecall, I took a long, hard look at myself and asked myself if I was really ready to give things another try. That was probably when I realized how cynical I had become. In the end, I decided to try to have faith and give things one more try and spent the rest of my stay visiting and looking into various neighborhoods until I found one that gave me a good feeling."

I get up and give Lilly a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"In the end, Lilly, what you did was for the best. I think my life has truly taken a turn for the better now. The neighborhood we ended up settling in has been a lot more welcoming than our old one, and I'm on fairly good terms with both of our neighbors and several other people who live nearby. I can't say we're extremely close, but I don't think that's really necessary. In public, I try to conform to expectations others have of me while in private, I can be myself. I can visit my friends and colleagues in Scotland whenever I want, and when I'm at home I try to be there for your father. When your father and I were still dating, we respected each other's cultural background and often managed to laugh about the idiosyncrasies we perceived in each other's cultures. When we got married, that balance was lost but I feel like we've finally regained it. For the first time in a very long time I feel like I don't have to choose between my family's happiness and my own. Things aren't perfect yet, but I have good hopes for the future."

Lilly sullenly nods, but doesn't reply. She looks tired and even a bit confused. I sigh.

"It was quite a bombshell I just dropped, isn't it?"

"It... is."

"You should take your time to let it sink in a bit."

"I think I will do that. Mother, would it be okay with you if I... went to get a bit of fresh air?"

"Not at all, dear."

Lilly gets up and softly walks out of the room. As she closes the door behind her, Hanako gives me a worried look. I try to give her my most reassuring smile.

05

"Try not to worry too much about her, Hanako. Lilly's a strong girl. She'll sort this out and be perfectly fine afterwards."

"I k-know."

She gives me an unsure look.

"K-Karla, is it really okay for m-me to h-have heard all of this?"

"I think it is. Lilly may have quite a few friends, but I don't think she has many confidants. You and Akira are probably the two people she's most likely to approach when something's bugging her. It'll be good if she can talk about this with both of you."

Hanako smiles and nods.

"Okay then."

"There's a second reason too. It relates to something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Something else?"

I nod and give her a sincere look.

"Just this once. It's about... something we did slightly over a year ago."

"...Oh!"

Hanako cringes a bit as she realizes what I'm talking about and starts fidgeting nervously.

"Looking back on the whole thing, we could have handled it a lot better. The timing was pretty bad and we could have done a better job at getting our intentions across too. I'm really sorry about that. We probably caused you a lot of unnecessary stress."

"It's... o-okay, really."

"I often wondered if we wouldn't have been better off simply offering you a home."

"A... home?"

"Uhuh. A place to feel safe. A place to feel welcome. A place to belong. Everybody needs a place like that. We at least wouldn't have ended up casually insinuating that we could so easily replace the people that you lost."

"..."

"That home's there for you if you ever need it. Don't be a stranger, okay?"

"T-thanks."

I move my chair a bit closer to the bed and look at Hanako.

"You know, to be honest, I'm still kind of hoping you'll give our offer some consideration."

I let out a sad sigh.

"After I got married and it became clear that my in-laws didn't really want me around, I spent a lot of time wondering if they hadn't merely consented to the marriage because they felt they owed me something for the favors I did the company. That was a pretty awful feeling. I'd never offer to take somebody in if I felt that the best I could do was tolerate them. We're thankful for what you did for us of course... but that was never the only reason. Hanako, if I can ask: why did you help my husband back then?"

"Uh... I... I c-couldn't just do nothing."

I nod.

"Sometimes, you don't need a reason for something. Sometimes, you just do something because it's the right thing to do. I think that what you did and what we did are both examples of that. Let's just forget about the obligation stuff already. It stopped being important when we got to know you better, and frankly, my husband's entire life has already been dictated by nothing but obligations upon obligations. I'm sick and tired of those. Let this be about something other than social debts for a change. Let this be about doing what I think would make everyone happiest. You already have a really special bond with both Lilly and Akira. Given how different those two are, I think that's pretty unique and you'd fit in well with them. Last New Year's Day made that pretty clear to me. This is just a hunch, but I think everything that Lilly did to bring our family closer together... she didn't do it just for herself or for us. I wouldn't be surprised if she did what she did with you in mind too. Most importantly, I... also feel a sense of kinship with you myself."

She gives me a puzzled look.

"A... sense of k-kinship?"

"When we first met all that time ago and I shook your hand, you gave me a very telling look as I looked you over. It was what my husband would call a 'please don't judge me'-look. He says that in the past I sported one myself at times when dealing with my in-laws. Even before I got to know you better and learned that we shared a passion for writing, you already gave me a special feeling - a bit like a kindred spirit."

"A kindred spirit..."

Over the course of last year, I've come to the realization that there have been several motives for our family's offer to Hanako. Not all of them were particularly selfless. My husband felt he owed her something and he was eager to repay that debt. Lilly was desperately trying to fix a mess she held herself responsible for. And I eagerly jumped at the opportunity to show myself and the world that I wasn't the horrible mother I came to believe myself to be over the course of Akira's and Lilly's childhood. I can't blame Hanako for suspecting ulterior motives on our behalf and latching onto them. But I also came to realize that in a way, Hanako was just like us. Hiro, Akira, Lilly and myself...we've all experienced the feeling of being the odd one out among the rest, of not truly belonging, both as individuals and as a family unit. We've all experienced periods in our lives where we felt isolated and lonely and I think Hanako, more than anyone else, can relate to that. More than anything else, I've come to believe that that aspect was what made me relate to her as strongly as I do.

"I won't insult you by claiming that our situations are exactly the same. I've never been hospitalized and I wasn't an innocent victim either. Back then I was stupidly overconfident. Up to that point, I managed to succeed at whatever I tried my hand at as long as I put in enough hard work. I got good grades in school, my bosses were happy with my work, and I picked up Japanese pretty quickly. I thought it didn't matter that Hiro's parents weren't crazy about me as long as I'd get a foot in the door and an honest chance to prove myself and make them like me. I felt like I could take on the world until the world took the gloves off and showed me how hard it could push back. That was a pretty harsh lesson. Still... I know first-hand what isolation and exclusion feel like. I know what you were going through when you confronted your own anxieties at that second open house day, and I felt really happy and proud afterwards when you managed to pull through. I think... I can empathize with you. At least, better than most people. I like what I've seen of you and learned about you so far. If possible, I'd like to get to know you even better and I know that the same is true for my husband."

"But I'm..."

"Shhhh..."

I shake my head, softly put my index finger on her lips to cut off her protest and give her a sweet smile. Then I use my hand to gently brush the lock of hair in front of her right eye aside. She shivers a bit, but doesn't resist. I look into her eyes and we share a brief look of mutual understanding. Then I lean in, give her a tender kiss on the forehead and pull her into an embrace.

"You are you, Hanako, and everyone has damage. You are not strange and... you are not alone."

"I..."

I pull her closer and whisper in her ear.

"You're not alone."

I feel Hanako returning my hug, and we stay like that for a while, neither of us feeling the need to say anything. Hanako's embrace is gentle with just a trace of firmness in it and I instinctively feel that what we're sharing right now is a gesture of mutual comfort. A warm and loving mutual comfort. Eventually we let go, and I sit down next to her on the bed. Hanako's still not saying a single word, but there's a trace of a smile on her face. Not really sure how to continue our previous conversation, I decide to finish with some small talk.

"Hanako?"

"Yes?"

"You know what day it is next Saturday, don't you?"

"Yes, Lilly's birthday."

"This is a busy time for you, but do you think you can make it?"

She nods.

"Hisao's coming too. He bought a p-present on both our behalves. I'm... not staying over t-this time, but I want to be there for a few hours."

"One of us could give you a ride if you like."

"Akira... already mailed me and offered to pick me up. I can study in the car."

"That's assuming that that girl can keep silent for hours on end. I hope she's up to the challenge."

Hanako giggles, and I chuckle along as well. After the dramatic subject of this evening, some light-heartedness feels surprisingly good. I ruffle her hair a bit and then prepare to get up.

"Well, I'd better go and get Lilly. It's still quite a ride back and... maybe she wants to talk some more."

"Yes."

I get up and expect Hanako to do the same, but before she does she reaches back and puts something soft in my hand.

"T-This is for Lilly."

"Huh? A plush puppy?"

"She'll... understand."

"Okay then."

She gets up, we take the tea set to the kitchen, and then we head for the exit. As we exit the building, Hanako turns to me, fidgetting nervously.

"Umm... K-Karla?"

"Yes, Hanako?"

"Uh..."

An awkward silence. It looks like she's trying to say something, but isn't sure how to say it. Eventually, she sighs and gives me a meek smile.

"Thanks for visiting me today."

"It's always a pleasure. Good luck with your studying."

"Thanks."

We find Lilly sitting on a bench just outside the dorm building. We both say goodbye to Hanako and walk back to the car. As we get in, I give my daughter a little sidelong glance. She's been unusually quiet. She smiles sweetly when I give her Hanako's gift, mouths a soft 'thank you, Hanako' and takes some time to run her hands across its furry back, but she still doesn't say anything else.

"Lilly... if there's anything else you want to know..."

"Mother... Can I... ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What... do you think of me?"

"Huh?"

"While I was growing up, you were always the person I tried to be like... the person whose example I tried to follow. To make you proud of me. I've known for some time that the person in whose footsteps I tried to follow... wasn't really you. But I never realized that you actually hated being that person. It makes me wonder how you see me."

"Hey now! Surely you're not worried that I secretly look down on you, are you? Because I actually think that you're a much better person than I am. Assuming, of course, that the person I know you as is also the person you truly are and not just some sort of act you've been putting on for my benefit."

Lilly shakes her head.

"It isn't."

"And are you happy being you?"

"I... I am."

"Heh, then I see no problems. I think that in the end both you and Akira ended up becoming the people you've always been deep inside. The more I get to know you, the more you start reminding me of your dad. Heh, the persona I put up for your and Akira's sake was largely based on the tips and pointers he gave me, so in the end I feel that you still ended up following in one of your parents' footsteps to a large degree."

My daughter nods and smiles. My words seem to have put her at ease. What I said just now reminds me of something else, though, and I sigh.

"Your dad often said that Akira reminded him of me. That only makes me feel like we failed her even more. We gave her an upbringing geared towards making her act like a proper Japanese even though it often made her miserable. And now she's moved to a country with a completely different culture, I can't help but feel we could have spared her all of it. If only I had known. I'm not sure if we'll ever be able to make it up to her."

"Some time ago, she told me that you apologized to her while you were visiting. Did you... tell her what you told us just now?"

"I did. She was the one who made me promise to tell you all this. We were on a pub crawl that night and things started getting tense between us as usual. I eventually decided I didn't have much to lose by simply coming clean about everything, despite the possibility that she'd hate me even more afterwards. The worst outcome would have been getting permanently outed from her life, and I didn't feel the current situation was all that much better. I also told her that we were proud of her - for having lived such an independent life, for passing her law exam - and most of all for having looked after you in your grandparents' place. It felt embarrassing, but also good. Heh, the fact that I already had a few drinks by that time probably made it easier."

"How did Akira react to all of this?"

"I think her exact words were: 'We really are one royally screwed-up family, aren't we?'"

Lilly smiles wistfully.

"I think we're getting better though. I noticed that there was something different about Akira last New Year's Day. She seemed... more at ease than before. Like part of her was finally at peace. Hanako noticed it too. It'll take time, but Akira will move on eventually."

"Time will tell. These kinds of wounds take a long time to heal. I speak from experience."

"Mother, what do you think of Grandmother and Grandfather? Do you... hate them?"

"I used to. There's no use denying that. Nowadays... I'm not really sure. If you want to visit them at any time and your father's not available, I'll be happy to drop you off there. But I have no desire for any interaction with them myself and the feeling's probably mutual. They finally have a new daughter-in-law now, one who apparently gets along with them a lot better. No point in opening old wounds."

"They always seemed strict, but I never felt that they treated me unfairly."

I have to give them credit for at least keeping their ire focussed on me, even though they were always quick to blame me for everything, like Akira's tomboyish personality and even Lilly's blindness - at least for the first couple of months. Still, Hiro's mom could have refused to take our children to the park or attend those PTA meetings in my place. They obviously didn't want to punish our children for things they blamed me for. Despite my own feelings, I still believe that both of them cared about Akira and Lilly.

When Hiro's father stripped his son of his status as heir, I was very upset at first as it felt that he was callously tossing his loyal successor aside, but Hiro suggested that maybe his father felt that enough was enough, and he was setting his son free from his responsibilities at long last. I don't think a new start would have been possible without it, so in the end it worked out well.

"Their issue has always been with me and not with you. Anyway, I don't really hate them these days. At most, I pity them."

"Pity?"

I never really got the impression that they had great chemistry together. They've always lived their own lives. I don't really think they would have gotten married if things hadn't been arranged for them. I wonder if Hiro's dad ever figured out that he was, in fact, the cause of his wife's sudden declining health. 'Retired husband syndrome' is what they apparently call it over here, and it's been hitting the salaryman generation pretty hard. I can't help but feel somewhat sorry for two people who never learned to spend extended amounts of time in each other's presence, but who are now being forced by the circumstances to do exactly that.

"Yes, pity."

"I'm not sure if that's an improvement."

"Trust me, it is. I have no desire to go out of my way to make their lives miserable, but I won't be jumping through hoops anymore to win their approval either. I've spent enough of my life trying that

already. If I have to devote energy to strengthening my bonds with people, there are more worthwhile pursuits than your grandparents. Like Akira..."

I start the car's ignition and grin at my daughter.

"You know, this whole evening's been pretty intense. I could really use a beer about now."

"I think I know what you mean. I'm feeling the same thing."

"You're not asking me for beer, are you?"

"I've always been more of a wine person myself."

I roll my eyes.

"You'll turn 20 in about a week, and Akira's probably gonna bring enough wine along to permanently scar your liver with, and you still want to drink now?"

Lilly grins.

"Surely only one glass isn't a problem? It's under the supervision of an adult, after all."

I consider protesting, but then realize that we've both had a rough evening and could use some unwinding.

"One drink for both of us then. Let's see what's still open around here."

06

Final Chapter (Hanako)

01

My alarm blares into my ears, only to be swiftly silenced when a lucky swat from my hand hits the off-button. My body switches into auto-mode, carrying my subconscious self out of bed.

I didn't sleep all that well this night, and my body and mind are feeling the results right now even though I set my alarm to go off two hours later than I initially intended to get up.

I still manage to get myself to the bathroom and take a quick shower. Even after drying myself off and getting dressed, I still feel rather sleepy, but the shower refreshed me enough for my brain to quickly bring a nagging thought to my attention.

This has been the last time I've taken a shower here.

My mood instantly turns a bit gloomy again, just like last night when I realized that this was the last time I'd spend the night in my trusty little dorm room.

Today is graduation day. I've only taken one entrance exam this year and the results for that exam will come in today, but Miss Yumi has already told me that it's unlikely for Yamaku to let me stay here for another year. No matter what my exam results will be, today will be my last day here.

I've been trying to keep busy ever since the day of my exam, focussing on my librarian duties and helping out at the newspaper club, trying to live in the moment.

Maybe it hasn't just been about trying to keep my thoughts off my pending departure from this school. Maybe I've also simply been trying to create as many memories of Yamaku in the few days I had left. Still, the fact that it all ends today - that a very important part of my life ends today and that it will be replaced by... something else starting tomorrow - weighs pretty heavily on me.

I haven't managed to pack all my stuff yet. Doing that for longer than a minute feels like dipping a wounded limb into a vat of salt water. Hisao and his parents will be here today. So will Lilly and her family. Maybe they'll be willing to help me pack, so I'll spend less time agonizing over this.

Deciding to put off packing my things or even staying in my room for an extended amount of time for the time being, I leave my nightgown on my bed and head for the kitchen area. Judging from the noise coming from the common room, it's too crowded to comfortably have breakfast there, and I don't feel like eating in my room either, so I'll just eat in the kitchen today.

There are barely any people in the kitchen when I come in, but fortunately Jun is among the handful of people present, and she greets me with a friendly wave. I return her greeting, prepare my breakfast as quickly as I can and then join her at the table where she's sitting.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Feeling nervous already?"

"I'm... not really sure."

"It'll be fine. You'll see. We all studied hard. If I can make it, you can too."

I just smile and nod at Jun. She's been in pretty good spirits herself ever since her own results came in three days ago, and I don't want to ruin her mood with wistful thoughts.

"I suppose... We'll see soon enough."

"If the suspense is getting to you, maybe we can simply have a look here and now."

"Now? I d-don't think they've already posted the results on the board."

"That's not a problem as long as you still have a copy of your answer sheet. Or rather the number that was printed near the corner. You can use it to look up the results online. I just need to get my laptop from my room."

"Ummm..."

I'm not really sure if I'm ready to already hear the results even though it may take some of the pressure off my shoulders. Before I can decline Jun's offer, we're suddenly startled by a loud beep coming from Jun's bag.

"Oh, text message. You don't mind if I have a look, do you?"

"No."

Jun takes out her phone and looks at the display.

"It's from Naomi. I hope she didn't get delayed."

"What does it say?"

Jun opens the message and then a baffled expression appears on her face.

"What on earth is wrong with you?"

"Uh, did she text something strange again?"

"Yes, no, I mean it literally says: 'What on earth is wrong with you?' Seriously."

"Is it a reaction to something you sent her earlier?"

"I can't think of anything. I'll just ask her to explain herself."

Jun immediately starts hitting keys on her cell phone, spelling out each word she types.

"What... are... you... talking... about?"

With a slightly exaggerated motion, Jun pushes the send button and puts the phone down while rolling her eyes at me. A mere second later though, two electronic beeps can be heard from somewhere outside the room. Jun's eyes widen in surprise, and then she lets out a groan.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"N-Naomi? Are you there?"

02

Grinning widely, our mutual friend with the bleached hairdo barges into the room, still holding the cell phone that gave away her presence.

"Hey girls!"

"Hi Naomi."

"Were you listening in on us just now?"

"Hahaha, surprised you, didn't I? Congratulations yet again, college freshman Yamazaki."

Naomi walks up behind Jun and grabs her into a not-too-gentle hug. Jun's a bit startled, but then smiles proudly.

"Uh, thanks."

"So you've already gotten your results?"

While Naomi's still squeezing the breath out of Jun, another familiar voice is heard from beyond the doorway.

"Oh!"

"Good morning everyone."

To my delight, the person walking into the kitchen is noone other than Hisao. Naomi snickers.

"I ran into the boyfriend at the gate, so we came here together. If you wanna kiss him now, please don't mind us."

Jun frowns at her friend.

"If they have even an ounce more shame than you, they probably will mind."

Hisao seems to agree since he walks up to me, puts his hand on my left shoulder and playfully tickles the side of my neck with his finger, but holds off on the kiss. It's probably for the best. I'd feel pretty uneasy kissing my boyfriend with my friends watching me like that.

"Hey Hanako. When I came here I was wondering if I'd find you here or if you'd still be busy packing things in your room."

"Hi Hisao. Uh... I still need to do m-most of my packing. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Hanako. My parents and I can help out with that, and I'm sure the Satous will also be willing to lend a hand when they arrive."

Naomi scratches her head.

"Where are your parents anyway? When I got here I just saw you near the gate."

"They're currently in town having breakfast. We had to depart kind of early this morning. I wanted to check up on Hanako first, so they dropped me off at the school gates. They'll be here later."

"Heh, you guys had to skip breakfast too, huh?"

Upon hearing that two of my friends travelled here early in the morning on an empty stomach, I get up.

"Um... Aren't you hungry? I could... m-make some breakfast for you two."

"Hey thanks!"

"If it's not an inconvenience."

"It isn't."

I still had some leftovers anyway and since this is my last breakfast here, I might as well use all of them up so I won't have to throw them away or take them with me.

My last breakfast here...

My mood once again taking a little hit, I quickly head for the kitchen sink unit so the others can't see the corners of my mouth dropping a bit. I get the few supplies I had left from the fridge and get to work on preparing breakfast for Hisao and Naomi while still trying to follow the conversation.

"So... What was with the text message?"

"The internet? Seriously? You were going to look up her results on the internet?"

"Well, it was an option. What's wrong with it?"

"What's wrong with it? No sense of romanticism for one. Why do you think I'm here other than watching you, Hanako and our fellow newspaper club members stand up there and receive their diploma?"

"That's already a pretty good reason in its own right."

"Yeah, but I'm also here to experience *that* moment. The moment of walking up to the notice board, making my way past the other students and, assuming my name's on there, yelling at the top of my lungs and going for the biggest group hug ever. Going to some internet site and filling in some random number while sitting in a dorm room just doesn't compare to that."

I hear Jun giggle.

"It almost sounds like you saw this in a manga or tv-series and are now looking to reenact it."

"And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. Right, Hisao?"

"When did I become part of this discussion?"

"You went through this thing last year, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did. And you're kind of right. It *is* a rather special experience."

"Hahaha, see?"

"But to each his own. I've heard that you passed your own entrance exam already, Jun?"

"I have. After the upcoming break, I'll be off to study computer science."

"Sounds interesting. Do you want to be a software developer?"

"I'm hoping to become a programmer and work at a game company someday. But if that's not possible then there are probably a lot of other companies where I might be able to apply."

Having finished preparing Hisao's and Naomi's food, I return to the table while doing my best not to think too hard about the fact that this is the last time I'll eat here.

"Thanks for the food, Hanako. It would have been a pain having to go all the way to the cafeteria to eat something."

"Yeah, thanks for the food, Hanako. You can't be exhilarated on an empty stomach. Let's dig in!"

I sit down next to Hisao, and we eat our meal while Naomi and Jun try to combine the act of chattering with the act of eating to the best of their ability.

"Soooooooo... What are you guys gonna do after today? Anyone has any special plans for our inter-school break? Jun?"

"It'll probably come down to finishing the games in my backlog and catching up with my aerobics exercises."

"Aerobics? Huh."

"On nurse's orders. To get in better shape and make me less of a walking china doll. Apparently I've been lagging behind a bit. Normal aerobics is kind of dull, but I'm allowed to play Wii Fit as a substitute. Occasionally, Mom joins in, and the two of us hold a match who can get the least pathetic score."

"Okaaaaay, so it's playing video games and playing more video games."

"There's a difference. But how about you?"

"Natsume's coming over for a little while. If it turns out that I screwed up my exam, I'll probably need some distraction. And if I passed it, we'll go and PAINT THE TOWN RED!"

"Are you talking about getting hammered? I thought both of you were on meds you shouldn't mix with alcohol."

"We'll just pretend to be drunk. That's fun too."

"If you say so. Anyway, give her our regards, okay?"

"Of course. Soooo..."

Naomi gives Hisao and me a teasing look.

"What are you two lovebirds gonna do, other than taking a vacation together and doing lovey-dovey stuff?"

"You don't think taking a vacation together is enough?"

"Wait! Huh? You're actually serious?"

"For serious? You're going on vacation?"

Both Naomi and Jun have a flabbergasted expression on their face after Hisao's revelation. Maybe I should have brought this up myself earlier.

"We are. The day after tomorrow. My luggage is actually already in my parents' car. We're allowed to stay over at the Satou home tonight and tomorrow, and we can leave Hanako's belongings there. We've both been saving up a little bit. In two days, we'll be leaving on a little trip together."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little jealous. Where will you be going? Scotland again?"

"No, Okinawa. We're planning to take it easy there. Maybe go and see some natural parks, take a boat trip or two and see the sights."

"Also, Hisao has promised to take me to D-Disneyland in Tokyo if I pass my exams."

"As an additional motivation. The last time she went there was on her own, and she told me she would have enjoyed it more if she would have had company. So this time we're going there together."

Naomi pouts.

"That sounds sooo awesome. I'm kinda envious, but I'll forgive you if you buy us a nice souvenir and take some pretty pictures."

"I will."

"It's a shame that today is our very last day here or you could have borrowed the club's camera again."

"Y-Yes."

Naomi's words once again awaken the wistful feeling I've been trying to silence all morning and this time I didn't manage to hide the melancholic tone in my voice from my friends who give me a worried look.

03

"Are you alright, Hanako?"

"Yeah, you look a little bummed."

"You've been a little gloomy over the last few days."

"It's... okay."

"Are you sure?"

"The thought of... leaving here today... just feels a bit strange."

Hisao nods understandingly.

"Seeing that this place has literally been your home for the last four years, I think I understand how you feel."

Naomi and Jun nod as well. I don't think either of them can completely understand how I'm feeling right now, but I can tell that they're making an effort, and I appreciate that.

"Hanako, this must have been a problem last year too, right? How did you deal with it then?"

"Last year was... different. It's... hard to explain."

Last year, I already knew in advance that I messed up my entrance exams, and I was so preoccupied with the disappointment I felt I was about to bring down on Hisao and Lilly that I couldn't even think of anything else right up to the point where I fled Yamaku in a panic.

"But you'll have another place to stay after today, right?"

"If I pass today, I'll move in with Lilly after my vacation. I'm... not really sure yet what to do if I don't make it in."

I won't be able to stay at Yamaku, so I'd either have to pick another university that doesn't have its own entrance exams or I'd have to spend another year preparing for a third attempt. Karla offered to have me help her out with her biography activities. Or as she playfully put it, become her sidekick. But even she pointed out that getting myself into a reputable university is the best thing I can do for myself.

"We'll deal with that when we get there. We'll figure something out, Hanako. Together. Right?"

"Y-Yes."

We finish our breakfast without any further conversation. When I start gathering the bowls and plates, Naomi gets up and takes them from me.

"No need for that. Your boyfriend and I will take care of the dishes."

"But..."

"No buts. You've made us breakfast, so we'll clean things up for you. Won't we?"

"Uh, sure. I'll help."

"Okay. Thank you, Naomi and Hisao."

Hisao and Naomi head over to the kitchen sink unit and start arguing who's going to do the washing and who the drying. Meanwhile, Jun takes off her hair tie and starts fumbling around with her hair.

"Hanako, how's my hair?"

"I think it's looking fine. Why?"

"I had a shower just before going to bed last night and sometimes the next morning I have pieces of hair...you know..."

She makes a quick gesture with her head in the direction of my boyfriend. I quickly put my hand in front of my mouth to stifle a giggle. Then I shake my head.

"Not this time."

"Good. I could keep my favorite cap on during the ceremony, but I don't think the school would approve. Or my parents. They'll probably be upset if I don't look my Sunday best today."

"Are you... nervous?"

"Only a little bit. It's just a ceremony though. How about you? This is about the time they usually post the exam results on the board outside the main building."

"I'm... not really sure."

Rriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg - rrriiinngggggg rrrriinnnnngggg

Our conversation is cut short when my phone suddenly springs to life. I already know who it is before I fish my phone out of my pocket and look at the display.

"H-Hello Lilly."

"Hello Hanako. How are you doing? I'm not interrupting you, am I?"

"No, not at all. Hisao and N-Naomi are already here. We just had breakfast. Where are you right now?"

"Akira says it's only a few kilometres to Yamaku. I just received a call from Father that he and Mother are already there. They're waiting for us at the parking lot."

"You... didn't drive together?"

"We thought it would be more convenient if Father and Mother could drive straight to Yamaku without having to make a large detour to pick me up, so Akira spent the night at my place and the two of us had some breakfast and hit the road early this morning. Besides, since we'll be leaving here with you, Hisao and both your and his luggage, we might need two cars."

"That's true."

"Hanako, I assume you haven't checked the results yet?"

"No... Not yet. We can wait until you and Akira are here."

"I appreciate that, Hanako. I'm sure your results will be just fine. We can celebrate this evening at Mother and Father's place. Akira will be staying over too. It'll be great fun."

I'm almost expecting to hear Akira's voice at this point, commenting something like: 'Staying at that place is never great fun.' or something similar, but I'm pleasantly surprised that there's no reaction at all.

I really like Akira, but her reactions around her parents have always made me feel a bit uncomfortable. Lately though, Akira seems to have warmed up to her parents just a little bit, and last New Year's Day was the first time Akira was spending time around her parents without giving off the impression that she was dying to be somewhere - anywhere - else. Lilly told me two weeks ago that her mother offered Akira to go hiking in the Scottish Highlands together with her this summer and that Akira reluctantly accepted. They're certainly not there yet, but it's still progress, and I hope they can keep this going.

"I'm... looking forward to it. I just hope I w-won't let you down today."

"You won't, Hanako. I'm sure of it."

"Sis, we're approaching the parking lot. Let's go see where the folks are, okay?"

"Hanako, I'll have to hang up now, but we'll meet you in front of the school building, okay?"

"Okay."

After I hang up the phone, I notice that Naomi is putting away the last of the dishes, and Hisao is looking at me with a curious look.

"When do you think Lilly is going to be here?"

"She and her family have just arrived. She said... we'd meet up in front of the main building."

"My parents should be back by now as well. I'll go and find them, and we'll see you at the notice board, okay?"

"A-Alright."

Hisao walks out of the room while already in the process of dialing his parents' number and Jun shares a look with the two of us.

"Maybe we should go too. If the rest gets there before we do, they might just sneak a peek."

"Y-Yes."

"Uh... Yeah."

We get on our feet and head for the dormitory's exit. Just as we pass the dormkeeper's office, Jun gets a phonecall. It's probably her parents who are on their way here, though I'm not really paying enough attention to tell for sure. Now that the moment of truth is getting closer and closer, I'm starting to get really anxious.

Hisao and his parents will be there. As will the Satous. What if it turns out that I failed again? How will I face them?

And what will I do then?

My former strategy of blocking out the future by focussing completely on the present isn't helping me right now because in a few minutes, my exams results will no longer be a thing of the future. They'll be the present. And I'll have to deal with them, whatever they are.

When we reach the area in front of the main building, I can see that there's already quite a crowd there. Most of them are students in uniform, though I can see some others among them as well. Probably family. I doubt all of those people are looking up their own results. There are probably several of them who are merely taking a look at the results of their friends. I can see several people celebrating and patting each other on the back. But I can also see two people walking off with a dejected look on their face. I suppose not everybody has good fortune today. The mere look of them makes me nervous. And from the looks of it, I'm not the only one. Naomi is also giving them an uneasy stare.

Come to think of it, Naomi hasn't said a single thing since we left the dorm. That's... highly unusual for her. She smiles awkwardly when she catches me looking at her.

"I guess this is the big moment, huh? If I've mucked this up, my mom and dad are gonna be pretty upset with me."

"..."

Jun seems amused at Naomi's sudden nervousness.

"Naomi, this isn't like you. Earlier today you were still going on about yelling at the top of your lungs. Have a little faith in yourself."

"That's easy for you to say. You already have your exam results."

"Ah, Hanako, there you are."

We turn around and find ourselves not just face to face with Hisao and his parents, but also with Lilly, Akira, Karla and Hiroyuki. They must have run into each other at the gate. Karla smiles broadly at Naomi and me.

"Hello girls. Are you ready for your big moment?"

"We... umm... We..."

"We're... still kind of preparing ourselves mentally."

Akira snickers.

"Well, go ahead and finish your mental preparations. Don't mind us."

Naomi and I share an uncertain look. I think we both realize that we can't just keep standing here with everyone looking at us like that. We shoot an uncertain glance at the message board and then at each other.

"I guess we can't put it off any longer, can we?"

"I... guess not."

"Okay, this is the plan. We walk into that crowd and keep our heads down. We just keep looking at our feet."

"Uh... Okay."

That's pretty much how I always deal with crowds.

"We'll just keep walking until we're right in front of the board. Then we both count to three and look at the same time."

"...O-kay."

Naomi takes an almost exaggeratedly deep breath, and then we both head towards the notification board. When we reach the crowd in front of it, we both keep our head down and start making our way through the crowd of people. My heart's beating so loudly that it almost completely drowns out the murmur of the people around us.

"Hanako?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Is it possible to spontaneously drop dead from sheer nervousness?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Completely."

"That's a relief."

04

We fortunately make our way through the crowd before we descend into even more inane rambling. With the announcement board right in front of us, we both take another deep breath.

"Okay."

"Okay."

"I guess this is it."

"Y-Yes."

"The moment of truth."

"Yes."

"We've worked a whole year towards this."

"A whole year."

"One..."

"One..."

"Two..."

"T-Two..."

"T-Three..."

"T-Three..."

"Now!"

"Now!"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Hey!"

"Oh!"

"I..."

"I..."

"Whoa!"

"Wow!"

We look at one another, then back at the board, then back at one another. Naomi is the one to break the silence.

"Come on."

"Uh?"

"Come on! We've gotta go do something."

I suddenly feel my right hand being grabbed followed by a sharp pull on my arm.

"H-Hey! Careful!"

Before I realize what's happening, Naomi has dragged me back through the crowd until we're some distance away from the masses. Still tightly holding onto my hand, Naomi turns to me.

"Okay. On the count of three. One..."

"Uh... What?"

Naomi's mouth curls up into a grin that starts out small, but then slowly starts stretching until it nearly connects her ears.

"TWO."

"Naomi, what are you...?"

Naomi's eyes start sparkling.

"THREE!"

"What am I supposed to...?"

05

"YAAAAAAAHOooooooooooooo! WE DID IT! WE DID IT!"

Naomi lets out an ear-piercing yell and throws both her arms up into the air, forcing me to raise my right arm as well.

"HAHAHAHAHA! WATCH OUT, KASSHOKU UNIVERSITY! HERE WE COME!"

The others, who have been standing some distance away from the crowds in front of the board now come rushing to our side. Jun, whom I have never seen running before, is miraculously the first one to reach us, looking at both of us with an elated expression.

"Did you...? Both of you?"

"FINAL SCORE FOR THE BROKEN QUILLS: THREE OUT OF THREE!"

"Hahaha, wow!"

"PERFECT!"

"Hahaha, flawless victory!"

"YEAH! OH YEAH!"

"Hanako!"

Hisao is the second to reach us, and Jun graciously steps aside to make room for him. My boyfriend tightly hugs me and then gives me a big smooch on my left cheek.

"Congratulations!"

Next is Lilly, led by Akira. A proud smile adorns her face when she hugs me, and while I'm still overwhelmed by the fact that I actually succeeded in my exams this time, Lilly's looking happier than I've seen her in a very long time. Maybe even happier than she was at her own graduation.

"Hanako."

"Lilly, I... I made it in... this time."

"Yes, you did, Hanako. I'm so happy for you. Happy and proud. Congratulations."

"Yup, congratulations. You totally deserved this."

"T-Thank you, Lilly and Akira."

I think the reality of the situation is still in the process of sinking in, and in a bit of a daze, I accept the congratulations of the Nakais and the Satous. I nod at their words of praise even though they're barely coming through. I see Naomi excitedly talking into her phone while wildly gesticulating. I see Hisao cheerfully talking to Mutou and to a boy in a wheelchair, giving him a high-five. I see Jun walking up to her parents who probably just arrived. And all the while, one thought keeps running through my mind.

I made it in.

I passed my exam.

But will I be able to function in university?

"Hanako?"

"Ah, s-sorry. What did you say?"

Karla snickers.

06

"It looks like she's still a little bit in shock."

Her husband nods.

"I cannot blame her. I still remember the day I found out I made it into my university of choice. It was quite a special moment. Anyway, Hanako, I was saying that I hope you are also proud of yourself right now. You deserve to be."

"I'm... n-not really sure."

"Miss Hanako?"

I turn around and see my therapist standing there. Miss Yumi makes a deep bow as she approaches me.

"Miss Yumi."

"I think Mister Satou is correct. You deserve to be proud of yourself today. Try to allow yourself at least this much."

"I'll try."

"That's good. I think it's appropriate to congratulate you now, dear. You've done very well. So what will you do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've found a university that is willing to accept you. Are you also willing to accept that university?"

"I ah..."

"You'll come along, right? It wouldn't be the same without you."

I suddenly feel Naomi's hand on my shoulder.

"Well..."

"I get that you're a little squeamish about it, but I think it'll work out. You'll already have one friend there, and we can both watch each other's back. Teamwork!"

"I... I..."

Despite my uncertainties about the future, Naomi's words still make me very happy, and before I have time for any further doubt, I find myself responding.

07

"I... I'm going, too."

"Alright! That's the spirit."

Miss Yumi smiles.

"It is indeed. I think you've made the right decision, dear."

"Miss Takawa, it is good to see you too. It appears that your decision to place Hanako in Yamaku's ronin program has paid off. Congratulations on your good judgement."

"Hmmm. In truth, sir, I did very little. I may have shown Miss Ikezawa the road that was the most likely one to lead to success, but she has been the one who has taken the time and effort to traverse it all the way to the end."

"I agree. She can now participate in the upcoming ceremony with her head held high."

"Uh... Actually I... ah... will not b-be t-taking part in it."

Hiroyuki raises an eyebrow as if I just told him that the sky was green.

"You will not be taking part? But why not? It is a very unique experience and you might come to regret it later."

"Ummm... I..."

"The reason Miss Ikezawa will not be taking part is because the ceremony that will be taking place in an about hour is intended for third year students who graduate from Yamaku Academy this year. Miss Ikezawa may have passed her university entrance exams, but she already graduated this school a year ago."

"Yes, but she did not take part in that ceremony. I apologize for being so insistent, Miss Takawa, but certainly it would be little trouble for the school to arrange for one extra seat in front? Just picking up Hanako's diploma at the school administration office seems... extremely anticlimactic."

I can't really blame Lilly's father for his persistence. He and his wife, as well as Hisao's parents drove a long way just to be here today. Me not being part of the graduation ceremony must be a disappointment to them, and I feel a little guilty for my part in this. Truth is, I wouldn't be looking forward to standing in front there despite the happy occasion.

"I understand where you're coming from, but I have already discussed this matter with Miss Ikezawa a few days ago, and I came to the conclusion that she wouldn't enjoy standing in front of a gymnasium filled with people. I considered asking her to go through with it anyway, as a final therapy-related challenge of sorts, but I ultimately decided against it. There will be plenty of challenges for her in the weeks and months to come. I think today should be a day for celebration, not challenge. A day she should be allowed to enjoy as much as possible - on her own terms."

"Very well then."

I smile gratefully at Miss Yumi. I don't think I would have done that good a job of explaining myself.

"Thank you."

"So, Hanako... What would you like to do now? Pick up your diploma?"

"I..."

"There are... a few places I'd like to see one more time. I'd like to be in the audience when Jun gets her diploma. And uh...I still need to pack my things."

Lilly turns to her sister with that 'I have a good idea'-smile on her face.

"Akira? Do you think we could...?"

"Heh, I was thinking the same thing, Lils. Hey Hanako, the two of us will take care of packing your stuff for you while you attend the ceremony if that's okay with you."

"I couldn't possibly..."

"I guess it's settled then. Just leave it to us."

I guess there's no stopping those two. I might as well give them the opportunity to help me wrap things up a little sooner.

"T-Thanks."

Lilly shakes her head in that 'think nothing of it'-fashion of hers and turns back to me.

"Hanako, what places would you still like to see?"

"Just the tea room and the library."

"Can I come along? I wouldn't mind paying them a visit myself."

"Okay."

Karla turns to Hisao's parents and makes a polite bow.

"Would you perhaps extend us the honor of having lunch with us in the school cafeteria in the meantime? It's been a full year since we saw each other. It will be good to talk for a bit again."

"The pleasure is ours."

"Yes, thank you."

As the Nakais and the Satous walk off towards the cafeteria, Akira gestures in the direction of the school building's entrance.

"Well, let's have our little tour then. Lead the way, Hanako."

08

According to my watch, I still have 20 minutes to get to the gymnasium which should be ample time, and yet it feels extremely short at the same time. After visiting the notice board in front of the school building and confirming that I passed my exams, Hisao, Lilly, Akira and I took a little trip through the building and spent some time in the tea room, where Lilly made some tea for all of us for old time's sake.

We spent some time reminiscing about last year, noting that this was the room where Hisao first made Lilly's acquaintance, where Hisao and I played our first game of chess and where we spent so many lunch breaks eating and getting to know each other.

Then we visited the library, and I felt a strong sense of sadness when it sank in that this would be the last time I'd be in a place that held so many fond memories for me. I've truly started considering it 'my library', as strange as that seems, and a lot of important moments in my life are connected to that place. It's the place where Hisao and I first interacted, where we first spent time alone and where, after being apart for a long time, we met back up and reconnected with one another. I was thankful that Akira didn't see me blushing when I recalled that particular memory. It was also the place where I spent most of my time studying, first alone and later with Jun and Naomi. In a way it contributed to the fact that I passed.

Miss Morita, who usually runs the library when the usual librarian isn't available, thanked me for all my effort and allowed me to pick a handful of books to take with me as keepsakes. I think the fact that I'll be taking a little bit of the place with me makes the loss a little easier on me.

And now we're standing in front of the door to my room. I was supposed to just retrieve my handbag and then give the key to Lilly and Akira so they can get started on packing my belongings. But now that I'm here, I feel a serious lump in my throat that I just can't manage to swallow.

"Hanako?"

The others must have sensed my mood, and I turn away from Hisao and Akira because I don't want to worry them by letting them see my gloomy expression.

"I'm... okay. C-Could I... Could I just s-spend a few m-minutes in here, p-please?"

"Of course, Hanako. Just let us know when you're ready."

"T-Thank you."

I open the door to my dorm room, enter and close it behind me. Then I sit down on my bed and have a long, long look around, trying to etch every part of it into my memory. Last year I was too riled up to think straight, and I ran away from here without thinking about what this place has come to mean to me. Now that my mind is more at ease and I've had time to get used to the fact that I'll be leaving here today, leaving this room behind feels really painful.

It's been a close call between my room and the library, but in the end this room will be the place I'll end up missing most. For four years, this room has been my haven and my home. It's been the one place where I've always felt safe.

Having to move on can hurt.

I take out a handkerchief and dry my teary eyes. When I leave here, I want to walk out with a smile. I open the drawers of my desk, take a few private possessions out of them and put them in my bag and then walk around my room one more time, tenderly touching the bed, the chair, the desk and the closet. Finally, I close my eyes, take a deep breath and walk out the door, closing it behind me without looking back.

"I'm... r-ready to go. Here's the k-key. C-Can you... l-leave it with the d-dormkeeper when you're... done?"

"We will, Hanako. Are you alright?"

"I... I am. Thank you for doing this. There's...um...something under the bed that's g-going to be a present for someone. C-Could you be extra careful with it?"

I'm truly grateful. Packing my things myself and watching my home slowly transform back into an anonymous dorm room would have been much more painful. I'll remember this place the way it's always been. Things are okay this way.

"We will be, Hanako. You'd better hurry up and get to the gymnasium."

"Okay."

"You two will be okay on your own, right? Some of the science club members are graduating today as well, and I kind of promised that I'd be at the ceremony, too."

"Then you should go, Hisao. Akira and I will be fine. The last ceremony took quite a while, so we have plenty of time."

"Alright. Good luck."

We leave the dormitory and hurry to the gymnasium. It's already pretty crowded when we get there, but a look through the hall quickly reveals Naomi's bleached hairdo, as well as another head of blonde hair right next to her. Naomi and Karla wave at us as we approach.

"Hey guys. We kept these spots vacant for you. Have a seat."

"Thanks. I didn't expect to see you here, Karla."

"Well, as a sponsor for The Broken Quills, I felt I had to attend this ceremony since one of its members will be handed her diploma there. My husband didn't seem to be needing my help in keeping the conversation with your parents going."

"I kind of hope they're not just talking about heart conditions."

"Haha, no need to worry about that."

I sit down next to Naomi who gives me a little elbow in the side.

"Natsume says hi and congratulations, by the way."

"You've already phoned her?"

"Uhuh. My parents too. They were all really happy. There's a big party waiting for me when I get home. I can't wait."

"I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I know I will. Uh, by the way... You have your phone turned off, right?"

"Ah... Yes."

"Okay. Just checking."

The ceremony takes a little longer than I expected, and some parts are a little long-winded, but when Jun comes forward and accepts her diploma, I might have clapped louder than anyone else in the hall. I'm really happy that my friends have managed to come up on top as well.

When the ceremony finally ends, we quickly get up to leave in order to avoid the crowds. When we leave the gymnasium though, there's a familiar face waiting for me.

"Hello, Miss Hanako."

"M-Miss Yumi!"

I'm a little surprised by Miss Yumi's sudden appearance. Has she been waiting for me here?

"So... Have all loose ends been tied up here?"

All but one, I think. I still have a small gift prepared for Miss Yumi as a display of gratitude, but it's still with Lilly and Akira.

"Almost."

"That's good to hear. I was wondering if you'd give me the pleasure of one final session - and perhaps one last game."

"N-Now?"

"Yes, please."

This is rather awkward timing, but Miss Yumi seems insistent on me coming with her now. Maybe this is a busy day for her. I'm probably not the only client who's graduating here today. I look back at Hisao, Karla and Naomi who give me a 'go ahead' gesture.

"Okay then."

Before we leave, Miss Yumi whispers something to Hisao who nods his head. Then we make our way to Miss Yumi's office in the nurses' building.

"Miss Yumi, what did you tell Hisao when we left?"

"I told him and Miss Inoue to make sure that Miss Yamazaki doesn't get away before you can say your goodbyes."

"Oh. Uh... Thanks."

When we reach the entrance to the office, Miss Yumi makes an inviting gesture.

"Come in, please!"

"Thank you."

09

We enter and exchange polite bows. The familiar little ritual, one last time.

"May I have the honor of getting you some tea, Miss Hanako?"

"I humbly accept, Miss Yumi."

We sit at the table, a small bowl of tea is gently placed in my hands, and after a small bow, we both take a careful drink.

"Well then, shall we start?"

The familiar game. I've gotten a lot better at it over time. It'd be nice if I could beat Miss Yumi this time, though for the best I can probably hope for is keeping our score somewhat even.

"Yes, please."

Miss Yumi gives a small nod, and I place the first black stone onto the game board. Miss Yumi takes one of her white stones and puts it in place with a dull tap.

"Now then, Miss Hanako. You have just attended the graduation ceremony as part of the audience. I take it you feel no regrets about not having been on stage?"

Tap

"No. I think things are fine this way."

People may argue that I deserved some time in the spotlight, but in my eyes I've also missed an opportunity to make a fool of myself.

Tap

"How did you feel during the ceremony?"

Tap

"A little uneasy due to being in a room with so many people. But the fact that Hisao, Naomi and Karla were sitting right next to me felt reassuring."

Tap

"Anything else?"

Tap

"I felt proud... of Jun. And happy for her. But I also felt s-sad for a moment."

Tap

"Sad?"

Tap

"S-So many parents in the room. Feeling proud of their children. I... I missed m-mine today..."

Tap

"There's nothing strange about that, Miss Hanako. It's perfectly natural."

Tap

"..."

Tap

"Were you very surprised at the results this morning?"

Tap

"A bit. I... finished all questions on the answer sheet this time, but still... passing s-seemed too good to be true... I think."

Tap

"Good things can and do happen to everyone, Miss Hanako. You're no exception. Don't forget that. In fact, be sure to remind yourself of that every once in a while."

Tap

"I'll try."

Tap

"Just between you and me, your results were no surprise to me. I had the proctor make a copy of your answer sheet and asked Mister Hoshino to have a look at it. He said it was extremely likely that you'd pass this time."

Tap

"Oh."

Tap

"I wouldn't say it was entirely curiosity on my part. I also wanted to be able to take my time looking into someone who can take over from me concerning these kinds of sessions. I'm happy to say that I found a replacement who I think is up to the task."

Tap

"A... replacement?"

Tap

"Now would probably be a good time to say hello to each other, don't you think?"

Tap

"She? She's... here?"

"She isn't, but that's not a problem."

Miss Yumi takes a telephone from the nearby cabinet, dials a number and turns on the speaker. My heart skips a beat as I hear someone pick up on the other end of the line.

"Good afternoon, Kasshoku University counselor's office, this is Ibuki speaking."

Wow, she sounds young. I'd be surprised if she's older than 30. I didn't expect that.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ibuki. This is Takawa from Yamaku Academy. I promised to call you to let you know about today's results."

"Ah, yes, that's right. How did things go?"

"It couldn't have gone better. Not only has she passed her exams, but she also let me know that she's going take the opportunity and attend Kasshoku. In fact, she's here with me right now."

"Oh... I... didn't know. Good afternoon."

"Uh... G-good afternoon."

Miss Yumi chuckles at the slightly awkward atmosphere. She may be the only one who's completely at ease right now.

"Miss Ibuki, meet Miss Ikezawa. Miss Ikezawa, meet Miss Ibuki."

"Nice to meet you."

"N-Nice to meet you too."

"Ever since Mister Hoshino told me that he expected you to pass your exams, I've been searching for someone to keep an eye out during your time at Kasshoku. Miss Ibuki here is the person I deemed most suitable to the task."

The young woman on the other end of the line coughs modestly.

"I'm afraid I'm not a psychologist like Miss Takawa. I'm a school counselor, and the journalism faculty is one of the faculties I've been assigned to. I've studied at this university myself a few years ago, so I know quite a few people here. After graduating, I decided I liked it here so I chose to stay. The upcoming April it'll be my third year on the job. I... ah... know I'm not as experienced as Miss Takawa, but I'll still try my best."

Third year on the job? I quickly count the years back on my fingers and realize I was still off with my initial guess. She must be around Akira's age. This feels weird.

"Now then, shall we get down to business?"

Miss Yumi takes a sip from her tea, casually places another stone on the Go board and then continues.

"I don't think experience is really an issue here, Miss Ibuki. A personal click is much more important than seniority, and I think you two will get along fine. I am currently writing a treatment plan for Miss Ikezawa that I will send to you once it's completed. As long as you follow the instructions in there and pay attention to the recommendations made in there, I do not foresee many problems. Miss Ikezawa's case file will remain here at Yamaku, though you're always welcome to call me for advice if you feel you need it. I'm always happy to give my opinion."

Miss Yumi takes a note from her desk and starts scribbling on it. When she gives it to me, I notice an e-mail address, phone number and building number on it.

"Here's Miss Ibuki's contact information. I would like you to make an appointment with her for a face-to-face introduction. You can postpone it until after your vacation, but be sure to schedule it in before you start attending classes there. Now..."

Her expression turns a bit stern for a moment.

"Those first few weeks will be vital. We want to try and get them off without a hitch. During the first two weeks, I would like you to schedule one appointment a day with Miss Ibuki. If everything goes well, then you can bring things down to four short visits a week the next two weeks. Then, the next month, three visits a week. The month afterwards, you can take it down to two. By the time summer break arrives, you should be somewhat settled in and we can limit ourselves to one visit a week. In my opinion, you might still benefit from official therapy from time to time, but I'm still looking for a therapist with satisfying credentials in that area. I will let Miss Ibuki know as soon as I have found someone. Alright?"

Whoa, that's a lot.

"Y-Yes."

"Miss Ibuki?"

"I understand. Miss Ikezawa, these visits don't need to last for an hour. Just drop by after classes and we can spend a minute or ten to go over your day. That should be enough if your day was uneventful."

"Okay."

Miss Yumi checks her watch and then clears her throat.

"Unfortunately we seem to be running a bit short on time. Does either of you have any questions?"

"I don't have any. I'm looking forward to meeting you."

"Uh... I w-was wondering. I have a f-friend here who... uh..."

I hesitate. I'm not sure if I'm really in a position to be making demands already, but Miss Yumi mouths a quiet 'ah'.

"Oh yes, thanks for reminding me. Miss Ibuki, there should be another student starting at the journalism faculty this April. Her name is Naomi Inoue, and she graduated from this school one year ago. She happens to be a friend and former classmate of Miss Ikezawa. I think both will greatly benefit from being in the same workgroup this upcoming school year."

"Oh... ah... sure, of course. That can be arranged. Not a problem. I'll make a note and phone the faculty next week."

I'm a little baffled by the eagerness in her voice. She must be aching to prove herself.

"That would be greatly appreciated. By the way, Miss Ibuki, do you play Go?"

"Go? I've only played it a few times years ago. Why?"

"This young lady here has developed a real knack for the game and it would be a shame if she allowed her abilities to deteriorate. She's quite fond of board games, and playing one during the sessions may help take the edge off."

"I don't really have a lot of attachment with Go, but I used to play Shogi against my former boyfriend. Is that okay too?"

"Shogi?"

"Umm... Okay. Shogi is fun too."

I can briefly see Miss Yumi's mouth twitch as if she wants to say that Shogi isn't quite on the same level as her favorite game, but then she shakes her head.

"Oh well... Shogi it is then. I'm sure the two of you will get along fine. Who knows... You may develop a bond of trust and start using 'Miss Hanako' before you realize it."

I'm not sure what to make of that remark, but Miss Yumi chuckles as if she just said something extremely funny.

"I don't understand..."

I hear Miss Ibuki cough softly on the other end of the line.

"Well... ah... I suppose I can tell you... My first name is Hanako as well."

"Eh?"

Miss Yumi grins playfully at me.

"Amazing coincidence, is it not? Or maybe it was meant to be. Fate works in mysterious ways."

"W-Wow."

"Miss Ibuki, we'll be in touch."

"Thank you, Miss Takawa. And Miss Ikezawa... I hope to see you soon."

"G-Goodbye, M-Miss Ibuki."

When my namesake hangs up the phone, Miss Yumi checks her watch again.

"We might not have time to finish our little game, so let's call it a draw. Would you be willing to do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Could you help me move this table to the corner and make some fresh tea?"

"Okay."

"Good."

I'm not sure why she wants to do these things now, but I see no problem in helping her out a bit. The table is a bit cumbersome, and after I we push it into the corner, I can see Miss Yumi rub her back a bit. We get started on making a new batch of tea, and while we're waiting for the water to boil, Miss Yumi gives me a wistful look.

"Miss Hanako?"

"Yes, Miss Yumi?"

"Those first few weeks at university will form the foundation for the rest of your college years. If you can work your way through those without any major incidents, I think you'll do fine there. We've done all we can here to give you a little headstart. The rest is up to you. Have faith in yourself, okay?"

"I'll... try."

While we're finishing up the tea, our attention is suddenly drawn by a short, but loud knock on the door. Miss Yumi calls out a quick 'please come in', and my eyes grow wide as I recognize the person walking into the office.

"Good afternoon, Takawa. I hope you didn't have to wait too long?"

"On the contrary madam, you are right on time."

"M-M-Miss Principal?

The school principal gives me a friendly nod and then turns to Miss Yumi.

"That's a relief. I had the impression some of the people outside have been waiting there for some time."

"How many people were there?"

"I counted nine in total. Shall I ask them to come in?"

"Yes, please."

What's going on?

The principal walks up to the door, opens it and says something to whoever's waiting outside. Then she steps aside and people start pouring into the room. I gasp as I recognize Hisao, Lilly, their parents, Akira and even Jun and Naomi. I give Miss Yumi a dumbfounded look.

"W-What is this?"

Miss Yumi playfully smiles at me and then makes a quick gesture with her head in the direction of the principal. When I follow her gaze, I notice that the principal has something resembling a paper scroll in her hand. I let out a gasp before I can stop myself.

"I-Is that...?"

"It is. Ahem! May I have everybody's attention. Could you please line up over there please? Yes, that'll do. Thank you. Miss Hanako, please come and stand over here."

My mind still trying to comprehend this unexpected twist of events, I allow Miss Yumi to guide me to the center of the room. Everybody's attention's suddenly aimed at me, and I fidget a bit.

"M-Miss Yumi, what's going on?"

Miss Yumi chuckles mischievously.

"Why, this is your graduation ceremony, of course? What does it look like?"

"M-My...?"

Miss Yumi walks up to the place where the table used to be with the principal taking position next to her.

"Mister Satou had a good point this morning when he noted that just retrieving your diploma from the administration office would be anticlimactic. You've spent four years of your life studying here and deserve your moment in the spotlight just like any other student. Since I didn't want to risk ruining your day by forcing you to stand in front of an entire crowd at the gymnasium, I thought that maybe we could hold a small private ceremony here afterwards. The principal was so kind as to humor me, retrieve your diploma and attend here too. *chuckle* I can only hope that she also has a speech for the occasion."

The principal frowns upon hearing Miss Yumi's words.

"That may be a problem. I take it the people here have already heard the speech I gave earlier today."

"Maybe you could improvise."

"Maybe. Or perhaps you could do the honors instead of me."

Miss Yumi seems genuinely taken back by her superior's suggestion.

"Me?"

"You know this girl much better than I do. You have probably also known her for longer than many of the people here. It seems fitting. Maybe you can improvise."

"Well, I..."

Miss Yumi closes her eyes and seems deep in thought for a second. Then she nods.

10

"I suppose I could."

The murmur of the others in the room dies down as Miss Yumi takes the diploma off the principal's hands, turns to me, takes a deep breath and stands a little taller.

"Miss Hanako Ikezawa. Please step forward."

I nervously do so, well aware of all the eyes on me. Miss Yumi merely smiles at me.

"Well... Here you are. About to receive your diploma and about to embark on a new journey into the world beyond the school gates. The prospect of this journey may be exciting, but no doubt it is also a little frightening. Yamaku has been more than a school to you, after all. It has also been your home, your shelter and, most importantly, a place to grow."

"A place to grow... That is what Yamaku as an institution strives to be above all else. Good grades are important, but equally, if not more, important is our pupils growing the determination to create a future for themselves using the means available to them, taking advantage of their qualities while working around their limitations. You have shown yourself to be one of those pupils, Miss Hanako."

"As your therapist and confidante, I have very good memories of our sessions. I've enjoyed our games together and the process of getting to know you. But more than anything else, I have enjoyed the process of watching you blossom into the person who stands before us today."

I think she's flattering me. Progress doesn't mean much if everything's easily undone by a single bad day. I can see a playful expression appear on Miss Yumi's face as she studies me.

"I can tell from the look in your eyes that you question my words, even now. Of course there have been relapses in the past, and there will probably be a few more at some point in the future. Yet every time you were forced to take a step back, you've taken two steps forward afterwards. I believe you will continue to do that, and I believe it will get easier for you in time. The reason is simple and in plain sight. Look around, Miss Hanako. Look around and think about what you see."

Miss Yumi doesn't immediately continue, making me realize she really meant what she just said. I turn around and sweep the room with my eyes, briefly stopping on each of the people present.

Hisao's parents... I remember being really nervous when Hisao first introduced me to them. If they didn't think I was good enough for their son, our relationship wouldn't have had much of a chance in the long run. And yet, despite having already been introduced to stronger girls like Lilly, Shizune and Misha by that time, they approved of me dating their son and have always been welcoming to me. I feel a bit guilty for not having interacted with them a lot this year due to the distance. Now that I'll be living in the same city as them, I'm planning to drop by regularly. If anything, Karla's stories about her own family situation reminded me how fortunate I am to have supportive 'in-laws'.

Jun... I've really come to appreciate her friendship this year. During a school year when I was separated from most of my other friends, Jun was always there, convincing me to keep my newspaper club activities going, dragging me to her room to play games with her and keeping me company

whenever I was feeling lonely. She won't be attending a school in the same city as I am and I already know I'm really going to miss her. She's going to keep our private forum open though, and I promised myself to keep in touch with her and meet up with her again once things have settled down for us. Maybe the three of us could hold another slumber party at the Satou home just like before. I think I'd enjoy that.

Naomi... She's been my classmate for three years and in a way I've known her longer than any of my other friends. Despite that, I've spent most of those three years trying my hardest to avoid interaction with her, which I'm kind of ashamed of now. Despite the fact that I've spent so much time blocking her out, she never held it against me and was quick to befriend me once I started opening up to her. Her rambunctiousness can still be a hassle to deal with at times, but at the same time her enthusiasm and motivation are always very infectious, and there's no doubt in my mind that she's a wonderful person at heart. The fact that I'll already have one friend at the start of the upcoming school year is a big reassurance to me, and I'm looking forward to sharing classes with her once more in the upcoming spring.

Hiroyuki... When I first met him, I thought he was kind of intimidating. There always seemed to be this veil of formality and politeness around him that was pleasant enough until you realized that you couldn't see the person behind it anymore, and that put me off a little bit at first. But then I remembered that I used to see Lilly in the same light, and I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. Interaction between us can still be a little stilted at times, but I no longer see his pleasantries towards me as merely a front. I think that deep down he's actually a very caring person, even though he has trouble showing it, and I'm happy that I was able to help him when his life was in danger, so we could get to know each other a little better.

Karla... Before meeting her, I imagined Lilly's mother to be a distant and uncaring person. After all, why else would she have left Japan all those years ago? I was taken off guard by how nice and warm-hearted she turned out to be. I discovered that there was more to her than met the eye, and she has some scars of her own underneath, but my opinion of her hasn't changed. In addition to a source of support, she's also become a bit of a mentor figure to me, and I've realized that I want to do well at Kasshoku, partially because I want her and her husband to be proud of me.

Akira... When Lilly first introduced me to her older sister, I didn't think Akira would ever be more than the sister of a friend to me; someone who put up with me because I befriended Lilly, but who'd stop talking to me the moment Lilly and I would go our separate ways. Things turned out very differently, and I found that I may actually have more things in common with Akira than I could have imagined at first. Even though Akira lives in Scotland now, we still talk on a regular basis, and the last two times she visited Japan, she even took the time to drop by at Yamaku, purely for the purpose of spending some time with me alone. If someone were to ask me which one of the two means more to me, I don't think I could answer. Akira has become just as much of a sister figure to me as Lilly has been.

Lilly... When I first walked into the room of the blind girl living next door, in search of some comfort and company that wouldn't be put off by my appearance, I had no idea that this person would end up becoming the first real friend I've made in my life. Our friendship has had its share of hurdles, but in the end we've managed to stick together and remain in contact. I'm really looking forward to moving in with Lilly. Even if university proves tough, I'll at least have the simple pleasures of her sleepy smile each morning and the little small talks we make over tea in the evening. I hope I can do my part to make her daily life more convenient as well. Who knows, maybe I can even give her romantic advice sometimes. Well, that's probably stretching things.

Hisao... When I ran away from him during our first real meeting, he could have easily decided that getting to know me better was too much of a hassle, especially since there were so many other new people he could have forged friendships with. And yet, he stuck with me and ended up being the first person I truly opened up to. In just a little more than three months, we'll be celebrating our

relationship's second anniversary. I feel a little bad that such a large part of it was long distance, but at least that part's over now. I think that our relationship has changed a bit. My life no longer revolves around him like it used to when we first started dating. Unlike what I believed at that time, I was able to open up to others as well. It's made me nervous from time to time, but each moment we spend together still feels really special to me. Maybe our relationship simply has matured a bit, to the point where we can both have our own lives now without it endangering what we have. I'm really excited about our upcoming trip. It'll be our first true vacation together with no one else around, and I'm going to try my best to make it the best experience of his life. He often said that while he wasn't happy either that we were so far apart, he was willing to stick it out because he wanted the 'good times' to return. Now that I'll be able to once again be a part of his daily life, I'm going to try and be the best girlfriend I can be for him. It's the least thing I can do to reciprocate the dedication he has shown me. We might be able to keep our relationship going throughout university. I would really like that.

"I wasn't around to see it back then, Miss Hanako, but one of my predecessors told me about the day you first came here. His first impression: a frightened-looking girl, hiding behind the matron, dragging a suitcase along that was clearly too heavy for her. It feels good to look upon that same girl now. That girl who reached out and became a loving girlfriend, a cherished clubmate, a caring friend. A girl who has found new people in her life to help her carry both her suitcases and her burdens, while at the same time lending others her support in return. A girl who, when forced to rely on those around her during her more trying times, no longer sends them a guilty look, but a grateful smile instead. That in itself is growth, Miss Hanako, and a big reassurance as well."

Miss Yumi smiles warmly as she approaches me.

"Let this diploma be an acknowledgement. An acknowledgement of how much you've achieved already and how far you've come. An acknowledgement of the person standing before me: a strong young woman with clear plans for the future, surrounded by friends and loved ones who came here specifically to share and celebrate this joyous moment with her. An acknowledgement that you have graduated from this academy with flying colors. Please accept your diploma, Miss Hanako Ikezawa. You have truly, truly earned it."

She holds the diploma out to me, and I take it, holding it close to my chest. A moment later, the room bursts into thunderous applause, far louder than I ever thought eleven people capable of clapping. I turn around, face the others and see all the happy and proud smiles on their faces. I squeeze my eyes shut in a futile attempt to stop my tears from starting to flow. For once, being at the center of attention doesn't feel awkward or scary. In fact, it feels really good. I manage to swallow the lump in my throat for long enough to force some words out.

"Everyone... *sniff* T-T-Thank you. T-Thank you s-so much."

For a brief moment another thought enters my head.

I wonder if Mother and Father can see me right now. I wonder how they'd feel. Would they be... proud of me? Would they be happy, too?

The applause lasts a lot longer than I expected. Maybe everybody realized what a special moment this is for me and everyone wanted it to last as long as possible. When it finally dies down, Miss Yumi clears her throat in order to get everybody's attention.

"I'm afraid that's all I could think of. Perhaps that's all there really is to say. I'm afraid we didn't really put together a program for this occasion, but before this little ceremony Miss Hanako and I prepared some tea for everybody. If there are no objections, I'd like to propose we have a little drink in her honor before we leave here. One for the road, as it were."

The principal turns to Miss Yumi.

"I hope I don't cause offense, but I still have a lot of things to do today."

"Not at all, madam. I'm grateful you were able to spare some time for us."

"Alright then. Ikezawa... Congratulations yet again and good luck at university."

"T-Thank you, m-madam."

The principal nods at me and walks out of the room. After she's gone, Miss Yumi and I pour tea for everyone. After everyone's been served and Miss Yumi starts putting away the tea set, I take the opportunity to approach her.

"Miss Yumi?"

"Yes?"

"T-Thank you... for the beautiful speech. It was... r-really touching."

She chuckles.

"It was the best I could do from the top of my head. If I would have had time to prepare, I could have made it a little longer."

"It was really good. Y-You're really good at this."

Miss Yumi merely smiles and humbly shakes her head.

"I merely said what I thought you needed to hear. You brought up your parents today and there's nothing strange about that, but I wanted to remind you that there are others who want to see you succeed in life just as much."

"I've been... thinking a lot about them lately. J-Just now, too, when you g-gave me my diploma. I wondered... how they'd f-feel."

"I think they'd be both proud and reassured."

"Reassured?"

"Life can be a battle sometimes. For you it has been for many years. And for a very long time it seemed like it was you against the rest of the world. Those are very worrying odds to any parent. But I'd like to think that since you're no longer alone and more comfortable relying on others, they're a little more at peace now."

I never thought of it that way.

You're no longer alone. Karla said similar words to me not too long ago.

She said a lot of other things too. Some of them have been on my mind ever since.

"I... r-really wish I c-could talk to them one more time."

"I think they live on inside your heart, Miss Hanako. So that's probably the best place to look for answers."

"..."

"Hmmm, from the looks of it, people are about ready to leave."

"..."

"I'll accompany you as far as the gate. That's where we can say our goodbyes."

"..."

"Miss Hanako?"

"Miss Yumi?"

"Yes?"

"I... "

"You seem awfully nervous all of a sudden."

"I... I... I would l-like to s-say something."

"Alright."

"Ummm..."

I look around the room and then back at Miss Yumi.

"To everyone?"

I nod silently.

"Alright."

Miss Yumi loudly claps her hands to get everyone's attention.

"Go ahead, Miss Hanako."

My eyes jump from person to person. There are only a few curious looks. Nobody seems annoyed that I'm not immediately saying something.

I take a deep breath.

And then another one.

And yet another one.

It doesn't seem to be helping.

"I..."

The words I prepared for myself just seconds ago are now whirling around in my head. Whatever it was I wanted to say earlier, I won't be saying it anytime soon.

"..."

I stop trying to force the words out of my mouth and simply walk over to the table where my handbag is lying. As I reach out to take it, a profound feeling of sadness suddenly comes over me.

Is this really the right thing to do?

Is this really the right time to do it?

Is this what *they* would want?

Or am I about to hurt them?

A trace of doubt manages to sneak in there when I take hold of my bag. If I take it out now, there'll be no going back. My life will be changed permanently.

But then again, my life will be different after today no matter what.

With shaking hands, I open my bag and reach into it. My fingers find the fateful piece of paper and take hold of it. When I take it out, my eyes quickly scan the room again. Some of the looks are puzzled. I don't think Naomi, Jun or Hisao's parents know the significance of what I'm holding in my hands right now. Hisao, on the other hand, has an expectant look on his face. I can see Akira softly whispering to Lilly. Karla and Hiroyuki exchange a quick look, and, after a silent nod from his wife, the latter steps forward.

I take an unsteady step forward as well. Hiroyuki Satou looks at me with a completely neutral expression, neither eagerness nor impatience on his face. He just stands there, in a slightly formal posture, waiting for me to make the next move.

I start feeling a tight sensation in my chest. I've already passed the point of no return, but there's still something painful about continuing.

I take another step forward and, still trembling, hold out the form in front of me. Hiroyuki reaches out with both hands, as if preparing to accept an important business card.

A pang of guilt emanates from my chest. I close my eyes and take a deep breath in an attempt to keep my composure.

An image of my father and mother appears in my mind. I try to remember what they looked like, what they sounded like, the way they talked, the way they slept. And most importantly, the way they smiled.

I wonder if they can still see me somehow. I wonder if they know what I'm about to do.

I'm sorry, Mother.

I'm sorry, Father.

I'll never forget you.

I promise.

11

And then I let go.

When I open my eyes, I see that Hiroyuki has taken the form and is taking a quick look at the dotted line near the bottom. The line that holds my signature. When he sees me looking at him, he makes a graceful bow which I instinctively follow, and I hear him whisper softly to me.

"Don't worry. Things will be fine. I promise."

Then he turns around and faces the rest of the people in the room.

"It appears that today is cause for two celebrations. Not only has Hanako taken another step towards adulthood in her decision to start attending Kashoku University the upcoming month, but with the passing of this document, she has also accepted the adoption offer my wife and I extended to her earlier. When she leaves here today, she will not merely be leaving here with a diploma in her hands, but also with a family by her side. Lilly... Akira... I will leave the next part up to you. You can be the first to do the honors of welcoming your new sister in our midst."

Hiroyuki politely steps aside as Lilly and Akira walk up to me, and despite the nagging feeling of guilt in the bottom of my stomach, I feel a surge of joy as both wrap their arms around me in a loving embrace. The whole experience is so overwhelming I don't know what to feel. I feel sad and happy at the same time. Lilly has a tear running down her cheek as she smiles a glowing smile at me. Akira has a playful smirk on her face, but I can see that her eyes are a little moist as well.

"Thank you, Hanako. Thank you so much... for t-this... for this great gift."

"Well... heh... You're stuck with us now. But... I... wouldn't want things any other way."

I'm not really sure what to say to that. I'm not really sure if words could even properly convey what I'm feeling right now. So I simply return their hug and hope this moment will last for as long as possible.

After Lilly's and Akira's 'welcoming hug', I was congratulated by the others as well. I got a tight hug from Karla, a sweet kiss from Hisao, an enthusiastic high-five from Naomi and Jun and a heartfelt handshake from the Nakais. Now we're walking down the tree-lined walkway connecting the buildings to the gate. Akira, Karla and Hiroyuki wouldn't allow me to carry any of my own suitcases, so I'm merely carrying my diploma and the plastic bag containing a little present for Miss Yumi. As promised, she's accompanying me until we get to the campus entrance.

12

"Miss Yumi?"

I cast a sidelong glance at her when I hear her let out a soft chuckle.

"It's nothing serious, really. I was just thinking about how unexpected this turn of events was. It may not sound very humble, but I thought that little private ceremony would end up being the surprise of the day. Hmm, hmm... Only for you to go and pull an even bigger surprise out of your sleeve. Life can certainly be unpredictable. I never really knew you were planning this."

"I... wasn't. It was done on a spur of the moment."

Miss Yumi gives me a puzzled look.

"But you had that form in your handbag, signed and all."

"I... signed it a few weeks ago already. I thought it wouldn't make a difference anyway whether I signed it or not as long as I didn't hand it in. I p-put it in my handbag this morning because I didn't want Lilly and Akira to find it while they were busy packing m-my suitcases."

"So you've been considering it for a while."

"Y-Yes. I would have moved in with them either way. But I didn't want to be a 'friend of the family' or an 'honorary guest' forever. I...want to have the same obligations that Lilly and Akira have. They don't have to say please anymore when asking me something. I wanted to s-show them that...I'm here for them as well."

I sigh.

"I... s-still feel a little bit guilty though."

"Because of your parents? Your birth parents, I mean."

"Yes."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that, dear. What you did today would no doubt have made them truly happy. Proud too."

"I'm not even s-sure what to call my adoptive p-parents."

"Talk to them about that. I'm sure they'll understand how you feel."

"Is that... an assignment?"

Miss Yumi shakes her head and casts a glance at Yamaku's entry gate which is now looming over us.

"More like well-meant advice. As of today, I'm no longer in a position to give you any assignments anymore."

I cast a look at the gate myself.

"So... t-this is goodbye?"

"I'm afraid so. We've postponed this moment for a year, but we both knew it would come eventually. Departures are very much part of life."

"I'll m-miss you, Miss Yumi. And Yamaku too."

"Try not to fret about it for too long, dear. You've met many wonderful people here at this school, but all those people will still be part of your life after today. They're waiting for you beyond those gates as we speak. In the end, this place is just a collection of buildings. You'll be taking the best part of Yamaku with you."

"Except you."

"Well... There are reunions for graduates every year. Within nine years or so, you'll probably receive an invitation as well. I'll just be sure to... keep breathing, and when we meet again we can finish that game we were playing today. With luck I won't be too senile to tell the black and the white stones apart by then."

I giggle.

"That... probably won't be the case."

She chuckles playfully.

"It's a deal then. I'll be expecting a tough challenge from you, so try not to let that... Shogi thing... dull your talents too much, okay?"

"Hahaha, don't worry. But... Miss Yumi... we... d-don't really have to wait nine years."

"Hmmm?"

"Maybe we c-could... remain in contact... and play... from t-time to time?"

Miss Yumi sighs, and I can see a sad look in her eyes as she shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, dear. But I'm afraid my answer is still the same. I'm still a therapist, and you're still my client. That's been the nature of our relationship for over two years. I think if we would talk... socially... afterwards, we'd still fall back to those familiar roles without thinking. You deserve better friends than that."

"O-Okay then. I... w-won't force you. But, at least accept this from me."

I take my present out of the bag I was carrying it in and give it to Miss Yumi who takes it from me, handling it as carefully as she can.

"Oh my, what a beautiful flower arrangement. You truly seem to have a knack for creating these kinds of things. Thank you very much, dear. Such a sweet thank-you note attached to it as well. Hmmm?"

Having noticed something peculiar about the note, she takes another look at it and then gives me a puzzled stare.

"There's what appears to be an internet address written near the bottom. Is that meant to be part of the message?"

"It... leads to a site where you can register an account and then play Go online against others. I thought you m-might like it. I've... t-tried it myself a few times. It's pretty fun. You can chat with

other players as well, b-but it's not necessary. The chat-function can be turned off, so you can f-focus completely on playing. Maybe... you could try it sometime."

Miss Yumi looks completely baffled for several seconds. Then she gives me a long unsure look. Finally, a broad smile appears on her face and she chuckles.

"My my... Playing Go over the internet. What will they think of next? I suppose I could give it a try sometimes. Who knows?"

"Y-Yes. Who knows?"

There's a short silence between us afterwards. I consider coming up with some small talk, but Miss Yumi throws another glance at the entrance gate and gives me an encouraging smile.

"I don't think there's much more need for idle chatter. There's a new life waiting for you on the other side of that gate, and I think you're ready for it this time. Go ahead. Say it."

I take a deep breath.

"G-Goodbye, Miss Yumi. Thank you for everything."

"Goodbye, Miss Hanako. And remember: have faith."

We exchange one more bow, and then Miss Yumi starts walking down the walkway back towards the school building, giving me one final friendly wave. I watch her go until she's gone from sight. Then I turn around and face the gate separating the school grounds from the parking lot.

13

The gate looks far too pompous for what it is. In fact, gates in general seem to do that, but this one especially so. Red bricks, black wrought iron and gray plaster, assembled into a whole that towers over me. I never paid much attention to it until now. It takes me a moment to realize why I'm suddenly hesitant to do something I've already done hundreds of times before.

This feels like the last chance I have to turn back, even if there's no longer a life for me here to return to. Once I walk through, there'll absolutely be no way I can go back anymore.

It feels a bit scary, but part of me is also eager.

In the distance, I can see Hisao, Lilly and Akira patiently waiting for me. I probably shouldn't keep them too long since we still have a long drive ahead of us. Once more, Miss Yumi's last words echo in my mind.

Have faith.

Miss Yumi mentioned there'll be relapses in the future and warned that all I'll get at university is a small headstart, but that there'll still be plenty of bumps in the road ahead. I know myself well enough to know that that's true and given some of the challenges Lilly faced at Kasshoku, I feel like I'm going to need all the resolve I can muster. I pray that it will be enough. Perhaps what I'm feeling right now is still the bliss of ignorance, like before that first open house day. Things felt too good to be true back then too, only to quickly fall apart when something bad happened. But nevertheless, I feel like the deck is no longer stacked against me as much as it was when I came here. Regardless of what inevitable challenges the future holds, I want to hold off on worrying about them for the time being and just spend today and the upcoming week being happy with my life. I want to have faith that everything will be alright. For just a little while, the challenges can wait.

Deciding not to get stuck on looking at the gate for too long, I take one more deep breath and then walk through it with a brisk pace that feels surprisingly good.

Moving forward feels good.

When I reach the others, Akira affectionately ruffles my hair.

"All ready to go?"

"I... think so. How about you?"

"Yup. Totally."

Lilly makes a little gesture towards the parking lot with her cane.

"Father and Mother have already left, along with most of your luggage. All that's left is to put your last suitcase into the trunk of Akira's car, as well as Hisao's luggage."

Hisao nods and taps the suitcase at his feet.

"I've already said goodbye to Mom and Dad. We're ready anytime you are."

"I'm... I'm ready too. Let's..."

I take a deep breath before finishing my sentence.

"Let's go h-home."

My boyfriend and my sisters all give me a warm smile and then we set out for the parking lot. We stash our luggage into the car's trunk, get in, and Akira starts the engine.

As the car leaves the parking lot and turns onto the road to the nearest highway, I can't help but turn around and look at the school building behind me one more time.

I can feel my eyes becoming a little moist. Behind me, slowly shrinking in the distance, lies the place that's been my home for four years.

The place where I found a new life...

Friends...

A boyfriend...

A family...

A future...

Before Yamaku Academy vanishes from sight entirely, I use my hand to brush my fringe aside and send the school one last grateful smile, as if saying farewell to a beloved old friend. Then I let out a whisper that's too soft for even Lilly to hear.

"Goodbye, Yamaku."

"Goodbye..."

"...and thank you."



THE END

01

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Thanks to: 4LS, Jess Hirschmann, the Katawa Shoujo Community