



竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス



Toradora

Volume 9

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Prologue

It hurts.

Everything was lit up by that voice.

But the tiny voice was immediately swallowed by the roar of the raging snowstorm. Looking around at the blindingly white world around him, he felt as though he was going to be blown away by the strong winds. He tried to look towards the direction which the voice came from, but the wind that was cutting at his face made it impossible to open his eyes.

Fell down... It hurts.

The weak voice was heard again, but it disappeared almost immediately again. He wanted to find her as quickly as possible, but the sub-zero winds pushed him backwards.

Among the white snow, he discovered her even whiter fingernails.

His eyes came into contact with her small wrists, her diminutive shoulders, and also with her face that was almost covered completely by the snow.

He pushed forward with all his strength, desperate to save her. He pulled his snow boots out of the knee-deep snow with difficulty, and was finally able to grab hold of her fingers with his outstretched hand.

But...

I can't hold on anymore.

It was too late. She slipped away, as if she lost her last bit of support.

"TAIGAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA----!"

Chapter 1

He woke up, clutching his head just as he thought that he was about to fall.

"Whoa!.....That scared.....me to death....."

He was so afraid that he was covering his mouth with his trembling hands. His palms were drenched in sweat, making his lips salty.

It was a dream. So everything was just a nightmare.

His hands weren't the only part of his body that were trembling uncontrollably. Including his breathing and speech, Takasu Ryuuji's entire body was trembling uncontrollably. His muscles were tensed up, unable to relax even a little bit, looking as if he was about to morph into a demon at any moment.

Luckily it was only a dream, but even then, it was too---

".....Hey, are you all right? Why don't you sit down first?"

Ryuuji was finally brought back to earth upon hearing those words. He also finally realized that he was standing in the middle of the classroom, his large, shaking eyes staring into the smaller ones of the single Koigakubo Yuri, who was standing on the raised platform in front of the classroom. His classmates were all sitting silently at their desks, looking at Ryuuji.

"Sor.....Sorry! Umm.....I, fell asleep, so....."

He hurriedly sat down, slumping onto his desk so as to cover his burning face. It was too embarrassing.

He remembered that he had dozed off out of the boredom of waiting for his class teacher to come for homeroom after an entire day of lessons. And then he fell asleep and had a nightmare, standing up abruptly in the middle of homeroom while shouting the name of a female classmate.

How could he have done such a thing?

"That's all right. You couldn't do anything about it anyway."

The single woman (30) crossed her arms in front of her V-shape collared sweater, appearing to be surprisingly calm at the disturbance. Her gentle tone did not sound like the tone used to scold a student who had been sleeping in class.

"You were merely traumatised by Aisaka-san's accident in the mountains."

To complement the gentle attitude of their class teacher, the rest of Ryuuji's classmates did not laugh at his actions. Everyone merely nodded their heads in understanding, waiting for Ryuuji to overcome his embarrassment and calm down.

Kitamura Yuusaku, who was sitting in the front row, turned around while nodding his head, as did Kushieda Minori, who was sitting near the corridor, Haruta and Noto who were sitting behind Ryuuji

must have been nodding their heads as well, while only Kawashima Ami, who sat beside the window, was looking out of the window, seemingly unconcerned with the disturbance in the classroom.

"The Takasu-kun, who has just had a nightmare, please remember to hand this form in tomorrow."

Only at the reminder of his class teacher did Ryuuji discover the piece of paper that had been placed on his desk while he was sleeping. The form read: Higher education aspirations survey.

"This form will provide the basis for your scheduling next year's classes. I'll tell everyone again, please do not forget. Alright--?"

In the midst of the lazy replies of his classmates, Ryuuji sighed deeply. Clutching his head with both hands, he stared at the form on his desk. What higher education aspirations? And what kind of trauma were they talking about?

The school trip was over a week ago. As the muscle aches from all the skiing were already gone, only the memories of the trip were left. Be it happy or unhappy incidents, funny or unfunny happenings.....Of all these memories; most were about Aisaka Taiga.

That fellow fell down from the edge of the snow mountain.

(It hurts.....)

Missing in the mountain during a snowstorm.

(Fell down.....It hurts.....)

The blood that was flowing from her forehead, and the deathly paleness of her throat as she fell backwards.

(Ah.....Kitamura-kun?)

In the end, Ryuuji climbed off the edge of the cliff to save her, but she mistook him for Kitamura and told him,

(No matter what I do, it's still Ryuuji.....)

"Ah--....."

Ryuuji abruptly slammed his head onto his desk, crumpling the form in the process. Even though a loud thump was heard, everyone around him pretended to not hear anything. *No matter what I do, I still like Ryuuji.* --- That was what Taiga had said. And the person that she mistook for Kitamura was none other than Ryuuji, who was carrying her on his back. And Ryuuji was given no chance to correct this unbelievable mistake. When they returned to the top of the cliff and when Taiga was finally fully conscious, there was no time to explain anything as she was immediately rushed off to the hospital. So at the present time, the situation was that Ryuuji knew nothing about this, that Kitamura was the one who climbed down to save Taiga, and that Taiga didn't say anything at all. But in Ryuuji's memories of

that snowstorm (or the mental trauma that everyone else calls it), Taiga's words were still clearly recorded.

And so, what are aspirations?

What is scheduling classes to a person who had been struggling in a snowstorm barely a week ago? What is tomorrow? What is the future? What are aspirations?

Ryuuji twisted his face, looking like he had just swallowed poison. How am I expected to consider my aspirations under such conditions---

"Hey, Takasu-kun, we're supposed to be bowing."

".....oh....."

The girl behind Ryuuji poked him in the back, making him lift up his head hurriedly. Everyone else had already stood up, waiting for Kitamura to give the signal to bid the class teacher goodbye. Ryuuji stood up noisily, bowing together with the rest of the students.

In the next moment after the homeroom teacher walked out of the classroom, the class of 2-C was immediately enveloped in laughter and conversations.

But Taiga's petite figure still had not returned.

Ryuuji abruptly turned to look at Taiga's empty seat, his mouth set in an inverted V-shape, looking even more like he had just swallowed poison. Taiga had abandoned Ryuuji to be alone in that world of raging snowstorms, using her image that had fallen down on the snow covered ground to ensnare him, even as she herself disappeared in reality---and it was possible that she was running away. Not once had she visited Ryuuji's apartment after the school trip. According to the single woman, Taiga's health had not been well ever since she had been taken away by her mother, so she had been recuperating in a hotel in Tokyo. Her cellphone had also been turned off all this while.

Ryuuji lowered his head even more as he bit his lip subconsciously. His triangular eyes stared straight at Taiga's empty seat. The chair seemed to be shaking slightly, but that was probably due to the footsteps of the people running around it.

Taiga could have remembered everything. She could have decided not to come back after remembering that it was Ryuuji, not Kitamura that she had told the truth to. Ryuuji had already thought of that.

What if it really became like this? The chair shook again.....because the girl next to Taiga's seat jumped up.

Though school had already ended, Ryuuji was unable to move. Though he was able to shift his gaze from Taiga's seat, the snowstorm in his mind raged on.

The icy wind of that day, had ensnared the footsteps of today.

If only he could gaze upon Taiga's energetic figure, and listen to her normal voice, then he might be able to free himself from that world of raging snowstorms and icy winds.

* * *

"It's so cold! The queue's not moving at all! Ah!"

"Four people just came out a moment ago.....the longer you stand here the colder it gets!"

"What time is it now?"

The clock on the cellphone showed that it was 5pm. Ryuuji checked if there were any new messages before closing the lid of his cellphone, and proceeded to rub his hands together vigorously, looking as if he wanted to produce fire from the resulting friction. The sun had already gone down, the cars and trucks speeding by on the main road produced numerous reflections of the white road lights. As February came, the weather had become extremely cold, the temperature dipping below zero degrees. The evening winds were cold and fierce, forcing these high school guys to close their mouths, feeling as though spring would never arrive.

Noto pressed his hands over his large ear lobes, squeezing his already small eyes into an even thinner line.

"Though it's a stupid thing to say, it's just too cold out here! Even if the saying goes that 'The colder the weather, the more one should eat ramen,' this is going a bit too far! How much longer do we have to wait?"

"We're about halfway there I guess, but the queue behind us is really epic, it even stretches past the traffic light."

"Hey, don't go out of queue or you'll get knocked out of position by the killing aura of the people behind us."

Ryuuji quickly pulled Haruta, who had strayed out of position, back into the queue, nodding to the students queuing up behind them. His bag was only nudged slightly, but the group of students behind him were startled into apologizing profusely, forcing Ryuuji to return their bows, resulting in repeated bowing on both sides for about 5 seconds.

The queue that had extended along the pavement by the main road had extended beyond the turn at the crossroads. What awaited them at the head of the queue was the extremely popular ramen restaurant. But, looking at the long queue in front of them, the three of them began to wonder if they'd ever reach the head of the queue. If the restaurant ran out of soup stock just as it was their turn, the three of them would probably weep to death. Ryuuji, Noto and Haruta were queuing up for an

extremely popular restaurant opened by a famous chef, that had just opened near school a few days ago. Though it had been said that the restaurant was perpetually full, they never imagined that there would be so many people queuing up to eat.

To calm Ryuuji, who had been traumatized by the "TAIGA!" incident, Noto and Haruta had asked him to go eat ramen with them.

Noto, whose teeth were chattering, said, "I feel guilty for dragging Ryuuji along. Don't you still have to buy food for tonight's dinner? Will you be all right?"

Ryuuji shrugged, saying, "Even I feel like queuing up to eat ramen sometimes. Since we've queued for so long already, I might as well go back after eating."

"Ah, I really don't want to go back."

Looking at Ryuuji and Noto as they turned around in surprise, Haruta explained,

"It's not what you think, I still want to eat ramen, I just don't want to go back home."

".....Hey, what did you do? Break a vase? Deface a painting?"

"Smashed your grandfather's plants? Drew on your dog's face?"

"I don't have a grandfather at home, and I don't keep a dog. Not that, I'm talking to you guys seriously.....Though it's not nice to say this about myself, but I'm an idiot, so....."

Ryuuji and Noto furiously nodded in agreement.

"My results are extremely bad.....and we have to talk to our parents about the aspirations thing don't we, so I just feel depressed over the entire thing."

Oh, that form --- the higher education aspirations survey. Ryuuji sighed as he thought about it. Though he insisted that he didn't have time to think about it, he still had to think about it in order to complete the form. Haruta and Ryuuji looked at each other and let out loud lamentations, while Noto seemed to be enjoying the show as he looked at Haruta's tear-stained face and told him,

"You could always start to consider it seriously next year as you're preparing for the exams right? Since this is just a reference for the scheduling of year 3 classes."

"Speaking of that, are you planning to take arts or sciences?"

"Hmm.....what's the difference between arts and the sciences for me.....It'll be hard for me to even graduate.....Yuri-chan just told me a while ago that I've finally hit the level where even promotion to year 3 is a problem.....She even called my parents a few days ago, my parents almost killed me when they heard that. I guess I'll have to take arts, or I'll really die if I were to take mathematics. Noto-chan'll take arts right?"

Noto nodded. He was the classic "I don't need to study the languages to be able to pass" type of person.

"Yes. And then I'll go into the literature faculty in university, then become an editor for a music magazine, and eventually become a freelance writer.

I haven't thought of any alternatives."

"Oh, Noto-chan has told us that before. I'll be happy to just graduate. I'll study any course in any university that'll take me, since I'll have to work for my father in the end."

"What did Haruta-chan just say?"

"What did I just say?"

Nothing.....?

"I'll just be a small office worker, it's not cool at all, although the perks are good."

.....interior design eh? Ryuuji thought about it, looking back at Haruta and Noto.

"It's rather embarrassing to say this.....but the two of you really have been seriously considering your futures, haven't you? I just realized it, haven't I been left behind by the two of you?"

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

Noto replied while he repeatedly bumped Ryuuji with his shoulder and, breathing white steam from his nostrils,

"Takasu has nothing to worry about, since you're so clever. Your mathematics are so good, so obviously you'll take sciences. And then go to a national university together with Kitamura right?"

Ryuuji's high school was a school that focused on the promotion to university, so theoretically, every student should be looking to go to university. In year three, there would be a total of six classes, three each for the arts and science students, and the twenty five top students would be placed in a special class aiming to go to national universities. Sumire Kano, who had gone overseas before graduating, was in that class.

"But I heard that the curriculum for the special class is extremely stressful. Rumor has it that they finish the entire year 3 syllabus in a single term, and then move on to exam strategies and analysis.....I haven't even considered if I want to go to university or not. I feel that compared to someone like me, who doesn't even know if he wants to go to a university, there should be people that are better suited for that class."

Noto exclaimed in surprise,

"What!? With your kind of results, you're not planning to go to university, and you're getting a job instead?"

His surprise startled Ryuuji.

"It's not that, but you see, my family doesn't have money. And I don't have any university that I really want to go to, or anything that I really want to do.....I don't really dislike studying either, and I can still go to university after I work for a while and save up some money.

"How can your family not have money? Hasn't your mother been working all this while?"

"My mum's merely an employee, and it's also not a long term job.....When I was taking my high school entrance exams, my mum was talking about how 'Ryuu-chan wants to go to a university, right, so how could you not aim for a promotion-oriented high school?'"

Noto hugged himself and looked up at the darkened sky. While the other two were debating about the disgusting way in which Ryuuji's mother still called him Ryuu-chan, the queue had moved forward by a significant distance. Noto pushed the two people in front of him forward.

"Alright alright, let's just move forward shall we!"

"So I guess Takasu and I won't be in the same class next year. Haruta's taking arts too, so we may be placed into the same class.....oh, that means that we'll have to say goodbye to the great teacher Kitamura."

"One more step forward~just a bit more of the cold to endure~. Sigh~it'll be extremely boring by myself if I were to be separated from Noto-chan. Don't forget to keep in touch even if we're placed into different classes, alright? What about the girls? Taka-chan, have you asked them?"

".....Who?"

"Who else besides Minori? She's arts right? She looks like an arts student~"

"Should be, arts....."

Ryuuji pretended to be casual about Noto's question.

"I remember Taiga, talking about, something like that too."

Ryuuji thought that his stuttering speech was due to the cold gust of wind that blew past. Haruta muttered under his breath, but Noto curiously had a deep-thinking look on his face as he nodded.

"So Takasu and Minori would be in different classes as well. That won't be good. And speaking of Minori, how has she been? It looks as though she hasn't been talking much.

".....She's still the same as that time."

Back then---on that night during the class trip, when only the two of them were in the long corridor in the hotel, was the moment when Ryuuji's heart beat madly for that last confession of love. At that time, Ryuuji also finally realised that Kushieda Minori would never like him.

And at the same time, he understood that he could never continue to like her.

"It's awkward isn't it?"

"It's not awkward.....it's just that.....and it's not like I'm avoiding her on purpose."

"So you've given up?"

"More of.....I don't have the strength to carry on anymore."

Putting aside the possibility of his desired outcome, Ryuuji still did have the option to continue liking Minori. If he prepared himself to continue to get hurt as he continued to like Minori, then perhaps his feelings would change her. In actual fact, to like her secretly, and to sacrifice everything in the name of his love was good, was beautiful, and was something to be valued. He knew and understood that.

But---

"I see....."

"You can't do anything about it either, so just let nature run it's course~"

Ryuuji didn't do that, and couldn't do that.

Compared to the moment in which he was rejected by Minori, he remembered even more clearly how he finally understood why he didn't, and couldn't do that. Ryuuji had finally experienced the hidden facet behind the love that was rejected, and the love beyond that.

Just flip over to a new page, and be revived.....It wasn't like that either. Everything wouldn't be so easy.

Just as Ryuuji had abandoned his one-sided feelings towards Kushieda, he accidentally came to know about Taiga's feelings for him. Taiga had simply revealed her true feelings and disappeared. Ryuuji also did not know the reason for her disappearance. In the end, the one who was left behind---the one who was abandoned was Ryuuji. Only Ryuuji was unable to walk away, and only Ryuuji was still left behind, all by himself.

Ryuuji felt as if he was still lost in that snowstorm, ensnared by the things that had happened in his past, preventing him from moving forward. He felt as if he had become a criminal, and was locked into a snowstorm that shouldn't be there, together with the words of Aisaka Taiga that he shouldn't have heard. And he was now knee-deep in that snowstorm, forgetting his dreams of tomorrow, abandoned by the present that was moving on. Don't talk about the future when he didn't even understand his own feelings, his own situation right now.

".....ah---so cold."

Ryuuji locked his jaw and breathed white steam, as the chill spread straight up his body along his spine. He rubbed his shoulders while thinking about how at ease he would be if he could just rip off his past like he was able to rip off the pages of a calender.

"Cheer up~Taka-chan, it'll be our turn soon."

Haruta laughed while rubbing Ryuuji's back in a disgusting fashion.

"It's been really hard on Taka-chan recently~ You got dumped by Kushieda on Christmas eve, and then went into the hospital, and then got dumped again during the school trip, and Taiga-chan went missing at the same time. And after that, she's been taking leave from school, so~it's gonna get even colder."

"On the other hand, Kushieda hasn't changed at all. If we hadn't heard it from Takasu, we wouldn't think that she had just dumped a guy. Why is she so stubborn?"

"I really don't know what's going on with that girl, she even got into an argument with Ami. We're just in the dark about everything concerning those girls."

Speaking of girls, has Noto-chan made up with Maya-sama?"

"Sigh.....of course she has been denying my existence....."

The three of them looked at each other and were too ashamed to speak for a moment. Ryuuji rubbed his frozen nose as he stared at his fingernails.

Minori should be at her club activity right now. Taiga didn't come to school today either, and her cellphone was still turned off, all these things have been said before, except just this bit.

Just this bit--that there would be nothing much to say from now on. The criminal that had been locked up in the snowstorm now confirmed the cause of his pain. It was only that the one-sided love had not quite yet ended. But he understood how he felt right now.

"Oh, it should be our turn soon."

A number of people walked out of the ramen restaurant ahead, instantly making the long queue much shorter.

"Yah! The next three customers, please come in!"

Hearing that energetic roar, Ryuuji and the others looked at each other. They put aside those depressing thoughts, for a bowl of hot, steaming ramen was waiting for them on the other side of the door. As they walked into the smoky and slightly dark restaurant, they immediately heard the welcoming voices of the attendants.

"Welcome!" "This way please!"

"Please sit at the counter! Ah!?"

Ah!? She's really energetic.....Ryuuji thought as he turned towards the female waitress.

"Oh!?"

Ryuuji fell off his chair in surprise. To his right, Noto dropped his bag onto the floor in shock, while Haruta spit out an entire mouthful of water.

The female waitress standing at the counter turned away shyly, "Don't look-----!"

And turned back with a loud bang, "Just joking! You can look if you really want to look....."

Kushieda Minori had her hair neatly wrapped up in a towel, and was wearing a black t-shirt with the restaurant's logo on it, and matching aprons, humming cheerfully as she laughed.

"You....."

Ryuuji couldn't help but point at that smiling face.

"What.....what's wrong with you!?"

Wrong question. I should be the one asking. Although I see her at class everyday, the shock from seeing her dressed up like this was still considerable.

"I'm working!"

"Wait, then.....what about your club activities!?"

"They're over! Because of the limited daylight in winter, club activities end early! But I'm surprised that the three of you actually queued for so long to eat here. Please order! But if you three were to order 'handsome guy ramen' then I'll poke your eyes."

"Handsome guy ramen." "Handsome guy ramen." "Handsome guy ramen."

Pokepokepoke, Minori used her finger to poke their eyes in order of seating. Noto quickly apologized and ordered three bowls of ramen.

"OK---, that's a smart choice! Three bowls of ramen!"

An even louder reply emanated from the kitchen. Under the bright lights of the kitchen, the restaurant workers milled to and fro, with a few pairs of hands showing the reflection of cooking fires in the deeper recesses of the kitchen. The workers were mostly male, with a few females like Minori. They were perpetually drenched in sweat, clutching the orders of the customers in their hands.

".....Why are you working here? What about the family restaurant?"

Minori was wiping the counter, but turned back to answer Ryuuji,

"I haven't quit, but the hourly wage is higher here, so I'm adding two hours here to try it out."

The V-shape hand sign.....no, it was the 2-hours hand sign. Her tireless smile was on display even today, and she appeared as energetic as always. Minori's smile was as forthright as ever, not affected by the changes in Ryuuji's heart at all.

"But do you know how to make ramen? That's such a disappointment~I queued one and a half hours just to eat ramen made by a trainee~"

"How can that be? I'm just a waitress. I only get to wash the plates and clear the tables."

Hearing a "waitress!" call from one side of the restaurant, Minori hurriedly dashed off. Looking at her receding figure, Ryuuji couldn't help but mutter,

".....we were still queuing up in the cold weather, but she rushed straight here to work after her club activities....."

While Ryuuji was still thinking about ripping off the pages of a calendar, Minori was already seriously working today. Instead of stopping in her tracks like Ryuuji, Minori was moving forward, slowly leaving Ryuuji behind, the distance between them getting greater and greater. She was like an animal that would die if she just stopped for a moment, and even though she was talking to the Ryuuji whom she had just rejected, there was no trace of hesitation in her speech. They were the same age, and they were both human beings, so why was the difference so significant--The Ryuuji who was still trapped in the snowstorm shook his head vigorously. It wasn't the difference in natural intellect, or life would depend too much on luck.

Noto asked, "Why are you working so much?"

Minori was clearing a table, so she answered while wiping the table with one hand and clearing plates with her other and said, "My second year of high school is ending, so I must work harder."

She really didn't answer the question. Just as she didn't answer the question before when Ryuuji asked, and even Taiga didn't seem to know the true reason behind Minori's desire to work so much.

"That part-timer over there! Stop chatting! Quickly bring this bowl of ramen to that customer!"

Hearing that sudden outburst, Minori shuddered slightly, "That's the owner. He's going to open his eyes soon.".....and then hurried away, leaving Ryuuji and the others slightly confused.

"What? Open his eyes?"

"You mean he had his eyes closed all this time? Wouldn't that be rather dangerous?"

The restaurant suddenly lapsed into total silence as the customers all shifted their attention to the counter, where the shadow of a middle-aged uncle appeared. The uncle had both his eyes closed. One of the customers said in a soft voice, "He's going to open his eyes."

Just as Ryuuji and the others were still confused, the uncle's eyes suddenly opened wide. But it wasn't that dramatic, for those were very common eyes.

"Secret technique--The cycle of the six planes!"-In a single moment, the uncle had already picked up a few netted spoons that already had noodles in them and threw them into a tub of boiling hot soup, stirring the noodles vigorously. The hot water droplets from the stirring flew straight into the faces of the three guys.

"Ah hot hot hot hot--!"

The three people did not know that this was the secret technique that only the owner of the restaurant, who normally had his eyes closed, was able to use.

Ryuuji turned his head around, thinking that this was a bit too dangerous. At that exact moment, the other customers pushed and shoved to stick their head closer to the counter so as to get some of the hot soup onto their faces.

* * *

Ryuuji reached home later than he expected after eating ramen.

Wrapping his muffler around his neck, Ryuuji hurriedly ran along the length of the sakura-lined road, carrying bags in both hands. The cold wind blowing into his face felt like knives.

The faster he was able to finish tonight's dinner, the better. Though he struggled over whether to buy raw cabbage or not, Ryuuji eventually had decided not to buy it, choosing instead to buy pork, carrot, and fried tofu to make a simple steamed pork. There was still leftover rice, so 20 minutes would be enough. Ryuuji turned a familiar corner, walking into a familiar street, and then stopped for a moment to look up at the window on the second floor of the condominium.

This had become a habit over the past week.

The window still had its curtains closed today. The living room was dark, with no signs of life within.

She hasn't come back---Ryuuji continued to look up, unaware that his mouth was open and his eyebrows were knitted closely together. Where had the owner of that home gone to, and why wasn't she back yet? He slowly breathed out a plume of white steam. He continued to stare at the darkened window, and his imagination began to run wild again. Soon the whispered words that he had heard that day began to resound in his head once again.....Ryuuji, I still.....This was the last sentence that Ryuuji had heard Taiga say. As he looked into the empty apartment, Ryuuji wondered if there were any clues, any hints as to why she still hadn't come back.

Was what the class teacher had said about her being in bad health true? Though it had been said that she only suffered minor injuries, were her injuries actually very serious? If it wasn't like that, was it because she thinks that things are going well between Minori and me, and therefore felt uncomfortable about it?

Could she have found out about Ryuuji's feeling, and thus decided to never appear in front of Ryuuji again? It was hard to say. Ryuuji whispered,

".....Such an idiot....."

While Taiga wasn't there, Ryuuji spoke the words that he had been wanting to speak for a long time.

If the story about her being in bad health wasn't true, and the real reason was just like what Ryuuji had guessed, then Taiga would really be an idiot. What was the point of running away from everything?

Would everything be all right if she just abandoned Ryuuji like this, never to see him ever again, pretending that nothing had ever happened, never knowing what had actually happened between Ryuuji and Minori?

If it was really like this---but Ryuuji shook his head at this thought, throwing it out of his head.

Everything that he had just thought of was built on shaky assumptions of 'what if'.

Nothing would come of staring at the luxurious condominium and letting his imagination run wild. He wouldn't be able to know the truth unless he went to ask Taiga herself. So even if he thought of 'if I forgot about everything, then everything might go back to normal, and Taiga would come back', it was meaningless. And it wasn't like one could simply erase memories.

A gust of cold wind blew across, making Ryuuji shudder, sighing in the cold. He calmed himself down and began to move his footsteps. No matter what, he still had to make dinner. Just as he sneaked a peek at the entrance of the condominium out of the corner of his eyes.

".....Argh!"

In that instant, his field of vision turned black, his throat constricted so that he couldn't breathe. As he was pulled down by the person behind him, Ryuuji finally saw the identity of the demon behind him.

.....with a loud thump, he dropped his bags on the floor. "Tai....."

Taiga---is going to kill me.

"Ah, it's over....."

The hands that had held Ryuuji's muffler in an iron grip suddenly let go. Ryuuji, who was ambushed by a surprise choke from behind, gulped the ice cold air gratefully.

"Cough! Cough.....Coughcough!"

"Don't you think you're being a bit over dramatic?"

Ryuuji half-kneeled on the ground, throwing the words that he had wanted to tell her towards Taiga with tears in his eyes and a scary look on his face,

"You.....You idiot.....! How could you choke me just because you weren't able to get my attention!? I really couldn't breathe! What do you want to do to me!? Don't you think your way of making an entrance is a bit too weird!?"

Ryuuji pointed his finger at the tip of Taiga's nose, but Taiga merely put on a 'that's too bad~it's not my fault~' face.

"Ah, that's too bad~it's not my fault~"

.....She said it! She actually said it! Ryuuji's eyes started emitting red light, but Taiga arrogantly thrust out her chest, sticking out her chin, saying,

"I saw you around the corner but I was a bit too embarrassed to call out to you. But no matter how hard I waved, you didn't even see me. Is there a problem with your eyes? Is there a layer of oil on your eyeballs? Did you wash your face?"

"What are you talking about.....!?"

Ryuuji's voice sounded like one which was used to recite curses as he quickly covered his throat with both of his hands to prevent a repeat of the choking.

But Taiga still pulled on the two ends of Ryuuji's muffler, as she climbed onto Ryuuji's back like a monkey. Like this, obviously Ryuuji's neck would be constricted, obviously his breathing would be difficult, obviously his life would be in danger.

"Don't joke with me! What have you been doing for this period of time....."

.....nothing more to say. Ryuuji swallowed the rest of his sentence. The finger that was almost touching the tip of Taiga's nose was shaking uncontrollably, but here were no words left to finish off the sentence. "Tai,Tai,Tai....."Isn't this Taiga!?"

Ryuuji turned around while saying that, the small hands that had control of his muffler loosened as Taiga slid down from his back.

"Huh? I don't get what you're trying to do."

Ryuuji shook his back and thought, Taiga's back!

She stood in front of Ryuuji, pouting, "Could you hold in your sleep talk till you get to the other world?" Staring at him as if she wanted to send him there herself.

Taiga wore her school uniform under her coat, her bag was slung across her body with both hands in her pockets, her muffler was wound around her body several times.

There was a white piece of plaster on her forehead.

"Tai.....Taiga....."

She's back. She, is really back---Ryuuji didn't know what to say, or how to react. Taiga asked,

"Just what is wrong with you?"

Taiga slanted her eyes 45 degrees downwards while admonishing Ryuuji.

".....You, you....."

"I'm asking you a question. What's wrong with you!?"

"Where.....where have you been---!? Why didn't you come back earlier!?"

"Argh"

Ryuuji subconsciously grabbed Taiga by her muffler. It was definitely a coincidence, not revenge. The end result was that Taiga began struggling to breathe, as if she was being tortured.



"Do you know how worried I was! Such a long time, what, have you, been doing, and, with who!?"

"You're.....you're killing me, you idiot!"

Taiga's right hand slammed into Ryuujii's chin as if it wanted to rip apart the very fabric of reality. It hurt, but, but, but.

(No matter what)

"Just what is wrong with you!? You fat dog!"

"Oh! Oh!"

Taiga started to slap Ryuujii's face with her hands, but Ryuujii dodged, making Taiga even angrier. "Why are you dodging!" Taiga shouted as she flew forward to grab hold of Ryuujii's collar, forcibly pulling his face towards her as she took a deep breath, preparing to hurl her usual insults at him.

Under the light of the streetlamps, Ryuujii looked into Taiga's eyes.

Her brown eyes were shining like the scattered stars in the night sky.

The tiny hands which were on Ryuujii's hands suddenly became hotter, her breath was on his lips, her skin was close to the point where he could almost feel the heat of her body--

".....Argh!"

".....Oww....."

Ryuujii pushed her away roughly.

This was too stimulating. Ryuujii couldn't help but struggle to get to his feet, pushing Taiga's warm hands away.

The two of them stared at each other without saying anything. The cold street was swallowed by the quietness.

In front of Ryuujii, Taiga opened her mouth as if she was confused at Ryuujii's sudden outburst of resistance. She looked at Ryuujii wonderingly, not knowing why he was showing such resistance, when she did this to him all of the time. Ryuujii still refused to speak, though his ears and face that were touched by Taiga felt like they were burning. Ryuujii couldn't take it anymore, and shifted his gaze away from Taiga. Taiga stood with her back to the purplish-blue night sky, looking at Ryuujii.

Ryuujii did not know how he should face Taiga, and with what kind of expression. But Taiga seemed to have sensed something while looking at Ryuujii's face, and breathed in lightly.

".....What's wrong.....?"

Ryuujii saw that her pearly face was now tinged with a light shade of pink.

With every breath that she took, the tinge of pink on her face would get deeper. And then.

(Still like him the most)

"What, is, wrong!?"

Taiga suddenly opened her eyes, letting off the aura of a desperate beast. "Huh!?" "What's wrong what's wrong what's wrong!"-- She pulled back her hands as she prepared to attack Ryuuji once again. Taiga was like a child who kicked and destroyed anything she could get her hands on, slowly forcing Ryuuji into a corner.

".....Just what, are you trying to say.....!?"

"....."

She closed up the distance between the two of them once again, punching his chest with a loud thump.

And then she attempted to grab hold of Ryuuji's collar again as if she wanted to erase the awkward atmosphere that had been created. But the blush that was on her face refused to go away, even spreading to the tips of her ears. Taiga held her breath and bit down on her lip, still glaring at Ryuuji.

*Was it the throat that had been grabbed that was hot, or the hand that grabbed the throat that was hot?
Was the loud thumping coming from my heart, or from Taiga's heart--*

(Still like Ryuuji the most)

--In that moment.

Taiga's hands grabbed Ryuuji's throat and shoulder, pulling his face in words. Ryuuji didn't even have time to resist before his body was lifted up.

What happened, was everything suddenly became white.

It was like being smashed on the head by a meteor, the shockwave that he was hit with was many times stronger than a simple choking. He even felt that his body was smashed into nothingness. The world had disintegrated, the heavens and the earth had been reversed, stars had been burnt out, and every living creature on earth had been swallowed by the raging flames of destruction.

Nothing could be seen, nothing could be heard, as only one thought echoed throughout the universe, "What just happened!?"

"Sweeping kick!"

".....Oh!?"

Taiga was looking at him from above.....Ryuuji seemed to be lying on the road like an idiot.

"Ah.....the sweeping kick.....!"

The heavens and the earth were reversed because he was hit by Taiga's sweeping kick. If not for Taiga's grip on his collar, Ryuuji would have hit his head.

He whipped out a stick of carrot from his bag, waving it in front of Taiga's nose. Taiga swallowed her saliva in surprise, staring straight at that stick of carrot.

".....Hey, are you really all right?"

"I'm all right!.....This is pork.....! This is.....fried tofu!"

Ryuuji flipped out the contents of his bag for Taiga to see.

"And this is frozen fried rice!"

Taiga pressed the plastic bag with frozen fried rice into Ryuuji's face. Ryuuji screamed in agony at the cold.

"Argh, it's cold! What are you trying to do!?"

"Now are you awake?"

How should he answer Taiga's casual tone? He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"The doctor said that this would heal in ten days. So it'll be fully healed soon."

--But

Taiga pushed up her bangs, pointing at the white plaster on her forehead. Looking at her, Ryuuji forcibly swallowed the words that he was about to say once again. He felt as though all the sweat that had been on his body had been blown dry by the cold wind. The castle of Ryuuji's chaotic memories and imagination crumpled as reality stood in front of his eyes.

One week ago, Aisaka Taiga had hurt her forehead in the accident. Though he had not forgotten about it.

"Was it.....sewn up?"

He was already unable to distinguish imagination from reality.....probably. Perhaps that's why he was so bothered by the sight of Taiga's wound. Ryuuji stared at the plaster unblinkingly, but Taiga merely shrugged.

"This kind of wound doesn't need to be sewn up. Though the doctor said that it would heal faster if that big needle was used to close the wound up, I rejected his suggestion because it wasn't required. That thing was extremely scary. And now that the wound is healing, it's not painful anymore. Now I can wash my hair, it's just a bit itchy sometimes."

"Hey, don't scratch!"

He quickly grabbed her hand, afraid that she would open the wound. Taiga threw Ryuuji's hand to one side, putting one hand on her plaster as if she was relieving the pain of her injury.

".....It's my fault I guess. I know you were worried about me. See, my injury's not serious, and the thing about me being in bad health was fake too, I just didn't want to go to school."

"Is that so, you're all right? Then.....huh?.....Huh!?"

Ryuuji's eyes almost cracked from the shock. Taiga shuddered at the sight of that inhuman figure in front of her.

"It's not my fault that I haven't seen my mother in a long time. I was so touched that she came for me. So I just stayed with her in a hotel and went shopping, watched movies, and just caught up with each other."

".....You were.....having fun with your mother.....? That's why you didn't come back.....?"

"Yes. I'm very close with my mother. Probably because I haven't seen her much for these few years. You see, even though I keep telling the old man that, 'you don't care about me even though you're my father', but if not for such things, they might not be so honest about their feelings, right?"

Her words were like previously prepared words that served only to convince herself. Taiga nodded to herself.

".....You're really an.....idiot aren't you....."

Ryuuji felt even more awkward. He clutched his head, breathing out deeply as if he wanted to breath out everything that had happened in the past week.

".....I was really worried about you.....!? And, why did you turn off your cellphone!? You could have told me if there was something going on!? You could have sent me a message!"

"My cellphone battery ran out of juice."

"You could have just charged it at any convenience store!"

"Ah so I could, I didn't know."

Hearing Taiga's casual answer, Ryuuji's shoulders slumped. Looks like he was the only one still trapped in the snowstorm of his dreams.

"Wh, What.....Seriously.....! Seriously!"

Though he felt mistreated, Ryuuji was still happy to see that Taiga was safe and sound. Only Ryuuji was frozen at that moment in time. Wasn't it a good thing to have only one victim? He stood up and patted off the dust on his uniform.

And--That's right, it meant that Ryuuji's assumptions were all wrong.

Taiga didn't stay away because of that "confession".

"Alright, it was my fault that I didn't update you on my situation, really.....right, didn't you come and find me together with Kitamura-kun and Minorin?"

Taiga suddenly asked Ryuuji, her large eyes boring into his.

".....how did you know, since you were unconscious at that time?"

"This was what Yuri-sensei told me at the hospital. She also said that the three of you were too rash, and was rather angry. But, I was really happy at hearing that.

Taiga miraculously thanked Ryuuji honestly.

"I'll promise you. Next time if you're buried in the snow, I'll come and look for you."

And then, she nodded her head seriously as she used her nose to take a deep breath. Ryuuji saw it, and thought, that's right.

That's right, Taiga doesn't remember anything. Ryuuji confirmed that fact once again. And her reason for coming back was just that her holiday with her mother ended, and not because she was making her own mental preparations for the answer to her confession.

Which was to say---that if Ryuuji acted as if he never heard any of those words, everything will return to normal. All it required was for Ryuuji to forget Taiga's confession. Just like that, it would be like nothing had happened. Though Ryuuji was unable to control his own memories, he could at least pretend to forget. Just like how Minori ignored Ryuuji's feelings.

Though Ryuuji was hurt at that time, Taiga won't be hurt this time. Because Ryuuji would act according to Taiga's wishes. Taiga surely wished to have 'never spoken'.

Ryuuji confirmed yet another time, ".....You really don't remember anything?"

Taiga nodded, "but, " Taiga's long eyelashes drooped, as she continued in a low voice, as if she was talking to herself, "I had a dream. Kitamura was carrying me on his back, and I said a lot of stupid things. That.....was a dream, right?"

Ryuuji answered unhesitatingly, "It was a dream."

At that moment, a gust of freezing wind blew past. Taiga wrinkled her eyebrows as she used one hand to keep her hair in place while pulling her coat

tighter around her body.

".....Kitamura carried you up to the cliff, that is true. But he said that you were unconscious the whole time."

"Really?.....That's good. I thought for a moment 'What!? What if that wasn't a dream!?' and I was worried for a while."

--The stone in Ryuuji's heart finally dropped. He looked down at Taiga, thinking that the lie actually worked on her. Why was her usual sensitivity not on display today?

"Clumsy."

That was Ryuuji's true opinion, but Taiga merely pouted.

".....humph, even though I'm unhappy about it, I have nothing to say. Yes, I'm clumsy. This accident led me to understand that. But,.....though I'm clumsy, I still have some good points."

She looked at Ryuuji as if she had made up her mind about something, and said,

"I've been thinking about this.....have you asked Minori about what she really thinks?.....Don't tell me you couldn't even ask her about that because of my accident?"

Ryuuji suddenly thought of something.

If he could see the wound in his heart and the blood that is flowing out from it, his entire field of vision would probably be saturated in red.

"There's nothing between Minori and me anymore."

".....Why?.....Ah, you're trying to say that I shouldn't be going in between the two of you anymore? Then I'll....."

"No, no. Who'd think of that, I'm not talking about this. It's got nothing to do with you.....There's nothing to talk about, really."

Taiga was speechless for a moment, she had once cried because Minori had dumped Ryuuji, but now she merely stared at Ryuuji quietly.

Though she was staring at him with steel in her eyes, his words would not change. Do you really hope for the development of the relationship between Minori and me?--the words that couldn't be spoken, the feelings that couldn't be revealed, still had not changed.

".....I really don't know what you're thinking....."

Taiga's gaze flickered slightly,

"But, just a bit.....If you ever need me, you must tell me. Though I'm clumsy and stupid, I'll surely help you with all my might."

That promise was true. Taiga was that kind of person. Even if she knew that the person she liked was in love with another, she would still help him to the best of her ability. Ryuuji knew that. He had seen everything Taiga had done after she found out about Kitamura's agony from being in love with Sumire Kano.

That's right. At the same time as Kitamura's love was shattered, Taiga had left her own one-sided love behind. And now.

".....I don't know what you're thinking either."

Right now, why, me?.....Ryuuji thought.

What kind of closure had Taiga reached about her feelings towards Kitamura?

Though he wanted to know about these things, what good would it do? Would he then forget what Taiga had told him, and start encouraging Taiga to go for Kitamura once again? To persuade her to continue chasing after Kitamura? To tell her that all she needs is to put in a bit more effort since there are no competitors anymore? Did he really want to tell her these things?

"I'm, really cold~! It's stupid standing out here talking. I'm going back before I catch a cold."

Taiga attempted to end the conversation as she turned towards the entrance of the condominium.

".....Wait."

"Don't want to. It's cold out here."

"You're only eating frozen fried rice? Come over and eat, Yasuko'll be happy too.....She's been worried about you."

Ryuuji couldn't help but say that to the retreating figure. But Taiga half-turned and shook her head,

"It's alright. I like to eat frozen fried rice. Just go back and send my regards to Ya-chan, and tell her that Taiga's alright already."

"Don't force yourself."

"I've forgotten how to force myself already."

Taiga turned and walked up the steps to the entrance, smiling as if she just told a joke. On her pearly and almost-transparent face, her nose was red from the cold.

"Let's stop here tonight, you should go back too. I'm tired and want to sleep as soon as I finish this. Don't worry, I'll be on time for school tomorrow."

Taiga's coat was blown back as it fluttered in the strong winter gusts. The auto-locking door closed with a loud clang.

Chapter 2

The nuclear war had resulted in the end of human culture as we know it, while mutant viruses that had come about as a result of biological weapons had rampaged through the globe, causing the deaths of over 90% of the human population, as the survivors could only sit and wait for their deaths in their hastily constructed settlements. Even so, the nuclear-powered military robots belonging to the old human civilization, having lost their human masters, were now the enemies of the human survivors as they relentlessly attacked the human settlements, continuing the never-ending 'war'.

A young man living in one of the settlements was chased by one of the military robots into the deep recesses of the 'ruins', inadvertently awakening a sleeping android. No one would have thought that this chance encounter would decide the fate of the human race--! That's the main gist of the story.

".....Why did only men survive? That's so boring."

"It's said that the biological structure of men gives them more resistance against such viruses."

"But even then, there's really no reason for them to pair two guys together is there?"

"That android isn't male, it's gender-less. And anyway, they aren't officially together yet, they've only confirmed each other's feelings."

".....You're actually listening to the story aren't you."

"I borrowed the script from them before the broadcast."

Kitamura Yuusaku happily pushed his glasses further up his nose as he opened the lid of his lunchbox, only to find that the seaweed had stuck to the bottom of the lid. 'Oh no, I was careless.' Using chopsticks to lay the seaweed onto the rice as it should be, while opposite him, Ryuuji also opened the lid of his lunchbox. Since he was the one who made it, there was no feeling of anticipation, just a feeling of meeting again with familiar dishes.

Wildly exaggerated shouts of 'Kill!' 'Go to hell!', coupled with technical terms like 'The time of destruction' 'Nuclear fission' blasted out from the speakers as it spread across the noisy classroom.

Going into the third school term, someone had finally complained about the student council hogging the lunch break broadcasting time period, which is why right now, from Monday to Friday, the student council's 'love cheerleaders' and the voice drama of the voice acting club were taking turns.

In the world where the voice drama had projected, girls were speaking in boyish manners, giving a jarring sense of discordance to the drama. They still haven't finished killing yet? It's so irritating. Ryuuji used his chopsticks to stab at his food as he complained,

"Don't you think they have too much of these battle scenes? Aren't there programs that are more suitable for lunchtime listening? Like girls telling happy stories for instance?"

"Perhaps the story's become a bit too complicated because only a small portion is broadcasted each time. And also, the target audience of the voice acting club is girls."

"I don't think anyone's listening."

Though Ryuuji and Kitamura looked rather creepy sitting opposite each other while eating lunch, the two of them still nonchalantly observed the other students in the classroom--Even girls were concentrating on their individual conversations, looks like the reaction to the broadcast was so non-existent that Ryuuji and Kitamura were the only ones actually listening to the drama. On a side note, Noto and Haruta were still fighting over bread at the charity club, so they won't be back for a while.

Hmm-- Kitamura's straight face revealed a slightly villainous expression as he spoke softly,

"It seems like just my show is enough. Ah, but I haven't gotten any new ideas lately."

"Don't be silly, no one's listening to your show either.....Ah, this seems to be an unspoken secret isn't it?"

"I heard it, I heard it."

"Ah, you heard it?"

As the two of them casually exchanged meaningless talk, a girl's scream suddenly sounded in the classroom.

"I've to-to-to-to-to-to-to-told you that you don't have tooooooooooooooooooo-!"

Kihara Maya was screaming by the window, as Kashii Nanako's facial expression was stiff from the force that Maya was grabbing her with. Unusually, the bishoujo gang was without Ami, as her place was taken up by Taiga, who stood in front of the two of them while shouting 'Look, look!'

"Why are you reacting so violently? Weren't the two of you the ones who asked me about it?"

"We only asked you about your injury! No one asked you to show it!"

"You'll understand everything by just taking a look. After all, seeing is believing."

Listening to Taiga's warped logic, Ryuuji couldn't help but think: *She really is Minori's best friend.*

"Aisaka.....How do I put this, she really is Minori's best friend."

Looks like Kitamura also has the same feeling. On a side note, Minori isn't in the classroom right now.

Don't don't don't want! No no! Maya screamed incessantly as she pushed Taiga away; Nanako, on the other hand, had an irritated expression on her face,

"I don't dare to look at the injury, so please don't show it during lunchtime! Right, how about a meatball?"

She stabbed at a meatball with a plastic fork and pointed in to Taiga as a sacrificial tribute, to which Taiga swallowed with relish. Just as Nanako and Maya looked at each other and sighed in relief--'.....But those are two different things! Come, let me show it to you!'

Kya-- The two bishoujos who were innocently eating their cute bentos during lunchtime were being forced by Taiga to witness first-hand the almost completely-healed injury on the side of her head. Ryuuji couldn't help but shake his head at such childish behaviour.

"Stop it! Tiger!"

"Continue! Tiger!" The guys who were eating their lunch in the vicinity shouted to get Taiga to show her injury to the two girls--even though they would scatter and run the moment Taiga turned around and glared at them.

"Just what is she trying to do....."

"Well, it's good that she's energetic."

Kitamura smiled towards Ryuuji and began to eat his lunch, looking as though he was in an advertisement for seaweed bentos.

"But it's great, really great. It's all due to Takasu's courageous actions that we're able to see her energetic smile again."

"....."

Ryuuji couldn't help but stare at his best friend Kitamura's face. Kitamura noticed his stare,

"I know I can't tell her that you were one who saved her. If she asks about what happened, I'll tell her that I was the one who carried her up. Would that be alright?"

"....."

"Hey hey hey, what's wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Give me the seaweed! Of course now. Ryuuji didn't need to physically grab the seaweed, all he needed to do was to absorb the essence of the seaweed through his gaze--obviously it couldn't be something like this.

Ryuuji was thinking. Kitamura didn't ask any questions, probably because he already knew. But Ryuuji could only think about it in his head, unable to say his thoughts out loud.

Even when he heard Ryuuji's strange request, 'Tell Taiga that you were the one who saved her.' Kitamura still didn't ask any questions, but merely told him,

'It isn't your fault.' before accepting the request.

Ryuuji liked Minori, but was rejected by her on Christmas Eve. Taiga was also acting weird over the new year, and since Kitamura also understood the undercurrents beneath all their actions, he didn't need to say anything. That Taiga confessed her feelings to Kitamura in spring, and then acted to end her one-sided feelings, thus able to change her relationship with Kitamura to that of good friends, was rather unbelievable. From the ideal friendship that was now blossoming in front of his eyes, Ryuuji felt like he could feel Kitamura's desire for such a relationship with Taiga.

Which is to say, Kitamura had known long ago that the person Taiga really liked was Ryuuji.

"Alright alright! Even if you look at me with such passion in your eyes, you won't get a thing."

Of course, the events that had transpired in the few minutes it took to pull Taiga back from the edge of the cliff were only known to Taiga and Ryuuji--No, were only known to Ryuuji alone.

"I've always felt that your double eye-lids.....are so well cut-out. It's like someone operated on them....."

"You must be joking, I swear that I've never gone for plastic surgery."

And even before Kitamura had noticed that Taiga liked Ryuuji, Ryuuji had noticed something even more terrible.

Kitamura wasn't the only one who saw through everything, or rather, Ryuuji was the only one who was slow. *Just like how Ami had said that she disliked me because I'm stupid, seemingly referring to the fact that not only did I not notice Taiga's feelings, but even cruelly made her help me get closer to Minori.*

Another thing was Minori. *Is her stubborn rejection because of Taiga? I already know the answer, but I don't want to overreact or get too conceited, which is why I don't want to face up to that fact.*

In short, only one thing is certain: I'm an idiot. If that clumsy Taiga hadn't done something stupid, perhaps I would still be in the dark about her feelings, and would probably tell her 'You're really a nice person!' in return for all that she has done for me.

--Even though pretending not to know anything wouldn't change the outcome at all.

"Aisaka, stop it! Germs will get into the wound!"

Kitamura finally stepped in. The screams of the damsels in distress seemed to have ignited his passion as the class representative.

Taiga, who was chasing Maya and Nanako around the classroom while preparing to take off the band-aid on her head, looked over and then walked to the two of them while smiling broadly. Just as Ryuuji wondered about what she was doing -- "Look! It's healed already!"

"Oh.....!"

"Whoa!"

She took off the band-aid and moved her head closer to Ryuuji and Kitamura.

The 5-centimetre wound on Taiga's head was yellowish due to the fact that the internal bleeding had already stopped, and there was a small scar in the middle of the wound. Though the cut itself had already healed, scar tissue could still be seen.

"Why must you show me something like that during lunchtime!?"

Normal people would probably be shocked by something like that right? But Ryuuji also couldn't help but want to knock her head lightly -- "Ah.....It really is healed!"

Kitamura was also slightly shocked by Taiga's sudden actions, but he immediately recovered to take a look at the cut before grinning and giving her a thumbs-up. 'I told you!' Taiga happily leaned her head to the side as she gave Kitamura a thumbs-up in return.

Why?

Even I think that such thoughts are stupid and embarrassing, but why? Why do you always punch me, kick me, put me in strangleholds, while you always smile at Kitamura and give him the thumbs up? Since you like me, then shouldn't you.....No, no, I've already decided to forget about it, so I shouldn't think about such things.

If I had known that it would become like this, it would be better for me not to have found out about anything. If I hadn't known about her feelings, then I wouldn't have such stupid thoughts, and would only smile and think, 'She still likes Kitamura.'

"It's all thanks to Kitamura-kun that I only suffered such a minor injury. Thank you!"

"No, it's nothing."

Kitamura waved his hand as he looked at Ryuuji, who turned away, pretending not to know anything. This definitely wasn't jealousy.

Taiga hadn't noticed the strange expressions on the two guys' faces as she continued,

"Why is Kitamura-kun here?"

"Hmm? Why can't I be here?"

Ryuuji couldn't help but feel like doing his usual falling-on-the-ground routine at Taiga's question.

"No, I don't mean it like that. Because Minorin just went out of the classroom passionately declaring that she had to snatch the rights of usage of the sports field from the soccer team. Isn't Kitamura-kun the captain too?"

Ah--So that's what she meant.....Kitamura pushed up the glasses that had slipped off in surprise with his middle finger,

"To tell the truth, the male and female softball teams were merged together a few days ago, with Kushieda as the overall team captain. I'm still part of the team, just that I'm not one of the committee members anymore. It's a bit too hard for me to juggle the positions of student council president and softball team captain at the same time."

"Is that so?" "That's right." The two of them continued their conversation. Ryuuji still had a blank look on his face as he put a piece of mushroom into his mouth.

"Speaking of which, seeing that Aisaka can come back to school safely puts my heart at ease. Everyone was worried about what had happened to you when you didn't come to school for an entire week."

"heh heh heh, it's nothing."

Taiga gave Ryuuji a look. *You want to tell me to not tell everyone that you merely wanted to skip school right?* Ryuuji's lips curved upwards at this shared secret as he returned a look that said 'I know' while drinking a mouthful of Oolong tea.

If only all the secrets could be swallowed into the stomach and digested as though they never happened.....Ryuuji even began to think in that direction. If that could happen, then everything would become much simpler, and Ryuuji, whose engine was about to break down, would be able to continue moving forward.

Perhaps it would really be like this.

"Takasu--! Yuri-sensei's looking for you!"

A classmate called for Ryuuji from the corridor. 'Got it!' Ryuuji replied before he got up, not bothering to put back the lid of his lunchbox as he stuck out his chin towards Taiga,

"You didn't bring lunch right? Mine's practically untouched, so you can have it. I don't feel like eating today."

"Huh? But....."

Taiga looked at the lunchbox hesitantly. 'Just eat it.' Kitamura said as he smiled like an oba-san.

".....I didn't bring chopsticks. And I don't want your chopsticks, so give me a pair of disposable ones."

"There's no such thing as disposable chopsticks. You should know that the world's rainforests are rapidly diminishing."

"Wow, you're so naggy.....! I haven't seen you for a week and your naggingness has taken over your body."

"Just wash my pair and use it."

"Environmentalist!" Even when Taiga shouted that at him, Ryuuji didn't turn around as he strode out of the classroom. He thought to himself while walking: Would other people think that it's weird if I give a bento that I've already eaten to a girl? Is it very strange? Perhaps. But Ryuuji felt that if their relationship was like before, then this sort of action should be normal, or rather, she would have robbed him of his bento.

Since it's like that, then the present has to be exactly like the past. Since his standpoint has not changed, Ryuuji will have to make his actions look less deliberate and more natural.

* * *

Other students could also be seen in the staffroom during the lunch break. The more serious ones were asking questions about homework, while some female students were eating lunch with the more popular male teachers. In the top half of the crowded staffroom, were the second year teachers' desks.

"Why haven't you turned it in? This is an extremely important form....."

The single (30) Koigakubo Yuri's lunch was a cup of instant noodles. The plastic cover on top of the cup was fogged up, making it easy for Ryuuji to imagine how the noodles inside must be rapidly expanding.

"Everyone has turned in the form.....I would never have thought that Takasu-kun would forget to bring something so important....."

Still staring at the cup noodles.

Koigakubo Yuri looked at her rapidly expanding noodles uneasily out of the corner of her eyes. No, no, she quickly swivelled back to look at Ryuuji, but still couldn't resist sneaking glances at her noodles.

".....Sensei, you should eat first. I'm listening to you speak, so you should quickly eat the noodles before your noodles shrivel up."

"Gah! No, no, never mind. Takasu-kun hasn't eaten lunch yet either right? So how can I, as your teacher, eat noodles by myself?"

"I've already eaten. You don't have to mind me, so please go ahead and eat."

"Is, is that so? I'm sorry, I have so many things to do, but so little time."

Ryuuji watched as she peeled off the cover and broke apart a pair of disposable chopsticks, "heh heh heh!" as she happily scooped up the noodles. But then, she suddenly stopped her actions,

"About that.....Didn't an incident regarding Aisaka-san's disappearance happen during the school trip?"

"Yes....."

The single class teacher blinked carefully as she said,

"I think that because you're so worried about Aisaka-san, the screws in your brain have become a little.....loose."

The screws in your brain --- Hearing something that he never thought would come out from the mouth of his class teacher, Ryuuji was at a loss for words. An awkward silence descended upon the two of them, as Koigakubo Yuri attempted to cover the awkwardness while stuffing a piece of jelly ear into her mouth,

"Because.....ah hot hot hot. You've been spacing out a lot lately, and have even been forgetting important things. Sensei's really worried about you."

"Would you like to go for a.....psychological assessment?"

The class teacher gulped down a mouthful of expanded noodles. Ryuuji watched her eat as he replied in a low and steady voice,

"There are a lot of reasons....."

Flying drops of soup flew onto the table that was completely covered in papers, leaving stains on the free real estate information magazine. Ryuuji's mouth twisted in to a ^ shape as he watched the drops of soup fly. The object he hated most in the entire world was this kind of free advertisements. These things never do any good, and only serve to fill the world with random advertisements, resulting in a gross wastage of resources! "Wow! It's free--" You collect so many of these things because of that mentality, of course your home can never be completely clean and tidy! That sort of thing should just be thrown away! And speaking of such megazines, it's not even a health megazine! Ryuuji desperately fought to keep the urge to shout and throw that megazine into the dustbin under control. *Control yourself, my environmentalist spirit.....!*

"There may be many reasons, but this is normal isn't it! I don't think I need to go for counselling! And also, the reason why I'm unable to hand up my higher education aspirations survey is not because I have a screw loose, but because I've yet to come to a consensus with my family!"

"Ah, is that so.....?"

"Yes, it is!"

Ryuuji's uncommon display of rebelliousness made him look like an eagle tasked with an assassination mission, as he looked down at his noodle-eating class teacher with a piercing gaze. *This stupid single woman (30)! You can eat such convenient food until you die! You even put so much salt in it! Curse you into buying an eerie house for an extremely high price!.....* Of course Ryuuji wasn't thinking of such things, but what he said was the truth.

Yesterday, as he was eating hotpot with Yasuko, they did discuss his future higher education and career prospects, and also about the higher education aspirations survey which would be used as a basis for next year's class streaming.

Yasuko's answer was, just write 'I will study hard!'. Although Ryuuji didn't want to accept that answer, and also wanted to discuss more practical and realistic problems, but because he was late in cooking dinner, Yasuko had to rush through dinner so as to be on time for work. The next morning, before Ryuuji was about to go to school, Yasuko was sleeping soundly, and since Ryuuji felt drunk just by smelling the stench of alcohol in the apartment, discussing serious matters was out of the question.

Even then, the Ryuuji with a mother complex.....no, with a serious attitude still wished to discuss this issue with Yasuko and only hand up the survey when they had reached a consensus. Ryuuji was

seriously considering both applying for higher education and going straight into work, so how could he take being seen as someone with a screw loose?

"I see, I see."

Koigakubo Yuri placed a piece of fish cake into her mouth as she waved her chopsticks at Ryuuji, attempting to calm him down,

"Sigh, because Takasu-kun's a good student who has never done anything to worry sensei. And also, it's because I have high expectations of you that I'm so naggy. This is the natural tendency of a teacher."

"High expectations?"

Ryuuji's eyebrows rose in surprise as he repeated the two words, the class teacher's eyes intently watching his expression.

"Please don't have high expectations of me, my family is very poor."

Ryuuji prepared to rebutt his class teacher, but to his surprise, she merely put her chopsticks down and smiled slyly at Ryuuji,

"Anyway, please try to hand it up as soon as possible. Only Aisaka-san and you have not handed it up."

"Taiga hasn't handed it up either? Then why am I the only one you called?"

"Because I just passed the form to Aisaka-san. Even though you also have many reasons, but this and that are two completely different things. Please find a time to have a talk with your mother, and think about your future."

* * *

In the corridor outside the staffroom, Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh deeply.

His footsteps on the way back to class grew heavier and heavier, until Ryuuji was almost not moving at all. This heaviness reflected his current state of mind, something that frustrated him.

This and that are two different things. Though his class teacher had said that, but it's impossible to separate the two so clearly. Wishing that the everything would stay as it is while being unable to imagine the unknown future, even as he completely disagreed with Yasuko's opinion. Yasuko would only say ambitious words without considering the financial situation of the Takasu household. It was next to impossible to get her to understand that, and Ryuuji got a headache just by thinking about it.

"Sigh....."

Ryuuji used his right hand to hold up his swaying head.

This is probably because I haven't been sleeping well these past few days right? Even though his heart had come to a complete stop, there was still outside pressures coming in the form of his higher education aspirations survey.....The footsteps that was supposed to go back to class turned towards an empty corridor. *I need to regulate my feelings before going back to eat with Kitamura and Taiga, I still have to continue lying in front of them.*

As he came to the corridor that connected the main building and the gym, Ryuuji felt as though he was unable to breathe properly, so he opened a window to let in some fresh air. He opened his mouth like a fish out of water, filling his chest with lung-piercing cold air.

No matter how deeply he breathed, he still felt uncomfortable. Ryuuji stuck his head out of the window, still feeling trapped. He was still unable to escape from that snowstorm.,

Haven't I already decided to forget Taiga's confession? Since she doesn't intend to let me know, wouldn't everything go back to normal as long as I forget her confession?

But then, even if one is really determined to forget something, it isn't as easy in practice. To be able to perfectly pretend that one has forgotten everything requires more time. Just that when he was still trapped inside 'something that logically, shouldn't exist', time was still moving forward. Ryuuji understood that as he stopped in his tracks, everyone else were still moving forward, step by step. The decision between going to university and starting a career was even more so, as Ryuuji felt that he was being left behind in every department.

Ryuuji also knew that he shouldn't be like this, that he had never proactively pursued a course of action before, only responding to problems as they happened. He wanted to choose the right path of advancement, but he did not know which was the right path.

Perhaps I really do have a screw loose, just like what sensei said. No matter what, my mother is Takasu Yasuko, so the nuts and bolts in my brain could have already disappeared, just that I haven't noticed it yet.

"Will I.....become.....useless.....!?"

Ryuuji had thought that he was a dependable and hardworking person---but that beautified self no longer existed. So what remained? What was his real identity?

"Ahhhh....."

The demonic-looking young man who was talking to himself by the window groaned softly, his attention suddenly attracted to the gap on the windowsill that was stuffed with leaves and dust---one would probably get an acne outbreak if one gets too close. Ryuuji quickly took out a piece of tissue from his pocket, nonchalantly wrapping it around his index finger as he 'ahhhhh---'ed like an oba-san while drawing his finger across the windowsill.

Even Ryuuji himself felt that he was being too pessimistic.

Speaking of someone who was as un-pessimistic as he was pessimistic, Kushieda Minori appeared in Ryuuji's mind.

Ryuuji had felt that she was the epitome of optimism ever since their first meeting, willing to smile at the person whom everyone said was a delinquent, she's the goal that someone who lacks self-confidence like him aspires to become. In comparison to Ryuuji, who walked around with his head lowered to hide his scary features, Minori always looked straight at the sun like a sunflower blooming towards the sun. *That is why I am attracted to her, that is why I like her.*

*Now, I've experienced first hand the steel within Minori. She's not just optimistic, kind and cute, but also individualistic to the point of stubbornness. Even if she hurts the people around her (like me!), Minori will never change herself, will never stop in her tracks.....*This is what Ryuuji found out. She is like a sunflower that raises itself towards the sky, blooming healthily.....no, she's the missile launching program that locks on to the sun, preparing to knock it off its place in the sky.

The reason why Ryuuji ended his one-sided affection for Minori was also because after getting to know her on a personal basis, he knew that he was unable to 'keep up with her'--not because he felt that he wasn't good enough for her, but because Ryuuji really felt that someone like him would never be able to match up to her strength of will and the speed at which she speeds along the highway of life. But even if the flame of affection has been extinguished, even if he no longer had hope for any kind of future progression with her--"Kushieda....."

Ryuuji thought about it everyday: *If only I could become like you one day.*

To Ryuuji, Minori was something perfect and admirable, his wish to become like her never changing at all.

"Am I just a piece of rubbish in your eyes....."

"Of course not--"

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Due to the significant shock that Ryuuji received, his body was unable to keep up with the speed of his turn, as his indoor shoes screeched in protest, throwing him onto the floor.

".....Since when have you been there!?"

"Kushieda, you Unkotarezo, you must have thought of me as Cascade haven't you....."

Minori's eyebrows shot up as her dark eyes shone with light,

"Which is why I said 'of course not', I'm not a horse."

Just how long has she been here? Minori bent down to look at Ryuuji, who was sitting down on the floor, nodding her head forcefully in front of him.

"What happened to your ear.....!"

Ryuuji couldn't help but lie down onto the ground, his heartbeat suddenly increasing exponentially. This was something that cannot be described by phrases like 'heart-pounding' anymore.

Why would Kushieda appear at this time? And what is she talking about? What Horse? What Tarezo? I don't understand any of that!

And she---"Since it has come to this, I shall use my ultimate killing move Mustang Special! Hah!"

"Calm down! You're really dangerous! Calm down!"

Minori suddenly started to run, as Ryuuji quickly jumped in front of her while sticking both hands out at her as though he was trying to stop a galloping horse. There would surely be an accident if she ran in school like that.

"Hmm? Why are you stopping me? I'm just going back to class the normal way."

"Who would run like that indoors!? How is that normal way!"

Hearing Ryuuji's lecture, 'I got scolded', Minori immediately turned around and started doing the robot, causing Ryuuji to become momentarily speechless. Right, I almost forgot, she's been like this a lot recently..... 'How, how, Takasu-kun? Please don't let your soul leak out of your mouth like that, you should go back to the classroom too. What could you be doing at the borderlands?"

"That should be my line.....You aren't stalking me are you?"

And so, Ryuuji started to fall in line with Minori's jokes.

"What are you talking about."

But Minori chose that moment to go back to normal as she looked at Ryuuji blankly,

"I was on my way back from returning keys to the gym teacher's office. It should be strange that you're here right?"

"I am--"

Because I am unable to become like you.

*I am unable to face up to each new day as energetically as you. I'm being restrained by many things, and have always stopped in my tracks, alone--*But how could he say that kind of things out loud.

".....I'm still taking in the shock received from Yuri telling me that I have a screw loose in my brain."

"Huh? A screw loose? Wh, Why?"

"Because I didn't hand up the higher education aspirations survey. And also my sleeptalk.....during class yesterday, seems to have gotten her worried."

"Ah---Dream and Cry eh?"

"What's that? You're not talking about me are you.....?"

But Minori wasn't toying with Ryuuji. She walked to the window, breathing out a stream of white mist towards the cold air outside the window, and turned towards Ryuuji,

"It's really good that Taiga can come back safely. Really, really good."

And then she smiled widely, the corners of her mouth turning upwards,

"That time, if you hadn't gone with me.....if you had let me go look for Taiga by myself, how would everything have turned out? Most probably both Taiga and I would have met with an accident. Thinking of that possibility, even I'm also Dreaming and Crying."

".....You too?"

Yes---Minori gave a small reply that sounded like her, and yet didn't really sound like her as she nodded her head.

Under the assault of the cold wind on their faces, Ryuuji and Minori maintained a small distance between them as they mirrored each other actions, putting their hands on the windowsill while shivering with their heads tucked in. If someone had seen them from outside of the building, it would probably an extremely interesting sight.

The thin layer of clouds seemed to have been frozen in the wintry sky, but the weather was clear, with the only problem being the murderous gusts of wind. There were no tall buildings obstructing the view from the window, and so the two of them could see rather far out into the streets. They looked at the housing districts with their roofs and chimneys that stretched all the way to the faraway resource-recycling factory, despite the line being broken in the middle by the river. The two large red and white striped industrial chimneys on top of the factory was spewing out clouds of white smoke. *Doesn't that harm the environment?*

"I had originally thought that I would be able to save her by myself."

Beside Ryuuji, Minori's voice floated up together with a stream of white mist, as he looked at how the mist dissipated into the air. Minori should be talking about Taiga's accident.

"But to be honest, she dropped to the bottom of that kind of cliff, which means that I would never have been able to save her alone. I'm glad that I didn't make a wrong assessment of the situation at that time.....And also, even I doubted that I would be able to find Taiga by myself. Takasu-kun even knew the position of her fall."

"That's because--"

The object that reflected the light that brought me to Taiga was -- "--I saw the brooch that was buried in the snow first."

Minori, who had stuck her head out of the window, looked back in, her eyes meeting Ryuuji's. Ryuuji couldn't help but look to the side, but Minori's gaze did not waver.

"I had thought that the brooch was a present from Taiga, but it isn't, is it? It's the present that you had bought for me but didn't give it to me in the end, which is why Taiga gave it to me right? According to my deduction, that should be the present that you were planning to give me on Christmas Eve?"

".....!"

She got everything correct.

Minori seemed to have expected that Ryuuji wouldn't be able to come up with an answer to that, as she nodded her head to fill the silence that descended upon the two of them. To tell the truth, Ryuuji hadn't given her the present because he had forgotten to bring it to meet her on Christmas Eve. But of course he couldn't say something like that as he merely quietly looked at Minori.

At the same time, he thought to himself---*She really does know everything.*

"How did you....."

"I have my sources. Speaking of which, I'm sorry, I really didn't know, and I really thought that it was Taiga's present."

Ryuuji wasn't able to immediately perceive what was it that she was apologizing for, but Minori's expression remained serious, as she looked at Ryuuji with a gaze fierce enough to knock the sun out of its place in the sky,

"You.....You wore that brooch for a while, you can't be apologizing for that can you?"

"I am."

*I lost my memory, so I don't remember anything about Christmas Eve. So Takasu-kun must be like that too, the way we interact must not change.....*Minori, who had been like this since that night, hurting Ryuuji in the process, talked about that Christmas Eve night for the first time. She finally decided to face up to that night, and to Ryuuji's feelings.

"Although my decision not to accept hurt you, but I hope to apologize to you by wearing that brooch in front of you. I'm really sorry."

"This....."

Admitting that she hurt Ryuuji was the same as admitting that she knew of his feelings, rejecting his confession one step ahead, and not forgetting about that incident until now.

"You apologized to me so suddenly.....Is it because of Taiga coming back to school?"

Minori didn't reply his question, merely looking at him with her blazing eyes, letting her hair dance freely in the wintry air.

Ryuuji suddenly thought of something: *Perhaps Minori is the same?* The Minori that looked as though she was moving forward at an inhumanly fast pace on the outside was actually just like Ryuuji, that she had already stopped in her tracks as well? Most likely she'd stopped ever since that night.

Which is why she wanted to take the chance after Taiga comes back to settle everything.

She admitted to rejecting Ryuuji's feelings, and apologized for hurting Ryuuji, basically signalling that she knew everything---Is this Minori's way of 'moving on'?

"Where's the brooch now?"

Hearing Minori's nonchalant question, Ryuuji answered her just as nonchalantly.

"It's in my room. Do you still want it?"

"No thank you, I don't think I'll accept it after all."

I knew you would say that--Ryuuji had wanted to say that to her, and then smile.

Since you're going to settle everything, then I shall settle everything with you as well--Although he really wanted to tell her that--"I....."

He sighed before opening his mouth again.

".....really admire you."

I'm still unable to take that all-important step forward. I really hope that I am able to move on, just like Kushieda, but I can't do it, I'm still unable to stand on my feet, still unable to leave that snowstorm.

As long as I am unable to forget that voice, I will be unable to move on.

"What's wrong? Why do you suddenly say that?"

"I.....have been restrained by many things, abandoned by even more things. I've been unable to forget the things that I want to forget, and also....."

I still see that snowstorm everytime I close my eyes. The chaotic swirling of snow and ice, and the pair of tightly-shut eyes that are buried with the snow and ice, the tears beneath her eyelashes, and --- 'It's painful.'

That voice was heard once again.

Within an endless pool of solitude, Taiga decided to hide her feelings and move on by herself. Ryuuji thought of the only time when Taiga said the things that were hidden in her heart, her voice resounding incessantly in his heart and mind.

"I am unable to forget the things that I want to forget."

Minori's fist drifted towards the side of Ryuuji face,

"Of course you can't forget, from the moment you decided to forget it, it was already set that you will be unable to forget it. If you really could forget it, then you wouldn't have remembered it in the first place. It's because you'll never be able to forget it that you'll want to forget. That's why pain is unavoidable."

"But.....I must forget it.....At least I think the other person would want me to forget."



Turning around, Ryuuji attempted to push Minori's fist back at her. Minori didn't ask questions like 'What do you want to forget?', or 'Who wishes for you to forget it?', merely listening to his exposition.

"That's why I want to forget."

Perhaps Ryuuji's way of thinking wasn't correct, since Taiga had never said anything along the lines of 'I want you to forget it'. She hadn't planned to let her hidden feelings out, hadn't planned to confess her feelings, had hoped to hide her affection for Ryuuji forever.

That's why---I want to forget--"I admire you because you're proactive, and always moving forward towards a goal. What should I do to be as proactive as you?"

Minori kept quiet for a while as she looked into Ryuuji's eyes. She pouted slightly, 'hoooo~' breathing out another stream of white mist,

"Because I've 'decided'."

and smiled,

"Because I have already decided the direction in which I want to go. If I hadn't made up my mind, then I wouldn't even know which way is forward. Takasu-kun, where do you intend to go? Do you have a place you want to go? If you don't have such a goal, then you wouldn't be able to move on.

The direction to move forward.

The place you want to go.

Hearing Minori's questions, Ryuuji realised that he was unable to answer any of them.

He didn't know where he should go, or maybe such a thing didn't exist in his heart in the first place. In all, he didn't possess any sort of passion or hope for a dream or aspiration. At least, he was unable to detect the presence of such a desire.

Ah, so that's it---Because I've been unable to make up my mind, that's why I'm unable to reach anywhere. Ryuuji looked up at the sky.

"Do you know where you want to go?"

"Of course!"

Answering resolutely, Minori lightly jumped behind Ryuuji, and, not caring whether her skirt was being blown up by the wind, posed to make a pitch. The hair on her shoulders danced lightly, her eyes following the invisible softball all the way down the corridor.

Right now, Ryuuji really admired the person with that kind of eyes.

As the lunch break was about to end, the corridor became more crowded with students going back to their respective classes. Ryuuji and Minori had stood by the window for too long, as they shivered while walking down the staircase, suddenly noticing a certain person at the same time.

"Oh, Ami!"

Kawashima Ami just walked out of the staffroom.

Among the other students, she was the only one that stood out. Her willowy limbs, straight back, and snowy-white skin was completely different from the students around her. Once again, Ryuuji felt the strength of Ami's existence.

The beauty in question turned around when she heard Minori's voice. Minori waved at her in response -- "....."

But Ami acted as though she didn't see Minori and walked away. The target of her wave gone, Minori could only lower her raised right hand.

".....The two of you are still fighting?"

"Please say 'we're in the process of making up'.....Although it seems that I'm the only one who wants to make up."

Minori didn't stop walking as she continued to walk slightly awkwardly in the corridor that Ami had just passed through. Looks like even Minori has things that she cannot solve.

* * *

"Didn't we talk about this yesterday--?"

Yasuko, who was busy stirring a bowl of natto, opened her eyes widely as she looked at her son, who was sitting across the table from her,

"Didn't I tell you to write 'I will study hard!' on the survey? Why haven't you turned it in yet?"

"I haven't finished my side of the argument."

Ryuuji prepared dinner especially early today, planning to discuss the issue with his mother over dinner.

"You haven't thought about this seriously yet."

"Ya-chan's really serious."

"If I go into a government university near our home for four years, it'll add up to about 10 million yen in expenses altogether. If I get into a private university, then the expenses will be even greater. Have you ever thought about the financial implications of me going to university?"

"Hmm? The government universities near our home are all third-grade universities-Definitely not! Ryu-chan's so clever, a private university should be easy to get in, you must get into a good university in Tokyo!"

Natto Bomb~! Ah--Sticky~! Yasuko used her chopsticks to stuff a piece of natto into Inko-chan's cage.

"Hah!" Inko-chan grabbed the natto while drooling all over himself. This bird actually eats natto.

"That's not what I'm talking about."

Yasuko's bowl of natto, the dinner table, Inko-chan's cage and Inko-chan's beak were all connected by a string of nattos. Ryuuji used his chopsticks to pick the natto of the table with a serious face. Yasuko, who had no make-up on, had her hair in a bun as she happily sipped a bowl of miso soup while watching television, humming the tune of some new idol singer that was probably two decades younger, probably planning to perform it at work later.

"Ah!"

Ryuuji turned the television off.

".....The point is, our financial situation isn't suitable for me to pursue higher education."

"Of course it does."

Pouting, Yasuko attempted to snatch the remote back, but Ryuuji was one step ahead as he stuffed it under his cushion.

"I'm telling you that it's extremely hard!"

"How hard can it be? Of course it wouldn't be hard. You're going to be in your third year of high school next year, and then it'll be four years of university right? And of course my salary wouldn't decrease over this period of time."

"How can you be so sure? What if the business closes down?"

"It won't close down! There are a lot of customers there."

"The other investments of your boss might fail right?"

"Eh--? How would I know about such things."

"That's the point, you don't know for sure, that's why our financial situation is not good.....I think I should just get a job after I graduate, and then only try for university when our household income is stable. Or I should look for a university that would give me a full scholarship....."

"No way~!"

Yasuko would only give an expression befitting a mother at such times. she leaned towards Ryuuji and loudly rebutted his argument,

"Ryu-chan doesn't need to think about anything, Ryu-chan only needs to concentrate on studying and try for the best university! It'll mean that Ryu-chan's really good if you get a scholarship right? That's why Ya-chan doesn't allow you to think about other things. Ryu-chan will go to a place with a lot of good students to study! Ryu-chan's different from Ya-chan, Ryu-chan's really clever, so you must get the best~~education possible, and develop your talent as much as possible, so that you can have an extremely happy life. That's why you shouldn't be thinking about things that aren't related to studying!

There's a saying that goes.....A saying that my teacher often said when Ya-chan was still a student.....
Hmm..... Jade..... process..... shiny..... something like that....."

".....A Jade stone is useless before it is processed?"

"That's~~right! That's it! That's why Ryu-chan must get into a class full of good students to study hard, and must also go for extra lessons and the such. And then Ryu-chan must properly prepare for the university entrance exams. Wow--Which path will Ryu-chan choose? It's so exciting--! Would it be to become a doctor? Or a Vet? Or a pharmacist, dentist? A professor isn't bad either! Being a scientist at the cutting-edge of technology isn't bad either, but then perhaps being a lawyer would suit Ryu-chan either? Ah--What if Ryu-chan goes overseas? Ya-chan will be very lonely! But Ya-chan will try to endure the loneliness!"

"....."

Ryuuji was left speechless as he stared at his mother, not knowing what else he could do other than stirring his own bowl of natto.

"Nyan! His mother bit into a piece of bluefish as she imagined a rosy future for Ryuuji.

This idiot.

Talking about med school without any supporting evidence? Just what are you talking about? Apologise to every student who is aiming for med school and their parents right now! Ryuuji stirred his bowl of natto violently, finally thinking of the only way to get Yasuko to face up to reality. He went over to the closet in the corner of the room, taking out the savings book from a drawer and handing it to Yasuko.

"Hmm.....? We have quite a lot of savings! Eheheh!"

Ryuuji resisted the urge to just fall down onto the floor as he said,

".....Does it look like a lot? Half of this amount will be gone after we pay the school fees in spring. And we still have to deduct every month's rent, utility bills and our personal expenses. And since you're working in the service sector, so you'll have to buy clothes and make-up, don't you? No matter how we scrimp, we'll never be able to save up any money each month. Under this kind of financial situation, where do you think we can get the money for me to study medicine?"

"Ehhhh?"

"What was that for! Ah--I guess I better go and work part time. That way, our household income will increase by about fifty thousand yen each month, so at least....."

"No! I won't allow you to work!"

Yasuko raised her right hand violently, her nattos flying up into the air. Ryuuji hurriedly picked them up again.

"If you start working, then you won't have time to study--! And then we won't be able to see each other everyday, life has no meaning if I have to eat dinner by myself! It's not nice at all! I won't let you work!"

.....Because of Yasuko's stance on working part-time, Ryuuji had never worked before, only taking care of household chores.

"It's because you told me to go on to university that I want to work part time!"

Thinking back, Ryuuji felt that he had wasted the past two years of his life, for if he worked as hard as Minori part-time, then he would have a sizeable amount of savings right now, saving him the need for such a quarrel.

"Don't worry! Ya-chan will find a way!"

Yasuko gave a victory sign as she smiled. It was this that had kept Ryuuji in the dark the whole time, because Yasuko the adult said so, that is why Ryuuji had always believed that she could solve the problem, when in reality, even Yasuko had no idea as to how to solve the current problem. Takasu Ryuuji is already seventeen, and will soon be eighteen, so he was finally beginning to see the world for what it really is.

Even parents have things that they are unable to do. Never believe them when parent's say 'don't worry'. In the past, Yasuko had been lying to Ryuuji the whole time, telling him, 'don't worry!', 'Ya-chan's the mother, just leave it to Ya-chan.', 'As long as Ya-chan's here, everything will be fine.'.....And Ryuuji had always believed that everything will be alright.

"You won't be any less happier than the other children who have fathers, because Ya-chan's a super-mom! Always young! Always cute! And Ya-chan has superpowers! So if Ryu-chan meets any problems, Ya-chan will be able to save you immediately! Even if there's an accident, nothing will happen; Money will gush out like water. So you don't have to worry at all, just leave it to Ya-chan. We'll be able to be happy all our lives---".....Find a way? I don't think so.

Ryuuji thought to himself: *The fairy tale of my childhood is finally going to end.*

"There'll be a way! Really, Ya-chan will think of a solution! So Ryu-chan doesn't need to worry about money."

Yasuko gave an innocent smile as she nodded furiously, but her child could not be tricked any more.

After Yasuko went out to work,

Ryuuji was still unable to come to a conclusion regarding his higher education aspirations survey, only managing to wash the dishes and clothes, and finishing his homework. With nothing left to do, Ryuuji wasn't in the mood to watch television, so he could only think of studying a bit of English, writing down the pronunciation of each word with his naturally small and neat handwriting, but even as he wrote, he couldn't help but stop writing.

Where do I intend to go by studying so hard? Because he didn't even have a set goal to work towards, Ryuuji couldn't motivate himself. Thinking of that, Ryuuji quickly stopped himself from continuing that line of thought. One wrong step would bring him into a never-ending abyss of self-doubt.

He looked outside the window, Taiga's bedroom was still lighted. An extremely strong light emanated from behind the curtains, looks like she had turned on the table lamp.

Maybe Taiga is also studying hard at the table.....or she could be reading manga or magazines, or even surfing the net while eating instant noodles.

Ryuuji touched the cold window frame with his fingers, concentrating on the window opposite for a while, but was still unable to see Taiga's frame on the other side of the curtains.

There was nothing special to talk about, which is why Ryuuji didn't intend to call her, he just wanted to confirm whether he could see Taiga or not.

If 'not expressing any kind of affection' was Taiga's goal, then Taiga's 'moving on' was hiding her feelings and turning her back towards Ryuuji -- If it was really like that, then Taiga would move further and further away from Ryuuji, until he wouldn't be able to see her at all. Even if Ryuuji hadn't changed at all, Taiga would still leave.

No one, including Taiga, was willing to take responsibility for the way that Ryuuji had stopped in his tracks. No one was willing to give him a signal to move forward.

".....I guess that's to be expected."

Ryuuji tiredly let go of the pencil.

Chapter 3

"What?"

Taiga slowly blinked twice before squeezing out an answer,

"The cake shop? Ya-chan?"

Ryuuji nodded,

"Yes. Monday to Friday, from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon, nine hundred yen an hour."

"But doesn't Ya-chan usually only wake up in the afternoon? It's already four, five o'clock in the morning when she reaches home, and....."

"I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. She started work last week."

".....It'll be really tiring wouldn't it."

Taiga's gaze held a hint of disapproval, but Ryuuji couldn't do anything to stop her since Yasuko was working during school hours.

After school, Ryuuji and Taiga went to the interview room that was also known as the 'reprimand room' to wait for their class teacher to appear.

Ryuuji sat at the four-person table that was placed in the middle of the room, while Taiga, who was originally standing by the door, opted to be as far away from Ryuuji as possible, making one big detour to sit on the counter in front of the window, swinging her legs back and forth violently.

The enclosed area that was a little larger than two tsubo (Japanese method of measuring area) was awkwardly silent, with the only sounds the muffled voices of the students having club activities in the sports field. As long as no one spoke, the entire space was like a soundless vacuum, making its inhabitants feel an inexplicable sense of pressure.

"I hear that--"

Tap! Ryuuji drummed his fingers on the table as though playing the piano.

"--That the shop that I always go to in the shopping district is looking for part-time workers, and that part-timers get to take the unsold cakes home at the end of the day....."

"You're really noisy."

".....What do you mean by noisy?"

"That tapping sound you're making."

Taiga leaned on the window frame as she wagged a finger from each hand at Ryuuji. He understood what she was referring to, and promptly crossed his arms, placing them on the surface of the table.

Yesterday evening, Ryuuji found out about Yasuko's new job after meeting her in front of Taiga's apartment.

"But why did Yasuko suddenly get another job?"

"Because I told her that there won't be enough money for me to go to university. So she told me that she'll find a way around it and got a new job the next day."

"So it's because of your school fees.....Looks like it's really hard to be a mother."

".....The reason I've been called here should be because I haven't turned in my higher education aspirations survey. Why are you here?"

"I haven't turned it in either, so I think I've been called here for the same reason."

"Why haven't you turned it in yet? Is it because you don't want to discuss it with your parents?"

"No, I was just too lazy to do it, so I forgot about it."

Taiga turned around to blow a breath of air at the windowpane before drawing the picture of a heart on the windowpane.

".....!"

Ryuuji jumped in surprise at the Taiga's picture. Is Taiga hinting at something? A heart means LOVE, and Taiga's LOVE-- ".....Ryuuji, look."

"Oh, oh....."

"A Praying Mantis!"

"So it's supposed to be a praying mantis.....!"

Ryuuji suddenly had this insane urge to smash his face into the table in front of him. That heart was actually the head of a praying mantis. Taiga then filled in the eyes, body and the raptorial legs before labelling it 'KAMAKIRI'. Looks like it's really a praying mantis and not a declaration of love.

"Do you know how to write it in kanji?"

"Yes, you write the second kanji for church next to the kanji for insect.....and then write the second kanji for ichiro beside the kanji for insect....."

"The second kanji of ichiro? The kanji for insect? It doesn't sound correct does it?"

Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh to himself. You idiot--Why do I have to think that Taiga was trying to confess her feelings to me?

"And you've also drawn the praying mantis wrongly. The body of a praying mantis is split into three distinct parts, the head, chest and the long stomach, together with a pair of wings. Have you even seen one before?"

"Yes I have. In fact I just saw one cross the road a while ago. Minorin used her umbrella to poke it and it ran off."

"A while ago? Was that really a kamakiri that you saw? It looks more like a person with a really long body. An insect's body should be more clearly segmented like this."

Ryuuji walked over to Taiga, stepping on the middle panel of the counter and leaning forward to correct Taiga's kamakiri drawing.

"Ah! My kamakiri!"

"It's nothing much."

The marks left behind by Ryuuji's finger slowly turned to drops of water, rolling down the cold windowpane. Ryuuji blew another breath of air at the windowpane as he began to draw a more accurate drawing of a praying mantis. Even though I don't look that part, but I was also a primary school boy once! I even caught an entire plastic bag of praying mantises before forgetting it in the apartment, scaring Yasuko to tears.

"And then the wings are here, and it's stomach should be this long--"

"Ah! What is this! A praying mantis doesn't look like this! What are you trying to draw! That's definitely wrong!"

"I'm telling you that it looks like this. And then there should be Nematomorphs wriggling around the stomach--"

"Wh, What's that wriggly line you just drew!? Why is it coming out from that kind of place!? It looks really disgusting!"

"Yes, it's really disgusting! And Nematomorphs will become like this when they come into contact with water--Ah!"

"Kya!"

Crash! The middle panel of the counter finally broke down from Ryuuji's weight, one corner smashing into Ryuuji's leg.

"Ouch.....Ouch.....!"

"Ahahahaha, that has got to be the stupidest way of getting hurt in the world! Ah! You're bleeding....."

Ryuuji sat on the counter and pulled up his trousers to see that the cut on his leg was bleeding slightly. Luckily it's only a minor cut, so just some tissue will be enough.

"Damn these Nematomorphs.....! They're still cursing me after what they did to me that time!"

"That time? What're you talking about?"

"When I saw Nematomorphs for the first time during my childhood, I was so surprised that I threw the praying mantis I had in my hand away and tried to run, but my feet got stuck in the mud, forcing me to go home without shoes as I couldn't get them out of the mud!"

"Speaking of your childhood.....So you were a primary school kid at that time.....still carrying those small backpacks....."

Aha, aha, aha! Taiga suddenly thought of something extremely funny as she suddenly started laughing uncontrollably. She covered her mouth while looking at Ryuuji as she spoke softly,

"A primary school kid with that kind of face....."

"What's so funny! Everyone's been a primary school kid before!"

"You're special! Ahaha! I really want to see you like that!"

Damn it! Ryuuji was a little annoyed at how Taiga kept laughing at him, so he shifted away from her to the other end of the counter. Taiga was still laughing as she clapped her small hands, saying 'A Ryuuji who's smaller than me.'

Would one think that childhood version of the person one likes is extremely special?

Ryuuji looked at the side of Taiga's face as he thought. Was this how Taiga secretly enjoyed and treasured the memories of Ryuuji's childhood, and the time they spent together everyday?

(But I still like Ryuuji.) Did Taiga not tell anyone about that, only smiling to herself as she thought about their time together? Thinking about those memories over and over again, until the memories themselves faded away--

".....When do you intend to stop laughing?"

"Ah, I'm such an idiot for laughing so hard. Mm! Oh right, you!"

The two of them sat on opposite ends of the counter, Taiga clapping her hands together smilingly as she looked at Ryuuji,

"I'm in love with the ramen store that Minorin's working at! Minorin also told me that you've gone before!"

"Ah.....You've also been there? With who?"

"By myself. Minorin dragged me there. I was reluctant to go at first, but she said that I needn't worry as there're bartop seats over there. The ramen's really good! Although the soup-flinging's really dangerous."

"Ah, the cycle of the six planes."

The best combination is normal ramen with garlic! I've already been there thrice. You've only been there once?"

"Yes, I went with Haruta and Noto. We queued for a really long time before we got in."

"You should go more often! The queue won't be very long if you go before six. Minorin was really disappointed too, as she told me, 'Takasu-kun and the others only came once.'"

Taiga shrugged and smiled as she implied that, 'She said something like that you know. Isn't it good? Minorin's interested in you.' Taiga merely implied what she had wanted to say probably because she had already decided not to intervene unless Ryuuji specifically asked for her help. Ryuuji didn't answer Taiga, but continued to look at her face. Taiga helped Ryuuji to give the hair clip that he wasn't able to give away to Minorin for him; when the hair clip fell into the snow, Taiga even dropped off a cliff just to find it. Ryuuji thought about all these things as he looked at Taiga's facial expression.

Forgetting about how she confessed her feelings to Ryuuji, and still trying to get Ryuuji and Minori together, Ryuuji wanted to know what Taiga was really thinking. Even though he knew that she was trying to be helpful, but Ryuuji still wanted to know what Taiga was truly thinking. He wanted to tell her, if doing such things would make you bleed, then please stop doing such things.

Taiga didn't appear to be bothered by Ryuuji's silence as she turned towards the window, almost resting her forehead on the glass.

Her fringe was almost touching her nose, the shape of the side of her face was slightly illuminated by the light from outside the window. The slightly confused expression contrasted sharply with her petite figure, giving her a surprisingly mature look. The fingertip that touched the windowpane didn't look childishly round, but long and soft.

The praying mantis had turned into water drops on the windowpane.

Kushieda would never like me--if I were to say something like that now, Taiga would probably rebuff me. She would say, "That's impossible, Minorin likes you, she just has a misunderstanding about our relationship." She'll surely say something like that.

If I say that because Kushieda knows that you like me, that's why she'll never like me.....Taiga'll surely answer immediately, "Then I won't like you anymore. I've already made a wish to the love god of rejection to erase my feelings towards you, so it'll be alright."

The wish was never granted; -Right, last year, she and Kitamura.....No, she didn't. For the sake of Ryuuji and Minori, who weren't able to be together on Christmas, she decided to ignore her own feelings.

Ryuuji felt a sudden shortness of breath as he stared at Taiga's neatly cut and glossed nails.

When Taiga went missing, Ryuuji's thoughts were extremely clear; I'll never let go of Taiga's hand ever again, no matter how the people around us see our relationship, I'll never leave Taiga's side ever again--I did swear to myself at that time.

".....Koigakubo Yuri's really slow isn't she."

Taiga grumbled softly as she continued swinging her legs.

Ryuuji suddenly closed his eyes, trying to endure the snowstorm that was enough to freeze his body.

Taiga was the one who left me here.

Taiga was also the one who let go of my hand and became more and more distant.

Ryuuji's own heartbeat was searingly hot, as his ears and throat hurt, his face burning up, forcing him to cup his face in his hands.

"What's that single woman doing, calling us her and not showing up--Kyaa!?"

"Gah!?"

At that very moment, a 'crash!' that was even louder than the one a few minutes ago sounded in the room, as the entire counter broke down, throwing Ryuuji and Taiga forward--the counter was obviously not able to bear the weight of two high school students. "Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's going on!?" Taiga shouted as she performed a beautiful front flip, landing softly in a kneeling position. Ryuuji on the other hand, landed heavily on his knees, unable to explain the situation to her due to the excruciating pain in his knees. It was in such situations that the difference in physical ability was painfully clear.

Just as Ryuuji struggled to keep himself from groaning in pain, the door in front of them opened.

"I'm sorry for making the two of you wait.....Ah! You broke the counter!"

Koigakubo Yuri, more commonly known as the single woman (30), gave a cry of despair (My God!), and deliberately dropped all the stationary that she was carrying onto the ground for dramatic effect. What an ice age reaction.

"No we didn't! This room is haunted!"

It's such a pity--! The single class teacher dragged Taiga to her feet as she sighed deeply. 'Now what do I do...!' The class teacher glanced at the broken counter before sighing deeply for a second time, 'It's beyond repair.'

"How could the two of you--Ah how could the two of you do such a thing! The two of you must have been sitting on top of the counter right!"

It has nothing to do with us. Ryuuji and Taiga raised their hands and waved it in front of their faces in the exact same manner, but the fresh drawing on the windowpane was solid evidence of their previous presence. Even if the drawing had now become a few trails of water, Koigakubo Yuri was still able to deduce the exact manner in which the counter had tragically broken down. Looking as though she finally had enough, the single woman said in a voice that was three times louder than her usual volume,

"I give up on the two of you.....Alright, sit down!"

"Never! Ah, it's past four o'clock! School has already ended, I want to go home!"

Looks like this approach was useless against Taiga.

"No No No---! It'll be over in a moment, so just sit down!"

Ne---ver---Taiga childishly twisted and turned as she expressed her displeasure, The single class teacher grabbed hold of her hand and forcibly sat her down in the seat beside Ryuuji. Taiga then crossed her legs and turned away to look out the window as a show of resistance. The single class teacher then sat down opposite the two of them, her eyebrows knotting together before saying,

"Do you know what I'm going to talk to the two of you about? Why haven't either of you turned in your higher education aspirations survey?"

"I'm really sorry.....but I still have not come to a consensus with my mother."

Ryuuji answered awkwardly. Taiga didn't answer as she scratched the tip of her nose, looking as though she wasn't part of the conversation.

"Both Takasu-kun and Aisaka-san's results are extremely good, so the only thing the two of you need to do is to decide on whether you'll like to go into the science curriculum or the arts curriculum. Both of you should be posted to the high ability class."

"Wait a minute, I really--"

"Takasu-kun has already said that your main concern is financial, but this form is merely a reference, so you don't have to think so much about it, you won't get recommended into a university because you filled up the form nicely."

The single class teacher placed two pieces of the blank form and two pencils onto the table in front of them, just stopping short of saying, "Fill it out right this moment!"

But Ryuuji stubbornly pushed the form back towards his class teacher,

".....If I were to choose to go to university, and then if I were really posted to a class that will specially push for university admission, then I won't be able to persuade my mother to change her mind. And also.....It'll be too hard on my mother if she were to have high expectations of me for the whole of next year."

Even now, if Yasuko were to find out that they needed even more money besides the exam fees, she would definitely look for a few more jobs.

"I don't wish to give her hope and then betray her expectations, and I also don't want her to be so tired, which is why I intend to persuade her to let me not go to university. I don't have a father, and I don't want my mother to continue to struggle to support me."

"So your only problem is financial right? Many other students who want to go on to university have their own problems too. As long as you're willing to work hard, there are still scholarships and financial aid to solve your problem."

"I hope to leave such aid for the people who really wish to go to university, and who need it the most."

"Which is to say--"

Koigakubo Yuri straightened in her chair as she looked Ryuuji in the eye,

"So Takasu-kun intends to work? Even though your mother wishes for you to go on to university, but you don't want to due to financial concerns?"

"Yes.....My mother has an overly-simplified view of this matter, and only says things that are unrealistic. As such we're unable to communicate, and thus, unable to come to a consensus."

"Takasu-kun, I have to tell you one thing."

Bam. Ryuuji couldn't help but look at the hand that his class teacher used to slam the table.

"Almost no one has gone straight into work after graduating from our school these few years. Some students retake their exams, and some students become hikikomoris, but not one of them is able start work in April after graduating in March. Other schools have systems which prepare year three students to start working in spring through career counseling, career fairs, and talks regarding professional license exams, but our school does not have such a system. I hope that you'll be mentally prepared about this."

What the class teacher wanted to say was that, 'It's almost impossible to get a job after graduating from this school. Ryuuji wasn't sure of his class teacher's motive in saying this, and as such, was a little wary of her.

"I haven't thought that far yet.....and I haven't decided what to work as, I just want to settle down quickly and get a steady income after I graduate."

".....If Takasu-kun really 'decides' to do that, then I'll do all that's in my power to help you. Right, would you like to work part-time after the term exams are over? It would be good to get an experience of working."

"Working part-time--You're right."

"But I'm thinking.....Takasu-kun, have you ever rebelled against your mother?"

".....What? Hmm? Rebelled?"

Ryuuji tilted his head to the side, unsure of what his class teacher had meant by that word. He thought that she would continue with an explanation, but--

"Takasu-kun, please think carefully about everything I've said, and about my last question."

But Koigakubo Yuri's attention had already turned towards the other problem student, Aisaka Taiga,

"Aisaka-san, what about you? What is your opinion regarding your future?"

".....After hearing Ryuuji talk about his financial problem, I really don't want to say this, but--"

Taiga gazed at Ryuuji's face and stopped talking for a moment before continuing in a low voice,



".....My family's so rich that I can afford to not work for the rest of my life, and as such, I don't really need to study. I don't have anything that I really want to do, and I will definitely inherit my parents' inheritance, so I probably live on that for the rest of my life.....That's why I have nothing to write."

"How could.....the two of you be like this....."

Koigakubo Yuri held her head in her hands, looking as though she wanted to bang her head on the table,

"You actually said that you don't have anything that you want to do.....that anything would be alright? What about your interest, your dream.....how about being a singer, or a mangaka, or a traveller. Right, how about a school teacher? Hoho! How about that? Eh? Not interested?"

Koigakubo Yuri exchanged glances with the pouting Taiga. Looks like Ryuuji wasn't the only one who was tired--and it looks like not only Ryuuji and Taiga were the tired ones. The three people in the room lapsed into a long silence that was only broken when Ryuuji finally decided to open his mouth,

".....Is it really strange to decide not to go to university?"

"Of course not!"

The single class teacher shook her head violently,

"It's not like that.....I only wish for the two of you to see yourself objectively, and to think for the 'you' in ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years later. I wish that the two of you understand that you will have to live as your choices dictate. You will have to take responsibility for your own actions and decisions."

"I understand that."

Ryuuji grabbed a pencil as he began to fill in the survey form. He requested to be posted to the 'science curriculum', and wrote down his post-graduation plan as 'start working'.

The only problem was that he hadn't gotten the approval of his mother--That shouldn't be much of a problem.

I will try my best to let Yasuko realize the reality of our situation, to repeatedly communicate with her. If she still doesn't want to face up to reality, then why should I continue to try to persuade her? As long as it's my own decision, my own actions, it'll be alright. Even though the class teacher says that it's not an easy path to start work, but Ryuuji felt that it was 'the only path'.

If that is not my 'decision', then what is? I don't have a place that I should go to, nor a place where I want to go to. Then in what direction should someone like me move towards?

I don't have any other choice but this. Since I've come to this decision, I will move in that direction.

"Yasuko.....My mother refuses to face up to the reality of our financial situation, and I intend to get her to understand it. She's been overexerting herself so that she'll be a good mother, so that I'll trust her.....I don't want her to continue like this. My goal is to stop her from overexerting herself."

Takasu Ryuujii, 2-C -- After filling in his name and class, Ryuujii handed the survey form to his class teacher. The pink lips of his class teacher moved slightly, as though she wanted to say something--".....I understand. I'll keep this form for you for the time being."

She placed the form in her file, Taiga watching her actions with shining eyes.

"Then, if you could find a way to take care of that counter. Aisaka-san should fill in the form too, you can go home after handing it in at the staff room."

Ryuujii turned towards the counter that the two of them broke. Ryuujii had no idea how to take care of that mess.

But Koigakugo Yuri left immediately after finishing her sentence, leaving Taiga and Ryuujii in the room. Ryuujii sighed deeply as he prepared to fix the counter. This is my own fault, no one else is responsible for this.

".....I'll fix this, you should fill in the form now."

"I'll help."

"Idiot, you'll just get in the way. Start now if you want to go home."

Taiga 'humph'ed in disapproval before returning to her seat,

"It's so stupid, talking about our future.....What can we change with a piece of paper.....You should just continue to be the mother's boy that you are. Work? You've got to be kidding me. You've never even worked part-time before....."

"This is something that I decided after thinking it through. I've never worked part-time because Yasuko doesn't allow me to.....You should think about your own situation."

Ryuujii decided to slot the middle panel of the counter back in it's place. Luckily it wasn't bent out of shape, so it would probably still fit. Ryuujii picked up the heavy metal panel and held his breath as he carefully slotted it back in it's place.

Taiga, who was unusually quiet, watched Ryuujii slot the middle panel back into the counter before she slowly bent over the table to fill in the survey form. Just as Ryuujii thought that she had finally decided to fill it in,

"Look!"

".....What are you trying to do! Hey! Don't do anything stupid!"

Taiga held a simple paper aeroplane in her right hand. Ryuujii couldn't stop her in time before Taiga stood up, stepping over the broken counter and opened the window,

"Fly--!"

"Ah!"

She threw the paper plane into the winter sky. The paper plane flew an entire round in the sky before dropping.

"You.....Idiot! What are you trying to do. Let's go! Let's go pick up the paper plane! How could you!:

"It's alright as long as we've taken care of the form."

Looking out of the window, Taiga acted as though she wasn't involved in anyway with the paper plane, and looked as though she had no intention of looking for it.

Ryuuji could even see the white mist that she breathed out,

"I don't need something like that.....What future? What hobby? Who knows! Can anyone see the future? You can't see the future either, so stop acting as though you understand everything! What do you want me to write? What do you want me to hope for? It's not like what I hope for will come true anyway. I'll only fall off a cliff and cause a panic if I were to try to work hard even though I'm unable to do anything.....The injury on my forehead made me see that clearly."

Ryuuji was unable to rebutt the angry words that Taiga threw at him. Nothing you wish for will ever come true--His sentiments were exactly like Taiga's.

"It's stupid to even think about it.....You ask me to stop saying such things anyway."

"I didn't say that."

Hearing Ryuuji's words, Taiga turned around.

".....I'm thinking the same thing."

Taiga looked at Ryuuji, who was nodding in agreement, as her eyes widened in surprise. Ryuuji continued,

"Although I don't want to say this, but we're really strange aren't we. I'm poor and you're rich--Even though we're polar opposites, the conclusion that we come to is the same."

".....Why? How? Aren't you intending to work?"

"If you ask me whether I really want to start work, I will not be able to answer a definite 'Yes'. Perhaps the single woman understood that, which is why she said those things to me. But this is my real situation, I have no other choice but to start work. This should be the 'right answer' shouldn't it? This should be my 'decision' right?"

Now that Ryuuji had voiced his own rationale out loud, he realised that it was an extremely irresponsible decision. No wonder his class teacher would feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps I'm preparing to blame everything on 'because I only had this choice!' when I fall down in the future.

"Because I thought that I was doing it for Yasuko, that's why it's the correct decision!"--To shirk responsibility in this way.

I think I've already prepared a path of escape even before I've begun to move forward. For Yasuko--Of course it is a real reason, but the problem is that I think of the 'correct decision' as the only decision, placing myself in the safest position. Everyone, including myself, the entire world will think, 'Takasu Ryuuji made the right decision' 'He's a good kid'.....I'm using the 'correct decision' that would bring about such sentiments as a cover.

In truth, Ryuuji understood that he merely lacked the courage--He lacked the courage to look straight into the terrifying empty hole in his heart, and also lacked the courage to face up to his sense of helplessness in not being able to move forward in any direction.

Of course, he didn't have the confidence that the ball he throws will end up anywhere. Although he was like this, but Ryuuji didn't hesitate for fear of the consequences of his actions, as he relinquished his future under the cold, wintry sky. This is Ryuuji.

"You must be thinking that I'm extremely useless right? You can start to scold me now, to scold me mercilessly, just like you usually do."

"You....."

Taiga didn't call him a dog, pig, insect or anything like that, as she merely looked down at her feet, saying in a low voice,

"If you're useless, then what am I.....?"

The palmtop tiger who shouldn't be afraid of anything in the world, now had no counter to sit on as she turned towards the window,

"You're still looking in front of you, thinking about solutions to your problems. But I.....I can't even look at the present."

Taiga was trying to follow the flight path of the paper plane with her eyes. The sky was darkening, enveloping the town in a wave of darkness, like waves in the ocean.

"I've always,al---ways, al-ways been denying myself. I've been thinking, why have I become like this? What should I do to change myself?"

There's only one solution--Taiga said,

"If my parents were normal parents.....If they lived together like a normal couple, if my family lived together in the apartment that I live in right now, how would everything turn out to be? What do you think?"

Taiga turned away from Ryuuji as she continued,

"A normal family of three lives beside you. We become classmates in April, in the normal way. If it were like this, what would happen?"

Taiga's repeated usage of the word 'normal' had Ryuuji confused. He then started to think--In April, he was really happy about being in the same class as Kushieda Minori, and at that time everyone still thought that he was a delinquent, and then he met Taiga.

".....You would probably still have put the love letter in my bag."

"Is that so? Perhaps you're right."

"And then you would come and take revenge in the middle of the night..... How could you be this kind of woman? Sigh, never mind. Anyway, you run over to my home, and we reach some sort of a compromise, after which you normally go home, normally.....right, if you had grown up in a normal family, then you wouldn't break into my house to take revenge. And then I wouldn't get to know you, and you wouldn't get to know me."

And perhaps, you wouldn't like me -- Of course he didn't say that out loud. Ryuuji thought as he attempted to hold the top panel of the counter in place with his knee. But Taiga-

".....Normal's still better for me."

"After finishing what she had to say, Taiga still had her back to Ryuuji.

"Ah, I've got it!"

Looking as though she had thought of a prank, Taiga shouted in an uncharacteristically cheerful voice,

"I have something I want to do! I want to have a normal love relationship!"

"Huh.....?"

"Bang!" The panel in Ryuuji's hands almost fell from its position.

Ryuuji quickly pushed it back into place, but was unable to stop his irregular breathing. What did she just say? A love relationship? Which is to say -- She wants to have a love relationship with me!?

His brain unable to withstand the impact of Taiga's words, Ryuuji lifted his head to look at Taiga warily. His stiff neck shaking due to embarrassment. Taiga, what are you trying to do? With what kind of expression are you saying such things to me? But....."To grow up in a very, very normal family, to become a normal good kid, to normally meet a certain someone, and then deepen each other's feelings, then normally.....I want to have a love relationship like normaly people! I want to fall in love with someone, and that the other person also falls in love with me, and then we'll be together. Just like this, just like this--"

But Taiga -- ".....Just like this, I'll be very happy. I want such a relationship."

Taiga didn't seem to have said that with a specific person in mind, a painful expression on her face. That expression's not right, is it? Ryuuji couldn't help but retort.

Why would she have such an expression on her face when she's together with Takasu Ryuuji, the person she likes -- With a sober look in her eyes, with slightly parted lips that breathed painfully, her eyebrows knitted together tightly--?

Why is it like this? Ryuuji suddenly realised that his nails were scratching the surface of the counter, giving out an uncomfortable noise. Ryuuji took his hand off the counter as he looked at Taiga's face before stiffening. He suddenly had a bad feeling about something, as though seeing a black shadow standing in front of him. Ryuuji immediately thought of the reason,

".....Are you getting along well with your mother?"

Would she be hurt again, or be lonely by her self--?

"Why do you ask?"

Ryuuji's hands were waving awkwardly in the air, 'What're you doing.....' Taiga swatted Ryuuji's hands away impatiently. He couldn't touch her, and there won't be any point even if he could touch.

Ryuuji merely wanted to know the truth. Her father is that kind of person, and since she says that she gets along well with her mother, then why does she have that kind of expression on her face?

As though she had nothing, even more so than the first time I met--

"We're getting along well, really well."

"Is that so?"

"We don't live together. So right now, it looks as though we get along better than Ya-chan and you."

".....I didn't quarrel with Yasuko."

Taiga raised her eyebrows and said, 'Is that so? That's good to hear.' before turning around to walk away.

"Hey, where're you going? What about the survey form....."

"I'm going home. Who cares about that form."

Taiga didn't look back as she walked out of the 'reprimand room'. "Bang!" The door closed loudly, leaving Ryuuji behind once again. The hand that he reached out had been rejected, and now Ryuuji was alone. He wanted to step on the snowfield that he saw in his dreams.

But he didn't have the courage to chase after Taiga.

The good student, Ryuuji must fix the counter before going to the staff room to report to the single woman (30) that Taiga had already gone home.

Ryuuji went back to his classroom to pack his stuff before going to the staff room with his bag. Technically, Taiga's going home wasn't any of his business, but Ryuuji still maintained a respectful manner.

'I'm sorry for disturbing you', Ryuuji said as he stepped into the staff room. As it was long past dismissal time, the teachers were all at their desks, either writing or chatting. The sounds of conversation coming from the interview room in the office were so loud that even Ryuuji, who was standing at the door, was able to hear it.

Koigakubo Yuri had a red pen in her hand, as she seemed to be marking test papers. Just as Ryuuji wanted to call out to her--

"Koigakubo sensei should talk to her too!"

The year director stuck his head out of the interview room called out to her first, and so Ryuuji could only take a step back and keep silent.

"Kawashima refuses to listen to me."

"Didn't she reject your request a while ago-?"

Oh! Ryuuji couldn't help but widen his pair of demonic eyes to destroy the staff room, igniting a revolution in the school! I'll be the teacher from today onwards! Of course that's not possible.

"Ah....."

Ryuuji was surprised to see Ami walking behind the year director and another teacher. Seeing Ryuuji, Ami opened her mouth a little, but didn't give her usual 'Ah, isn't that Takasu-kun?' in greeting.

"Alright, I think you should respect Kawashima-san's opinion.....Ah, Takasu-kun! Where's Aisaka-san!?"

"Ah--Umm, She ran away."

"Eh--!? Why!?"

"Even if you ask me.....I'm sorry, but I'm going home now."

"Sensei, can I go home as well-? I'm going home too."

"Ahhhh, the both of you, wait!"

The single class teacher looked at Ryuuji and Ami, and then glanced at the teacher who looked as though he had something to say to Ami, and said, while still holding her red pen,

"Ergh, Takasu-kun, just wait here for a moment! AS for Kawashima-san....."

Koigakubo sensei! A voice came from some other part of the staff room. The single woman (30) seemed especially popular today.

"Ah, I'm sorry, please wait for a moment. Yes!?"

"The syllabus supplier is here."

"Ah, right! Please get him to wait.....no, nothing, that's not good--"

The single woman (30) spun the red pen she held in her right hand, as she stammered. Ryuuji knew that Ami was looking at Koigakubo out of the corner of her eye--'Ah, Kawashima!' "Kawashima-san's running away!--before running towards the entrance of the staff room. Seizing the opportunity when all the teachers had their attention on Ami, Ryuuji followed closely behind her. 'Wait!' The single woman (30) shouted after him. Never! Ryuuji had no intention of dragging Taiga back to school either.

Ryuuji and Ami stopped running on the corridor. Although they didn't think that the teachers would chase after them, but they still jumped down the stairs hurriedly, rushing for the shoe cabinets as though they were in a race. Ryuuji felt as though he was an accomplice in the crime, so he helped to pick up the shoe that Ami accidentally dropped onto the ground, preparing to return it to her, but Ami's first words to him since the school trip was -- "What are you doing! You're so meddlesome! Could you please stop following me--"

"Huh, how have I been following you!"

"Hey, return that to me! What're you trying to do to my shoe!? You pervert!"

I'm really angry! Does she have to say such hurtful things? Ryuuji's mind went blank for a moment as he subconsciously threw the shoe in his hand forward with all his strength.

"Fly!"

* * *

Even now, Ryuuji still didn't understand why things became like this. It all started when Ami told Ryuuji that she wanted to 'break off' their friendship.

According to Ami, she disliked Ryuuji, and disliked herself, because both of them were idiots. And to Ami, the reason why Minori rejected Ryuuji was because of something she said.

Ami 'broke off' their friendship on the second day of their school trip, and it had continued to this day.

She openly avoided Ryuuji, and ignored him when avoidance wasn't possible. Ryuuji really wished for Ami to explain everything, and at least tell him why she was doing this, but had no opportunity to even ask her.

"You actually ignored me for so long."

"....."

"You've been treating Kushieda as a non-entity all this while too."

".....You have a problem with that?"

"It's really childish! Are you a middle schooler? No, that's the level of a primary school kid!"

"I'm sorry, but that's because I'm not as dense as you or Kushieda Minori."

"What are you talking about? What do you mean by dense?"

"Even though one rejected the other, and one got rejected by the other, the two of you could still act as though nothing happened and continue pretending to be friends. The two of you disgust me."

Ami's face was right beside his, the distance between the two of them so close that Ryuuji could feel her breath on his face. After her outburst, Ami deliberately shouted 'Wow! You threw it all the way to that kind of place.' in an attempt to cut off Ryuuji's retort.

Ryuuji held Ami's and his bags, the other holding Ami's elbow, supporting her as she hopped on one leg, even coming into close contact with her body that leaned into him, earning the wild admiration and widespread jealousy of the Ami-worshippers. But the real situation was that the two of the continued bickering while walking towards Ami's shoe.

The shoe that Ryuuji threw dropped in the midst of a group of guys. But unluckily, that group of guys belonged to the five-men soccer fans' club, and one of them, not knowing that it was the shoe of the school idol Ami, reflexively passed it around until someone shot Ami's poor shoe out of the sakura tree-lined path, bouncing on the roof of the bicycle park and out of the school compound.

"This is the worst! How can that happen! I can't believe it!"

".....I'm sorry. I'll go pick it up for you, just wait here."

Ryuuji let Ami sit on a bench near the park entrance as he went to pick up the shoe. Ami's shoe stood in the middle of a sand box like a Moai stone statue.

Ryuuji thought about his actions -- I went overboard. By living with the invincible palmtop tiger, he seemed to also have grown violent. Ryuuji patted the sand off Ami's shoe as he walked back to her.

".....What are you doing?"

Ryuuji's actions was a result of him worrying about the sand dirtying Ami's hand and uniform, but Ami didn't see it that way,

"Why do you keep staring at my shoe.....hmm, it can't be true? It can't be?"

"What?"

Ami seemed to have misunderstood something, as she attempted to snatch her shoe back from Ryuuji's hands,

".....Takasu-kun has a fetish for female shoes right? Yes yes yes, there're such people in the world, boots-fetish, high heel-fetish.....oh, so Takasu-kun likes school shoes.....Ah!"

"No! What is wrong with your brain?! Take it! Go dust the sand of yourself!"

"Huh? You're commanding me? Who do you think caused my shoe to be like this? And who do you think you are?"

".....Right, I'm sorry! It's all my fault!"

I'm really sorry! Ryuuji snatched Ami's shoe away from her as he grumbled loudly. He turned the shoe upside down and knocked it a few times, the sand caught inside the shoe dropping out onto the Ryuuji's shoes.

Although there were no children to be seen in the park at this time, but a few kids ran across the road. All of them carried the bag with the name of a famous remedial class as they walked towards the train station with a serious expression.

In the park named 'children's park', a beautiful long-haired high school girl wearing a dark blue overcoat sat on one of the benches, her socks showing on the foot that did not have a shoe on. Beside her stood a fierce-looking high school boy who was violently clearing a shoe of sand.

"Ah, right, today's the Twelfth of February.....The entrance exams for private middle schools should be ending soon."

Another one of those remedial class children ran past. Ami looked at them as she muttered to herself.

"How do you know so much about private middle school entrance exams?"

"I took it in the past."

".....That I really didn't know. So you graduated from a private middle school just like Taiga?"

"I didn't pass any one of the entrance exams that I went for, so I went to a public middle school."

.....Ryuuji didn't think that his question would lead to such an awkward situation. Ryuuji wanted to apologize, but Ami, who was already in a bad mood, merely ruffled her long hair as she said softly,

"It'll be Valentine's Day the day after tomorrow, are you looking forward to it?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with me."

Ryuuji answered before continuing to clear Ami's shoe of sand. Most Japanese guys would have had their naively high expectations of Valentine's Day shattered between primary five and the second year of middle school. One saying goes like this, 'Never trust a guy who looks forward to Valentine's Day'.

Ami suddenly smiled, her eyes glinting like a chihuahua who just found a new toy, as she looked up at Ryuuji,

"Oh-? Are you serious? Shouldn't you be looking forward to receiving chocolate from a certain someone, but it's hard to say isn't it, since that certain someone is the woman with the densest heart muscle in the world."

Ami's irritating words was completely out of point, so Ryuuji merely answered her question nonchalantly,

"The heart is made up of muscle. And speaking of which, why were you made to stay back after school?"

".....How is that any business of yours? I should be the one asking you why you're still in school at this hour right? Ah, did you have a nightmare and shout out loud in class again--? 'Taiga-!' I can't believe how stupid you can be. Just what were you dreaming about? I should think that Yuri sensei's really worried about you."

"What are you talking about? I only stayed back to talk about my future prospects..... And, just what is wrong with you today? You seem to be emotionally unstable. So much that you don't even know that the heart is made of muscle? I don't want to say this, but to do so badly for your middle school entrance exams..... Were you made to stay back because you're at the same level as Haruta?"

"What are you talking about! You have such a lousy disposition."

Ami glared at Ryuuji as she stuck out her slightly glossy lips (they had transparent lip gloss on them). The two of them were of similar height and so Ami's glare felt especially piercing. But to be labeled as having a 'lousy disposition' by Ami was really hurtful.

"They call me 'the kind and thoughtful Takasu' you know!"

"Who would call you that!? You're not kind and thoughtful to me at all!? And I'll tell you, I was made to stay back because they want me to model for our school's uniform for next year's brochure, but I rejected them!"

"So that's how it is. Why don't you just accept them? You're good at such things anyway."

"What do you mean by 'that's how it is'!? To me.....! I did accept in the beginning, but.....I don't want to do it anymore! Never!"

"Why?"

"Because I don't know how much longer I'll be staying in this school for."

"That kind of--"

That -- what?

Looking at Ami, Ryuuji could only open his mouth in shock. 'tsk!' Ami knitted her eyebrows together unhappily, her expression showing her displeasure at talking too much. Ryuuji forgot what he was about to ask as he stood there in shock. So she intends to leave this school.....?

Ryuuji suddenly thought of a scene from the past -- Ami was quarrelling with Minori during the school trip, and it got so bad that the two of them start shouting things they shouldn't be saying at each other. Ryuuji remembered every single word of what they shouted at each other.

".....Could it be because Kushieda told you to 'go back to your previous school'? You took her words seriously....."

"Of--- Course--- Not--- Ah, it's getting harder and harder to explain."

Ami shook her head irritably as she roughly lifted her shoeless foot onto the kneecap of her other leg as she bent down, seemingly buying time to arrange her own thoughts. Ami mimed the action of holding a box, and then placed the imaginary box beside her, but this action didn't seem to mean anything.

"It's not because of that--It has nothing to do with whatever that girl said to me. Ami-chan's life will never be disrupted by someone like Kushieda Minori."

"Then why do you want to leave the school?"

".....I've been thinking about it since a long time ago. Really, I've had this thought since a long time ago."

Ami spoke as she stretched out her hand towards Ryuuji, asking for her shoe. Ryuuji couldn't help but lift the shoe out of her reach. Looking at his determined expression, Ami could only sigh helplessly, and stopped asking for her shoe. Ryuuji even thought, 'Might as well let the shoe fly another time.'

"Takasu-kun"

"No."

"How could you--"

She'll leave once she gets her shoe back, so I'm not giving it back.

I won't let you run away and continue to ignore me before saying everything I want you to say!? I won't allow you to quit this school! And I won't allow you to leave me behind!

".....To be honest, I had decided to leave the school after the end of the first school term. That was what I had originally intended to do when I first transferred here. I had wanted to transfer back to my previous school after settling the stalker problem."

"Last term.....You didn't even mention anything like this. Don't tell me you were planning to disappear forever after coming back from your summer home?"

"That's right."

"You.....Kawashima!"

"But I decided to stay in the end. At that time, I thought to myself, why don't I just stay for a while longer. Either for tomorrow or for the foreseeable future, to just continue to stay with these people.....Maybe something will change, maybe I'll be able to change myself--I had thought to myself at that time."

At that time--Ryuuji thought back to the Ami during last year's summer. She was just like she is now, pretty, devious, with a lousy character. And--"But I regret having that kind of thoughts back then."

And right now, she was more.....How do I put it? Ryuuji couldn't understand his own thoughts, as he couldn't help but look away from Ami's pretty face.

Ami has changed. Ryuuji remember Minori saying that during their rehearsal for the school festival.

That's right, after that summer, Ami was much more friendlier with the people around her. Her relationship with Taiga was still an unknown factor, the two of them still bickering when they met, and their classmates also liked to watch them bicker. When everyone praised Ami's pretty girl image, they also subconsciously accepted her devious and vicious side. Everyone accepted her as a friend and happily passed each day noisily. Ryuuji felt that their classmates liked the 'real Ami'.

Ami's existence in class changed because she started to show the real side of herself. She stopped hiding and acting dumb, and started to interact with everyone in her real way.

This is how Ryuuji sees it, but--but Ami now denies those days, and that side of her, saying that she regrets doing what she did.

"So you're saying that you regret spending all these times with everyone.....That you regret making friends with Kihara, Kashii, Kitamura, Taiga, Kushieda, and me!?"

"I'm really grateful to Maya and Nanako, and everyone. I never thought that everyone would be so good to me. I've been through a lot in my primary, middle, and high school days, but this is my first time making friends. I had some good friends in my previous high school, but they were only normal friends. I don't know how they talked about me behind my back, and they never contacted me ever again after I transferred."

"Seriously....."

"Surprised?"

Ryuuji nodded in response to Ami's question. He had thought that a pretty girl like Ami would become the center of attention, the most popular person, no matter where she went, whether she wanted it or not.

"To me, school's merely a temporary stop, you'll only make fake social connections that are easily forgotten after you graduate. What I really care about is my job, the me that's a model, I think to myself, that I only need to endure school for a few more years -- How can someone like this make friends, then? Everyone understands that, no matter how childish they are. But after transferring here, I abandoned my previous way of thinking, and was accepted by everyone..... I'm really happy, really, really happy, and I hope that I'll be able to treasure these friendships."

"Since you think like this..... Then make an effort to treasure these friendships."

"It's too late, I've made too many mistakes."

Ami suddenly snatched her shoe back from Ryuuji, as she turned to sit sideways on the bench, her long hair falling over her shoulders,

".....How do I say this..... I may sound strange if I say this, but.....I saw how tiger was getting hurt, and understood her feelings, so I thought, 'Since no one else notices it, why don't I help her'..... That was how I felt back then."

Ryuuji couldn't help but stare at Ami in surprise. Kawashima did know everything.

"In this period of time, I saw other wounds and injuries, not just tiger's. These injuries were everywhere..... Yes, I had wanted to help everyone, to move everyone towards a positive direction. Like this, I'll be able to protect this place."

After putting on her shoe and pulling up her socks, Ami stood up from the bench, playing with her long hair as she looked at Ryuuji,

"But on the other hand, I also got hurt, but no one noticed. Why was I the only one? Why wasn't anybody thinking about me? Did anyone even notice my existence?"

It would be useless to tell Ami, "I'm sorry. Who hurt you? Tell me, we'll start from the beginning." right now. Ami wouldn't accept something like that, because it's impossible to start over.

"I wanted to protect this place that was willing to accept me, so I told myself to not think too much about it, but the injuries got bigger and bigger, until even I wasn't sure that I could stop it. As I grew increasingly desperate, I made bigger and bigger mistakes, which only made things worse..... Which led to the current situation."

"I am an outsider who only brings trouble."

Everyone was willing to accept me, but I botched it.

"It..... It's nothing like what you say!?"

Ryuuji jumped up and shouted at Ami,

"Has anyone said something like that!? Stop joking with me! You're the only one who thinks like that! If anyone else says something like that, I will never forgive that person!"

In that moment-- Just for that moment, Ami looked at Ryuuji, before furrowing her eyebrows, her face looking as though she was about to cry.

But in the end, she merely sniffed loudly in the freezing winter air.

"But..... That's the truth."

Regaining her composure, Ami didn't cry or get angry, as she merely answered in a collected tone,

"Things that would have gone smoothly didn't because of my intervention -- Ah, I have to do something about this; Ah, I should intervene here, I have to save everyone -- My meddling led to a lot of problems, and in the end..... a lot of things changed for the worse. Takasu-kun got rejected by Minori because of my intervention. I quarrelled with Minori, and now, we won't be able to go back to how we were. And furthermore, because of our quarrelling, Taiga.....Taiga almost died. Now that things have come to this.....I, right now--"

Ami's lips were clearly trembling as she spoke,

"--So lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely, so lonely that I can't take it anymore."



You idiot! Ryuuji had this insane urge to shout at Ami.

But the strength of his emotions overwhelmed him, preventing him from speaking. Ryuuji's shoulders were trembling as well, where should he start to talk about? How can he make Ami understand my feelings when I hear her say such things?

"You....."

Ryuuji suddenly thought of how Taiga looked a while ago. A lonely person regretting over something that cannot be changed, something that made Ryuuji see the similarities between her and himself.

Taiga and I..... Not just the two of us, everyone is similar in some way. Perhaps everyone is the same.

Unable to move forward smoothly, unable to understand other people, and unable to find someone who truly understands yourself.

".....Since you say that you failed, then how can you just abandon everything and run away! You turn away, whining about how lonely you are, what is this!? Do you think that the people you abandon won't be lonely!?"

We can't even reach a common understanding, only able to shout hollow words at each other. Even though we all knew that such injuries burn the brightest.

I would think that everyone's like this. Me, Ami, Taiga, Noto, Haruta, and also Kitamura, everyone would surely have had their own moments of helplessness, I think that even the energetic and optimistic Minori would have thought to herself at some point of time, 'If only.....', but this kind of pain was not for other people to see. Most people can only afford to care about their own injuries -- That is the truth.

"In your eyes, how many people are able to sail smoothly through life? Everyone has their own worries, everyone has done something that is uncalled for, everyone has experienced failure, embarrassment, everyone has stumbled through life to get to where they are now! So what if you failed! So what if you made a fool of yourself! A 'I messed up!' will be enough! Why do you have to be so--"

"And who do you think you are to lecture me like this!?"

Ryuuji was surprised by Ami's loud retort, and couldn't help but stumble a little.

"You've never noticed my worries and my injuries! You, you've never really looked at me before!"

"As if I have the time to notice you! How would I know what you're thinking! I'm not a perfect human being, so how can I cover all the bases!"

What age must a person live until to be able to refrain from saying such irresponsible words? How old must a person be to be able to understand other people, to think for other people, to accurately express their own opinion?

"Since it's like this, then don't say such irresponsible things! Someone like you.....I really wish I never met you.....!"

How long must it take to live without hurting the ones important to you? How long must it take to be able to live without getting hurt?

"If I had known this would happen, I should have quit this school last year!"

Ami shouted, her voice shaking uncontrollably as she ran off, wiping off her tears with the back of her hand. What good would it do to make her stay? Ryuuji had no ideas, and couldn't do anything. Ryuuji stared at Ami as she left the park, and then stepped off in the opposite direction.

When he finally took a look at his cellphone, he had ten missed calls.

Chapter 4

".....The landlord's still awake!?! How can that be possible!?"

"Haven't I told you not to care about it already. The landlord says he'll bring some plum essence over some other day."

Ryuuji, who just came up from the landlord's apartment downstairs, replied as he arranged the three pair of shoes that were strewn around in the hallway. The landlord, who always slept early, had stayed up to inform Ryuuji about Yasuko's condition. Luckily there were oranges in the apartment to use as a gift for the landlord.

Ryuuji walked into Yasuko's room immediately after arranging the shoes in the hallway. Yasuko smiled at her son, but her pale face looked like it had been bleached, while her face and lips lacked their usual healthy pink.

"The landlord's worried..... What will happen to the store-? I'll call....."

"No, No!"

Taiga, who was still wearing her uniform, stopped Yasuko from getting up and reaching for her cellphone. 'You have to lie down, or your blood pressure will drop again.' Taiga pressed her down by the shoulders as she pulled the blanket over Yasuko.

"I just called the store. The owner picked up."

Yasuko looked up at Ryuuji, who was standing at the door as she mumbled to herself, 'That's not good'; "Anyway, the owner wants you to rest well today. He says that he'll call again tomorrow afternoon."

".....He didn't say, 'I don't want to hire old women-?'"

"No, he didn't."

".....Did he say that Mirano's already an old woman, so he wants to look for younger and more energetic girls?"

"He didn't say anything like that, so stop letting your imagination run wild and sleep. Didn't the doctor also say that you'll recover in a night if you sleep well? I've prepared dinner, eat as much as you can."

".....Ya-chan wants to sleep."

Yasuko whined as she pulled the blanket over her head. Seeing her actions, Ryuuji switched off the light in Yasuko's room, while Taiga got up lightly and walked quietly out of the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

In the living room, Inko-chan, who probably had felt the moody atmosphere in the apartment as well, was hanging upside down from his perch like a bat, its veined eyelids only managing to cover half its eyelids. And then, it asked in a weird voice 'How?', but was silenced by a glare and a fierce 'shhh!' from

Taiga, and so Inko-chan could only nod it's head and shut up. This wasn't because it understood the language of humans, it was merely a coincidence brought on by fear.

".....I'm really sorry."

"It's alright."

Taiga coldly replied to Ryuuji as she sat down beside the table. The right-sided position facing the television had always been Taiga's place. But now, she sat there, looking at the tip of her toes, seeming to be unhappy about something.

Taiga, who had gone home earlier, had nonchalantly looked towards the window of the Takasu-apartment and had happened to see Yasuko, who had just gotten off work from the cake shop. Taiga waved at Yasuko from her bedroom window, but Yasuko didn't react to her actions, her face looking extremely pale. A second later, Yasuko fell backwards.

Taiga immediately ran towards the Takasu-apartment, only to realize that she had forgotten the spare key. According to Taiga, she was in such a panic that she 'almost went crazy', so she ran to the landlord's apartment on the first floor, banging on her door heavily. Luckily the landlord was at home, so she quickly opened the door to the Takasu apartment and immediately called for a doctor after seeing Yasuko collapsed on the floor.

Taiga stayed by Yasuko's side until the doctor came, while the landlord helped to contact Ryuuji. At that time, Ryuuji the stupid son was busy throwing the shoe of his female classmate, getting into an argument with said classmate in the park, bringing the girl to tears.

"Is Ya-chan going to be alright? She should be shouldn't she? The doctor says that it's just anemia."

"It'll be bad if she's doesn't recover."

"She looks better already."

"I think so too."

When Ryuuji finally made it home, running at full speed the entire way, he found the landlord waiting for him in the hallway. At that time Yasuko's pale face was extremely frightening, and she was unable to speak. The strange old guy and old lady whose hands were on her wrist and chest looked to Ryuuji as though Yasuko was going to be dissected. Those people weren't wearing lab coats, so Ryuuji didn't know that they were doctors. If Taiga wasn't sitting beside Yasuko, Ryuuji would have screamed in confusion.

Seeing that Ryuuji had returned, Yasuko mouthed, 'Sorry that it turned out like this.'

Yasuko, who had drank a lot of alcohol, had only slept for three hours before going to work at the cake shop with a hangover, not eating anything due to her lack of appetite, resulting in her anemia. Naturally low blood pressure was also one of the reasons, but fortunately, Yasuko's condition was not very

serious. As long as she eats and sleeps properly, and avoids consuming too much alcohol, there should be nothing to worry about -- The doctors left after saying those words.

Ryuuji listened to the doctors as he noticed 'that smell'. 'That smell' seemed to consist of brown-coloured food that was cut into small pieces so that old people would have an easier time swallowing them, together with the smell of disinfectant, making Ryuuji slightly uncomfortable.

When Ryuuji was younger, before he moved to this town, there was long period of time when Yasuko kept going to the doctor. Even now, Ryuuji still didn't know what sickness Yasuko had at that time. Because he was young, the only memories were of that smell that burst into his nostrils when the automatic door slid open, and the pattern on the ceiling of the children's area in the hospital, together with the pictures of a mother hen and her chicks on the wall -- Ryuuji remembered how he felt when he was soaked in that smell, looking at the children's area.

The picture books whose content he could already memorize; The ceiling light which flickered and was darkened at the sides; the hair and dust in the corners of the walls; the pail that was placed beside the toilet that he didn't know what it was used for; the brand of that pail; the silent and lonely stairs to downstairs; there was a metal door with a horrifying sign on it.

I hated being bored, hated being together with adults and children whom I did not know, I hated it when other people talked to me, my heart beating furiously, my throat burning, making me feel like crying -- I must have been extremely insecure.

At that time, Ryuuji was an insecure, scared, and timid child.

Even now, that feeling of helplessness still had not changed.

"Dinner..... What should we do about that? There's nothing at home..... I'll go buy something before Yasuko wakes up so that she'll have something to eat."

"Then I'll stay and watch Ya-chan."

"It's alright, you should be tired too, so you can just go back first. I'll send dinner over to your place later."

Yasuko had mentioned that her stomach was uncomfortable, so should he make porridge or soup? Harusa soup sounds good, and then I should buy a bottle of Pocari, Yasuko's favourite pudding, ice-cream, almond tofu, and also a magazine for her to read tomorrow.

--That should be about it.

Although Ryuuji had the knowledge to choose the things that Yasuko needed, but was still unable to do the more important thing that he had to do. Though Ryuuji had grown up, had become wiser, but had still caused this current situation.

If Yasuko hadn't gone to work during the day, this wouldn't have happened. If she hadn't intended to let Ryuuji continue his studies, this wouldn't have happened. If he hadn't said something like that at that time, this wouldn't have happened.

"I'm fine, Ya-chan's more important. I'm also very worried..... Ryuuji?"

Ryuuji clutched his head, forgetting what he was about to do for a moment as his mind went blank.....Wallet. Right, wallet.

Ryuuji grabbed his wallet. I'm going to buy things, to buy food. He walked out slowly.

"Hey, are you alright? Hey!"

Switching on the light in the living room, Ryuuji listened for movement on the other side of the door, hearing Yasuko's steady breathing on the other side of the door.

"Hey, Ryuuji."

"I'm going out for a while."

Ryuuji walked out of the hallway and down the stairs in his slippers.

He only realized now that everything was dark around him; it was already night time.

The streetlamps cast circular areas of light on the asphalt road that was glittering from the reflection of small pieces of glass on the road. A woman breathing out white streams of air walked past Ryuuji with her dog. A white-collar worker wearing a face mask while talking loudly also overtook Ryuuji -- He wasn't talking to himself, but talking on the phone.

Hah -- The white mist that he breathed out refused to disappear as it started floating up in the cold air. Ryuuji moved his legs, feeling as though he was chasing after his own breath.

No wonder his vision was blurred.

He didn't even hear the footsteps behind him.

"Hey, you're not going to wear a coat!? You even forgot your keys and cellphone! And your shopping bag!"

".....Ah.....Eh?"

The sudden impact almost threw Ryuuji off his feet.

Taiga had rammed into him from behind. Ryuuji turned to see Taiga breathing out a constant stream of white mist like an out-of-control train.

"Get a hold of yourself! Pig-head!"

Ryuuji only noticed how he was dressed when Taiga passed him his eiderdown coat. He was only left with his school shirt and pants on him and was only wearing a pair of slippers, having already taken off

his school blazer and sweater. Looking down at himself, Ryuuji was shocked at the degree of his mindlessness.

"Seriously--Put it on this moment!"

Taiga stuffed the coat to Ryuuji while holding Ryuuji's shopping bag, which probably contained his cellphone and house keys. Taiga had realized that Ryuuji wasn't behaving normally, and so had grabbed his things and chased after him in the chilly night.

But Taiga, whose nose was extremely red--

"What.....What's with your feet?"

"Huh.....? Kya!"

Taiga, who wasn't wearing a coat, only had her school uniform on, her stockinged feet in a pair of Yasuko's sandals. Taiga looked down at her petite feet.

"I wore the wrong pair!"

Muttering softly, Taiga rubbed her forehead with her small hand.

"You should wear this."

Ryuuji took the coat from Taiga and attempted to place it over her shoulders. But Taiga twisted her body reluctantly,

"No! It's alright! I'm going home, so you should wear it!"

Taiga dodged to the side of the road, her sandals making loud noises as she moved. No, you wear it! Ryuuji wanted to reply, but was unable to speak, as he merely stood there, clutching the coat in his hands.

He couldn't speak.

His throat was dry.

Every thing has been a mess today.

".....Ryuuji?"

Ryuuji knew that Taiga was looking at him with widened eyes, her long hair dancing in the freezing northern wind.

You should wear it and go home. I'll help you prepare dinner. Thanks for helping me take the shopping bag -- Ryuuji couldn't even say those simple sentences.

Ryuuji felt as though a foreign object was lodged in his throat. He forcibly placed the coat onto Taiga's shoulders before walking away without saying anything.

Ryuuji walked on the darkened road alone, his shopping bag in one hand.

What should I buy? Looking at the time on his cellphone, it was only eight o'clock, much earlier than he had expected. The supermarket is still open at this time. Ryuuji moved towards the shopping district, staring at his almost-frozen toes as he walked, the only sound being the clanking of a certain someone's sandals.

Ryuuji didn't need to turn back to know that it was the sound of Taiga's footsteps. Taiga was secretly following behind him.

She can't possibly be thinking that no one will notice? Ryuuji stopped in front of a road junction, Taiga immediately jumping behind a nearby electric pole to hide herself. When the traffic light turned green, Ryuuji started walking again, and heard the sound of Taiga's footsteps soon after.

I know you're there, so go back! Ryuuji wanted to say that to Taiga, but not just his throat that made him extremely uncomfortable, as he felt a tightness in his chest as well.

Ryuuji, who was walking in front, and Taiga, the spy -- Two foolish people feigning ignorance as they continued to walk on the darkened streets. That he didn't open his mouth was mainly due to the fact that Ryuuji didn't know what he would say if he was to open his mouth, which was why he was unable to speak.

You've never really looked at me before -- Ryuuji suddenly remembered what Ami had shouted at him in the evening. He wanted to tell her right now, 'And would you know about how I'm feeling right now? You'll never know how I'm feeling, wouldn't you?'

Because I will never tell you.

When I'm in pain, I will never tell anyone about it. Because I don't want anyone to see me like this, I don't wish for anyone to understand this side of me, I don't want to tell anyone, I don't want anyone to notice this. Because if someone notices, if someone hears about this--

".....Achoo!"

--And the person who really cares will surely try to do something about it.

Ryuuji stopped and turned around, finally able to speak. 'Go back'. Taiga looked shocked, as she rubbed her nose with her eyes widened in surprise. Looks like she really didn't think that anyone would notice her.

"I'm serious, go back."

".....I don't want to!"

Ryuuji repeated those two words, even pushing Taiga back by the shoulders. Despite Taiga's small frame, she didn't budge, not even a little,

"I'm not going back! You're not yourself right now!"

Taiga's eyes narrowed as she shot a threatening look at Ryuuji, showing just how stubborn she was.

"Enough, go back!"

"I've already said that I'm not going back! I won't talk to you! I won't even walk together with you! I'll only follow behind you! Why can't I even do that! I'm free to do whatever I want to!"

Ryuuji didn't want to continue arguing with her,

"I'll feel disturbed if you do that! You can't do anything to help, so just go back!"

Ryuuji didn't wish for anyone to collapse because of him anymore. It didn't matter if it was anemia or any other sickness, he just didn't want to go through something like that ever again.

He never wanted to let anyone sacrifice for his sake ever again.

"I'm not going back! I want to follow you!"

"And I'm telling you to go back!"

"I want to stay here! Let go of me, you bald pig! Don't touch me!"

Ryuuji and Taiga started a mindless struggle on the road just before the shopping street. Taiga pushed Ryuuji tigerishly, while Ryuuji pushed back at her shoulders forcefully, biting hard into his lip at the same time. Busybody, annoyance, irritation, self-centred -- A long string of complaints surfaced in his head, but Ryuuji was unable to force them out of his mouth. Ryuuji was fighting a losing battle against the impending scream that was trying to push itself out from his throat.

--What if she dies!? This foolish and childish notion invaded his heart. Ryuuji was so afraid to even think about it that he felt as though he was about to lose control of himself any moment, which is why he bit his lip until the skin broke.

Ever since Ryuuji was a child, he had always been afraid of something like this. 'What if my mother dies?' This thought was the root of his fear.

The evening that the two of them walked while holding hands, the night that they two of them spent reading picture books, sitting on his mother's lap while she sat on the swing under the sun -- Ryuuji had always believed in the magic spell that was 'Don't worry', but the spell was suddenly broken. Such scary thoughts dominated his mind.

"Enough, you better go back!"

"Ryuuji!"

Ryuuji threw Taiga's hands off him, and ran from her with all his strength, ignoring her shout.

Ryuuji looked as though he was trying to escape the crowded, brightly-lit shopping street as he ran into the darker alleys, running aimlessly around the houses that looked like dark waves from school. Ryuuji was panting like a dog as he swallowed the voice that had pushed itself up his throat painfully. But no matter how he ran, the trepidation and fear of his childhood followed closely behind him. If this continued, he will surely be caught by those feelings.

Is it impossible to escape?

From the very beginning, Ryuuji's world consisted solely of Yasuko. Yasuko, who became a mother at too young an age, left the safety of her boat to float aimlessly by herself in the darkened sea. Ryuuji held on to Yasuko with all his strength, trying to look for salvation in the never-ending waves that life threw at them. If he let go, then it will all be over. If the person that this pair of hands is holding on to isn't here anymore, then everything will end. I'll be alone for the rest of my life. Everytime he thought about that, Ryuuji would always be extremely afraid.

But as Ryuuji grew up, he slowly gained confidence and strength after almost drowning a couple of times, feeling that it will be alright even if he let go of Yasuko's hand. He will swim away, find a safe boat by his own ability, and then pull Yasuko aboard.

Ryuuji had thought that way.

Which is why, when his mother felt that 'It's not time for you to leave.' and reached out to him -- "Takasu-kun, have you ever rebelled against your mother" -- Ryuuji wanted to push Yasuko away.

'Sit here', 'Be good', 'Wait for me to come back', 'Go study', 'Let's eat together', 'You're not allowed to work part-time' -- Ryuuji, who had always done what Yasuko told him to do, had wanted to disobey her for the first time, and that was to give up on university and start work instead. Because he wanted to let go of Yasuko's hand.

Ryuuji didn't know where he should go, but he wanted to try to swim by himself, he wanted to stand on the 'correct' side so as to win over the 'incorrect' Yasuko. He wanted to stand on an advantageous position, even though he knew that he was making an irresponsible choice, even though he knew that he hadn't seriously thought about his future, but just because he knew that he was 'correct' -- He was also mentally prepared to sacrifice for his own notion of 'correctness'.

In Ryuuji's eyes, going straight to work after graduating from high school wasn't exactly a sacrifice. Since he didn't have any specific goals, Ryuuji had used the difference between 'correctness' and 'incorrectness' as a basis for making his choice -- This was the sacrifice. To choose his future path in this way meant that Ryuuji would sacrifice his future, be it going to university, going to work, or going overseas to study.

He was afraid of not being able to meet his own expectations, which was why he had attempted to escape by moving closer to the 'correct' path. But Ryuuji was unable to deny that he was merely running away from his own insecurity, and the his future would be destroyed because of this.

He had also realised that he would hurt Yasuko by doing this, but he wanted to overtake that irreplaceable mother of his. He wanted to become stronger than his mother, even at the cost of losing her.

Ryuuji had thought that as long as he rebelled against and overtook his mother, then he would be able to overcome his fear of 'everything will end if I lose my mother'.

Did he really have the strength to swim alone? Ryuuji didn't know. But precisely because he didn't know, Ryuuji wanted to try. In other words, Ryuuji wanted to push the adults who attempted to intervene because they were worried, even if he sacrificed himself in the process. Perhaps he just wanted to do that.

It was because Ryuuji was unable to convince the adults to be completely trust him that Yasuko would try to prevent her son from leaving her. Which led to Ryuuji enveloping himself in the familiar bubble of fear and insecurity once again.

But this time, he wasn't worried that the freezing ocean would take his mother away, but that his inadequate swimming skills would only drag his mother down to drown together with him.

The finger that Ryuuji pressed onto his lips was trembling, and not just because of the cold.

"Got, Got you--!"

Ryuuji stumbled because someone grabbed his elbow from behind. He didn't think that the sandal-wearing Taiga would be able to catch up, as she pulled at Ryuuji's hand with horrifying strength, turning him around. Ryuuji made use of Taiga's strength to take a big step forward.

"Ryuuji! Stop, I'm telling you to stop!"

"My--"

"It's enough, stop, you pig-head! It's really dangerous! Didn't you realize that you were almost hit by a car!?"

Even then, Ryuuji still wanted to run away, something that only earned him a kick in the butt from Taiga. Although it wasn't painful, but it stopped him from trying to run.

"It's my fault.....It's all my fault isn't it?"

Ryuuji hugged a nearby electric pole pathetically, as he groaned soundlessly, 'let me go'. He wiped his face with the hand that was wrapped tightly around the electric pole, wanting to hide his face from Taiga.

"What are you talking about!?"

"It's my fault that Yasuko fainted. It's all my fault."

"You..... Are you trying to take responsibility for Ya-chan overexerting herself? But, but you couldn't have done anything about it! Ya-chan fainted because she had anemia, that's a body condition. No matter how careful a person is, there'll still be times when he or she will fall sick! What has this got to do with who caused it, and whose fault it is!? And Ya-chan is your mother, so no one can stop Ya-chan from working hard for you!"

Although she sounded winded, Taiga still continued to speak. Her parents had never worked hard for Taiga's sake before, which was why her words were too gullible with regards to the feelings of parents.

Taiga was implying that Ryuuji 'honestly accept', which only served to confuse Ryuuji further, as he was forced to look directly at his weakness and naivety.

"You don't understand anything!"

A sharp voice was issued from Ryuuji's trembling lips,

"Yasuko became like this because of me. If I were able to be more reliable, then Yasuko would believe that I am able to do whatever I proposed to do, and rely on me more, which means that she wouldn't become like this!"

"I..... How would I know about that....."

Taiga could only put her petite hand onto Ryuuji's shoulder, lightly rubbing his back.

Ryuuji wanted to throw off that hand.

Just like how he threw off Yasuko's hand, Ryuuji wanted to shake himself free from Taiga's hand --

"What should I do.....!?"

"Ryuuji--"

The moment of contact converted the warmth of Taiga's hand into a thunderbolt that shot straight into Ryuuji's ice-cold fingers. Taiga was still standing by Ryuuji's side. Ryuuji instinctively felt that this was his last chance at salvation, as all the figments of his imagination was burned up by the warmth of Taiga's fingers.

Ryuuji's instinctive reaction was to tightly hold on to the very hand that he had wanted to throw off a moment ago. Under the bright light of the streetlamps, Taiga's eyes widened in surprise.

She didn't say anything, as Taiga merely looked at Ryuuji with eyes that seemed to hold an inordinate amount of light, using her gaze to disrupt all the thoughts that were interfering with his heart. Taiga intervened with a strong force that others would never be able to muster, as she sliced open the ocean of Ryuuji's wild imagination with irrepressible might. Taiga's snowy-white face, saw through every one of Ryuuji's thoughts. From the opening that she cut open, Taiga offered her hand to Ryuuji, who was being beaten by countless waves. Grab hold of my hand -- "What should I do!? Just because they're parents, they think that they don't have to listen to the advice of others!? What should I do to convince Yasuko to stop pushing herself for me, to let her know of my feelings!?"

Taiga's hand felt extremely small.

"I really dislike--"

So small that it seemed as though he could crush her hand if he wanted to.

"This side of myself....."

But Ryuuji didn't wish to do something like that.

He didn't want to rely on Taiga, as he struggled to resist the temptation to tell her everything, to obtain the salvation he so desired from that hand. Because if he gave in to temptation, Taiga will surely want to do something for Ryuuji. Taiga would do anything for other people, for Ryuuji, for the person she likes. No, that cannot happen.

I cannot let her take action because of me.

I cannot drag Taiga into this.

I cannot let her drown because of me.

Because she's an important person, because she's an irreplaceable person, because I cannot be without Taiga. I understood that from the snowstorm.

Since she's important, then I should treasure her presence, and not let her sacrifice for my sake. Which is why I cannot let her see my pain, and why I don't wish for her to see through what I'm thinking.

The inability to understand each other will only make people feel pain. In a world where people are unable to understand each other, one has to look for ways to connect with other people, a process that is the joy of life. Who would have thought that there were people who didn't wish to be understood by others.

".....I want Yasuko to see my strength."

Strength? Hearing Taiga repeat after him, Ryuuji nodded his head vigorously, and continued with his lips trembling,

"I'm not a child anymore. Even if Yasuko isn't here to help me, I will be able to survive in this world. That is why Yasuko won't need to push herself for my sake. I want to show her cold, hard evidence of this. If I were to do that, I can only push her hand away once again. I will not fail this time, I will not let anyone drown or sacrifice for my sake, so I will swim out by myself. This is the only way I can be recognized."

Ryuuji reluctantly pried his fingers away from Taiga's small hand, and nodded lightly, 'Alright!'

It will be alright.

I will be able to do what I want to do.

Ryuuji then held his breath as he looked down at Taiga's snowy-white face -- Taiga was looking at her freed hand. Her doll-like features was too immaculate to deduce her exact expression. Taiga's soft fringe danced lightly in the biting winter air, as Ryuuji stretched out his hand to gently push away the hair that had gotten onto her lips.

Taiga silently looked up into Ryuuji's eyes, her gaze lucent,

".....Where are you going?"

"I just thought of something I have to do."

"I won't allow you to go."

Taiga shook her head as she spoke, her voice filled with uneasiness.

"Don't worry. I'll be going now."

Ryuuji took a step with his right foot forward.

Taiga continued to follow behind the under-dressed Ryuuji. Even if he asked her to go back, she definitely wouldn't listen.

It wasn't a lie -- That Ryuuji had suddenly thought of a place that he had to go. Ryuuji walked towards the crowded shopping street while paying attention to Taiga's presence behind him.

The imported goods department store and the stationery shop were already closed, but a small supermarket was still open, the road outside it's entrance crowded with office workers returning home. The convenience store was obviously still brightly-lit. The bookshop was still open, as were a few pubs, and the meat stall that was famous for its croquettes. Who would have thought that the meat stall would still be open at this hour?

But Ryuuji was going for the croquettes.

".....Just as I had expected. They're already closed....."

"You have something to do at this shop?"

Ryuuji stopped in front of the metal door. Albus - An ancient-sounding name jumped into his vision, the wooden call-plate stating that it was a western pastry shop, with a phone number written below.

Ryuuji punched the number into his cellphone and got to the answering machine asking him to leave a message after a few rings. He quickly spoke,

".....I, I'm really sorry for calling at such a late hour. Umm, I'm the family of Takasu Yasuko, a part-timer at your shop. That is.....I have something to tell you.....Ah!"

Click -- The answering machine cut off the recording abruptly. I have to tell them my number, should I call them again? Just as Ryuuji was hesitating, Taiga poked his arm lightly,

"What's with the 'Ah!'? Was that the answering machine? Your 'Ah!' must have been recorded as well. Is this the shop that Ya-chan's working at?"

Just as Ryuuji prepared to answer Taiga's question, the metal door was pulled up noisily. Within the brightly-lit shop, a middle-aged man wearing a white chef's uniform bent down as he looked at Ryuuji and Taiga,

".....Were you the one who just called? I heard your voice from inside the shop."

"Ah, yes. Umm.....I'm Takasu Yasuko's son."

So, Son!? The uncle shouted in surprise as he walked out from the shop.

"I'm really sorry for disturbing you at this hour. The truth is, my mother just fell sick--"

"Hmm? Takasu-san? What's wrong? Will she be alright?"

"Her condition has stabilized, but--"

Ryuuji knew that beside him, Taiga's eyebrow had twitched a little; she seemed to have realised what Ryuuji was about to say.

"I'm very grateful that you were willing to hire her. I know it's extremely inconvenient to say this, but I would like to request for you to allow her to resign from her position here."

What--!? The exact same expression and voice as a few moments ago, this overreacting middle-aged uncle should be the owner. Taiga looked at Ryuuji out of the corner of her eyes.

Yes, Ryuuji was taking matters into his own hands. Yasuko had called Bishamontengoku to take leave, but she had not contacted the pastry shop, which implied that she was planning to go to work tomorrow. Although Ryuuji understood that his actions will be troublesome for the pastry shop, but he still went ahead to quit Yasuko's job for her without her consent. And furthermore, he was planning to hide it from Yasuko by telling her that he had received notification from the pastry shop, saying that she needn't report to work anymore.

The pastry shop was close to Ryuuji's apartment, which meant that the lie would eventually be found out, but he didn't care about that anymore. Even though Ryuuji knew that doing something like this won't exhibit his strength in any way, but he would still do it, as long as it stopped Yasuko from pushing herself. If he left her like this, Yasuko would surely ignore her own health and continue to work longer hours.

"Ah--I see..... This is troublesome, I was quite happy with her performance."

"I'm really sorry for troubling you like this."

"I guess I can't do anything about it, since Takasu-san is in bad health. But still..... Would it be possible to work around this problem? Such as shortening her working hours and such?"

"No, umm.....I'm really very sorry."

"But it'll be Valentines Day the day after tomorrow, so we'll be having a special chocolate sale tomorrow..... What should I do? Hmm -- There aren't any other part-timers at this store....."

Just as Ryuuji was preparing to bow in apology once again --

".....Could you stand in for her?"

Looks like the owner was really desperate for him to say something like that.

"You're a high school student aren't you? It'll be good if you could come after school. Oh, and you only need to come and help for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. I'm begging you, we're really short-handed right now."

I'm sorry, but my mother prohibits me from working part-time -- Ryuuji had wanted to reject the owner's request, but then swallowed his words. Haven't I already decided to not live under Yasuko's wing?

Ryuuji quickly nodded his head before the owner had a chance to change his mind, looking to disperse his own doubts,

".....Alright, I'll come tomorrow and the day after tomorrow then."

Taiga looked at him in surprised. But this would also be good, because Yasuko wouldn't need to work here anymore. It was impertinent that everything return to normal as soon as possible.

If Ryuuji were to tell Yasuko that he was going to work part-time, she will surely attempt to stop him, so he planned to just tell her that the owner fired her. Yasuko will eventually find out that Ryuuji had worked here, but Ryuuji's top priority right now was to hide this from her during this period.

"Ah! That's great! You're really doing me a huge favour!"

"It's nothing, I....."

"When can you come over tomorrow!?"

Seeing that the owner had extended his hand, Ryuuji prepared to shake it, but only grasped thin air. 'Me!?' The owner had grabbed hold of Taiga's hand.

"This has got nothing to do with me has it!?"

"You're the younger sister aren't you? Of course not!"

Hahahaha. The uncle's cold joke echoed emptily in the winter air. "Isn't it obvious by just looking at our faces!?" Taiga retorted loudly.

"But it's always better to have a girl selling chocolates. And anyway, we don't have uniforms for guys."

"I'm unable to work! I'm really clumsy..... So I really start work, I may destroy the world.....!"

"It won't be very hard, you just have to sell boxed chocolates! Tell me when you'll be coming over tomorrow!"

Umm..... What about, me.....? Ryuuji pointed at himself, but the owner only had eyes for Taiga. Taiga, who was shaking her head intensely, looked over at Ryuuji --

"..... Then..... Then, he'll come with me. Together."

"Hey, wait a minute! Would that be alright!?"

Ryuuji jumped at Taiga's suggestion as he looked down at the Taiga's snowy-white complexion. The owner nodded, scratching his chin,

"Hmm, then it's decided. But I'm only paying one person's salary you know? And what should we do about your uniform?"

"We'll think of something. I'm only here to show my face, this fellow's the one who'll really be working."

Clad in Ryuuji's eiderdown coat, Taiga puffed out her chest and pointed at Ryuuji. It's alright, you don't have to do this. Just as Ryuuji wanted to say that, Taiga whispered to him,

"You're the one who'll be working. I'll only be standing there with you, so it shouldn't be too tiring. You're still a little dangerous right now, so I need to be watching you. And what did you just say? That I'm an annoyance? That I can't do anything? I'll make you eat your words. You just need to crawl over on your knees and worship my godly kindness."

And the secret part-time job that will last for two days was decided just like that.

* * *

"Work part-time! You!?"

Minori pointed her finger at the tip of Taiga's nose, her eyeballs looking as though they were going to pop out any moment.

"To be accurate, Ryuuji's working part-time."

Taiga pointed her finger at Ryuuji. 'So it's him!' Minori nodded at Ryuuji, her eyeballs almost popping out again.

"We'll be selling Valentine's Day chocolates today and tomorrow after school. Any tips for selling things? The owner said that if we're able to sell everything, he'll give us a bonus."

"Tips you say..... Hmm -- even if you're met with something you really don't like, you must never let it show on your face."

Hmm. Taiga listened to Minori's suggestions as she tugged at the duffel bag that she had slung over one shoulder.

"You're really heavy."

Minori tugged her bag away from Taiga's hands,

"And most importantly, dodge when the owner opens his eyes."

".....That kind of thing will only happen at the ramen shop where Minorin works."

The day's lessons had ended, and the homeroom had also ended. The single woman (30) had dragged Taiga off during lunchbreak for a lecture, but there didn't seem to be any visible effect. Taiga had completely ignored the words of her class teacher, but luckily, it looked as though the single woman had let her off for the day, which meant that Taiga would be able to make it to work.

Minori happily looked at the two of them,

"I'll stop joking around. But if it's only selling things, then there shouldn't be much to worry about."

I'll throw -- Minori made use of her ridiculously high athleticism to throw her can of juice at the rubbish bin at the entrance of the class from the middle of the classroom.

Swish.

"Good shot! It doesn't seem to be some suspicious job, so it should be alright. And speaking of selling Valentine's Day chocolates, today should be the busier of the two days, shouldn't it? Most people would probably buy the chocolate today. Where's the shop that the two of you are working at?"

"Gah -- I forgot hte name."

"Albus."

Minori 'Oh!'-ed in reply to Ryuuji's reply, looking as though she knew about the store.

"I've bought apple tarts from that store before! So Takasu-kun is going to be part of the background at that trendy pastry shop."

".....I know that I'll look out of place."

"Ryuuji's the one who'll be working, but the owner had wanted to reject him because he didn't think that he would be suited for the job. Ryuuji'll be pitiful if that happened, so I'm going with him."

Taiga told Minori matter-of-factly.

"Isn't that really good?"

Minori slung her duffel bag over her shoulder as she smiled and looked at the clock on the wall. Looks like it's time for her club activities, as Minori thrust her finger at Ryuuji's face,

"Very good! I'll be rooting for you, Takasu Ryuuji! Work hard for the first part-time job in your life! Attack!"

"Oh..... What was that?"

Blood-red Poison Needle! Minori nonchalantly flicked her fingers a few times before walking out of the classroom.

After resting for one night, Yasuko's condition had improved greatly. Ryuuji had made her promise not to drink too much alcohol in exchange for letting her go to work at Bishamontengoku. Ryuuji would rather Yasuko stay at home to rest, but he thought that the regulars at Bishamontengoku would probably have more sense than Yasuko herself. And Ryuuji had also lied to her, 'I have a test coming up the day after tomorrow, so I'll be studying at the family restaurant with Taiga and Kitamura today and tomorrow.' Yasuko had believed him.

Other than that, there was another lie that he told. Ryuuji told Yasuko that after she fell asleep last night, he had received a call from Albus, saying that she needn't report for work anymore. Although there a dejected expression flashed across her face for a moment, Yasuko still believed Ryuuji, as she lifted her face to smile at him, 'This often happens; Ya-chan will work harder to find another job', and

patted Ryuuji on the head as though she was comforting a little kid. Although Ryuuji loved his mother a lot, that action still made him uncomfortable, even though he wasn't able to dodge it.

Because the guilt that came with the telling of a lie was much heavier than he had thought.

"There are only two prices, the big box is 580 yen including tax, you just have to press the yellow button on the cashier machine. The small box is 380 yen including tax, you just have to press the blue button. Then you just need to press the 'total' button after keying in the amount of money you receive."

Ding--! The cash drawer opened with a familiar sound, hitting Taiga squarely in the stomach, making her grunt in surprise.

"Then you'll put the products into a plastic or paper bag. Do you understand? There shouldn't be any problems right?"

"Yes, I think I should be alright."

Ryuuji stood in front of the cash register spiritedly. To let Ryuuji practice, the owner stood in front of the cart and said in an disgustingly exaggerated voice, 'Please give me one of this.', while handing over the bigger box and a thousand yen note. Ryuuji immediately pressed the yellow button, keyed in 1000, and totaled the amount, opening the teller. Ryuuji took out the amount of change that was shown on the cashier machine,

"Thank you very much!"

Smile!

"Argh! I think we better.....leave this to Aisaka-san!"

"Thank you very much!"

Responding to the owner's summons, Taiga turned and gave an exaggerated smile, showing that she was merely standing there not doing anything. But the owner still nodded his head, 'You should stand closer a little.' and positioned Taiga in front of Ryuuji, obviously trying to block Ryuuji. What does he mean by this?

"Please work hard! There won't be any breaks because the two of you won't be working for very long, please take your toilet breaks at your own discretion.

After finishing what he had to say, the owner went back into the store. Throngs of people walked to and fro in front of Ryuuji and Taiga. The enticingly-boxed chocolates and the cash register were placed on a push cart that was positioned by the shop entrance.

The winter sky began to darken. It wasn't the time where most people came out to do their shopping, so the shopping street was filled with high school students returning home from school, who noisily said to each other while pointing at the cart, 'Ah they're selling chocolate!' 'Tomorrow's Valentine's Day!' before walking off.



It was good that Ryuuji and Taiga were standing on top of a heater so that they weren't freezing --
"There's more chocolates than I thought there would be.....Can we really sell all of them?"

Taiga stood below the Valentine's Day decorations of the pastry shop as she inclined her head slightly, looking at the contents of the cart. The boxed chocolates were heaped into a small mountain, with two more boxes below the cart.

"Speaking of which, don't you think that I look suspiciously like a con-man?"

"Hmm--A little.....You're right."

Taiga stood a small distance away as she looked at the way Ryuuji was dressed, her eyebrows knitted together worriedly. Ryuuji was wearing a borrowed chef's uniform -- Which is the same uniform that the pastry chefs wore in the kitchen. To sell chocolates while wearing that seemed to imply that Ryuuji was the one who made the chocolates. Even though it was printed on the boxes that the chocolates were factory-made.

"Your uniform's much nicer."

"You think so too? Right..... Help me take a picture."

Taiga took out her cellphone from her pocket and passed it to Ryuuji. Taiga was wearing a maid's apron on top of a black cotton western dress; Yasuko was probably dressed like that too. With her slightly curly hair tied up, Taiga really looked like a cute doll. But --

".....You want me to take a picture..... Wouldn't the owner get angry if he sees this? We're working right now."

"I'm not the one working, I'm only standing here. Just take the picture."

"I'm working!"

"It'll only be a moment."

Taiga pulled up her dress slightly in a pose. Seeing that, Ryuuji could only hide her cellphone behind the cart to help Taiga take a picture.

"Let me see let me see....."

Instead of looking at the picture of herself, Taiga aimed the camera at Ryuuji. By the time Ryuuji realized what she was about to do, the camera had already clicked.

"Wow! This picture is shocking, what a dumb expression."

".....Shall I get the old guy to fire you?"

"I'm not the one working anyway."

This fellow..... Ryuuji glared at Taiga as he breathed out steady streams of white mist.

"Excuse me, but do you have an even smaller box of chocolates? About three in a box."

A customer who looked like a housewife held up three fingers, surprising Ryuuji with her sudden question,

"Ah? Ugh, this box has six pieces, this has twelve pieces....."

Ryuuji mumbled in response, not answering the question at all.

"I see.....Hmm, milk chocolate."

The customer lost interest after looking at the box for a while, as she left after placing the box back into its original position.

"Ah--ah, she left."

"Ah, I'm really nervous. I look really suspicious don't I?"

"You should be like this -- Welcome! Wouldn't it better if you say that?"

"Hmm, you're right."

Ryuuji nodded in response to Taiga, who had a weird expression on her face while he rearranged the chocolates on the cart so that they'll be more visible.

"Cheese, Tenin-san!" (Tenin = Shop worker)

"Gah! Wel, Welcom.....It's you!"

Ryuuji almost fell down at the sight of a grinning Haruta standing in front of the cart. Ryuuji had told him about working at the pastry shop, but he didn't remember telling him to come.

"We're not here to play! Go back to where you came from! Your hair will drop into the chocolate, go away!"

Taiga swung her hands wildly in an attempt to chase Haruta away, her fingers hitting Haruta in the nose, but he continued grinning,

"Don't be like this, Tiger! I'm here to buy a box of chocolates!"

"We don't sell chocolates for insects here! Alright, now go away!"

"But I'm not the one buying! Right?"

Haruta turned around to smile at the girl standing behind him. That girl's a university student isn't she? No, what's more important is that -- Huh? Ryuuji and Taiga's eyeballs almost popped out of their sockets, as they looked at each other in disbelief, their jaws hanging open.

"Would Haruta-kun want the big box or the small box?"

"If I'm greedy and ask for the big one now, something bad will happen later!"

"Of course something like that won't happen."

"Then I'll have the big box!"

I'll have this -- The girl who pointed at the bigger box of chocolates was wearing a cotton hat, her beautiful hair going all the way down to her chest, her body clad in a figure-hugging light grey wool coat.

"5,580 yen....."

"Alright. I remember I had a 500 yen coin around here somewhere..... Let me look for it."

The girl took out a bulging wallet to look for coins, but her actions only served to shower the ground with receipts, 1 yen coins and other random things. Haruta helped girl pick up her things,

"Ah! You're really clumsy! Take it!"

He intimately stuffed the things into the girl's pocket. If the two of them weren't close, Haruta wouldn't do something so intimate would he? Which is to say, they are --

".....I don't remember you having a sister?"

Blood-related.

Ryuuji asked Haruta as he returned the change and receipt to the girl. If they're not siblings, then what can they be? Taiga, who was merely standing beside him, was so shocked that she was rooted to the spot.

"She's not my sister! Hehehe! She's my Girl! Friend!"

The girl also smiled at Haruta's declaration.

You're lying! I don't believe you! But no matter how Ryuuji wanted to deny it, there was something intimate about the way the girl looked at Haruta.

Ryuuji was speechless, as he looked at the pair of ivory hands that received the box of chocolates. She.....She's an older-sister type beauty! 'Thank, Thank you very much!'

Hearing Taiga's voice, Ryuuji hurriedly bowed.

Just as he was leaving, Haruta ran over to Ryuuji and whispered,

"I really like her! Because there're no secrets between Taka-chan and I, so I wanted to introduce her to you!"

Haruta laughed embarrassingly before running off to catch up with the girl. Ryuuji thought, Maybe it's because he had told everything about his relationship woes during the school trip that Haruta would introduce his girlfriend to him. But--

"How can it be..... Has this world gone crazy.....!"

Ryuuji completely agreed with Taiga's assertion. Haruta was a decent guy, and Ryuuji also liked Haruta (how disgusting). But just how was he able to meet a beauty like that? The most curious part of the whole thing was how the two of the even met?

".....Maybe Haruta happened to pass by when she was drowning and saved her? If it wasn't something like that, then I really cannot accept it.....! Damn it, Welcome! Please take a look! Valentine's Day chocolates! Please take a look!"

Ryuuji shouted at the top of his voice from the bomb that Haruta had dropped onto him. To his surprise, his shouting actually attracted a few customers, one of which bought four boxes at a go.

Ryuuji tore off the long list of receipts as he watched the customers walk off. He had originally thought that his face was suited for the service sector, but he was doing surprisingly well. He temporarily forgot about Haruta, and loosened his lips into a smile --

"Hey, I don't think you should smile. That captain-of-a-ghost-ship look you had on just now was better."

"When, When have I ever had that kind of look.....?"

"When you jealously watched that insect's beautiful girlfriend walk away. Yes yes yes, that's the look."

"This look shows that I've been hurt by your words!"

"And you should cross your arms in front of your chest, close your mouth, and spread your legs."

Ryuuji obediently crossed his arms, standing silently behind the cart. As a result, the two office ladies that happened to pass by--

"Ah, look, the pastry chef himself is selling his chocolates....."

"Wow, he's really young. But he looks really strict...."

"But it's really curious to see such a young chef making chocolate."

"I'll buy one for my boyfriend."

"I'll buy one for myself."

Why would they think that way? Ryuuji thought as he watched the two office ladies walking to the cart while whistling. What to do? If they ask me, 'Did you make this?', I would probably give in to temptation and lie.

Unconsciously, Ryuuji had transformed into the guard dog in front shrines..... No, He had transformed into Cerebus, as he stared at the two office ladies with widened eyes.

--If you dare to step into the realm of demons, then be prepared to be buried in cold, bloody soil, office ladies--! No, Ryuuji was not thinking anything like that.

Looking at his face, the two office ladies were a little afraid, but still pointed at the chocolate, 'Please give me the big box.' 'I'll have the small box.' Beside Taiga, who was just standing there, Ryuuji finished the increasingly familiar actions and passed the chocolates to the customers, saying in a deliberately low voice, 'Thank you very much.'

He succeeded in making them think that he was the chef. The two office ladies happily took their chocolates and left.

"You see, we really sold it away."

"We really sold it..... Are we allowed to do that!? It's stated on the boxes that the chocolates are factory-made..... We're cheating our customers.....!"

"It's not like we lied."

But the hands of the law are far-reaching..... No, it should be that Ryuuji was merely lucky, as no more customers came after the two office ladies. Even though the number of people in the shopping street had increased as it was getting closer to dinner time, but the people in this age group probably won't buy chocolates sold from carts.

"Takasu--Tiger! How's it going?"

Hearing their names, the two of them lifted their heads. In direct opposition to his cheerful voices, Noto's facial expression was extremely dark.

"I met Haruta over there..... Haruta and..... his girlfriend. He said that the two of you really free, so I came over to visit..... Ah, what's with that.....Girlfriend.....Girlfriend!"

"Sigh, here comes the pitiful glasses-boy."

Seeing that Noto was alone, Taiga's shot a barb at him, her arms crossed in front of her chest,

"The long-haired insect has already bought his chocolate and gone back. Since you've stopped here as well, you'll have to buy at least one box before you can go."

"No, never! This is bad, Takasu, have you known about it for a long time already?"

"No, I just found out."

"Exactly! What's with that! How could he go and get a girlfriend from another place behind my back..... Ah--I've had enough! Damn it! What am I trying to do..... Has anyone else come before me? What about the Grand Master?"

Ryuuji shook his head. Noto should know that Kitamura was still busy with the student council in school, what was he trying to get at?

"Sigh -- Have Ami, Nanako and the others come already?"

Hearing that, Ryuuji finally understood. Ah, could it be..... He sought to hide the fact that he already knew, as he answered in a collected tone,

".....Kihara hasn't come yet."

Ryuuji attempted to get his friend to speak the truth.

"Ah..... Who, who cares about her..... I'm, I'm just saying that Kihara may start to harrass the Grand Master by giving him chocolates! Just that! She's got nothing to do with me! I'm alright, but Tiger should be really worried right..... about those kind of things!"

"What should I be worried about? And what kind of things are those kind of things? And also, even if Kihara gives Kitamura-kun chocolates, why do you have such a huge reaction to it? Ah -- I see, you like Kihara Maya don't you."

Ah! Ryuuji turned to look at Taiga. One simple sentence from her was enough to destroy Noto's care and concern, and to cruelly remind him of the truth. The pitiful-looking Noto immediately blushed a deep shade of red.

Taiga had already been extremely irritated recently by Noto's show of 'support'. Noto teased Taiga at every chance he got, so Taiga was taking revenge by lashing out at Noto's confused and fragile heart.

Well, it wasn't surprising, that Taiga, the vicious palmtop tiger, would be able to smell the blood on a weakened prey.

"When you quarelled with her during the school trip, you realized that you actually cared about her..... didn't you? Tsk -- Hmm, this kind of situation is extremely common.

Since even your good friend the stupid long-hair has already gotten himself a girlfriend, you could just try to woo her. Perhaps the two of you will look good together? I won't know about such things."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh are y-y-y-y-you talking about!? Don't talk about things that you don't know!? You're not normal, not normal!"

"Ala, you're panicking. Looks like I'm right, your face is really red."

"I'm begging you, no more! Don't say such inaccurate things!"

"And how are my words inaccurate? This is merely the course of nature that the male stamen and the female pistil will--"

"You idiot--! There's something wrong with with your brain! Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Alright, you'll have to be stay in the same class as Kihara Maya tomorrow and the day after tomorrow as well. From now on, you'll have to carefully maintain your distance from her. I want you to feel the frustration! To feel agony!"

Hearing Taiga's relentless attacks, Noto's face was so red that Ryuuji felt sorry for him. Ryuuji couldn't help but think, Taiga's in a similar position herself, and yet she's doing such a thing to someone else--

".....Why are you blushing as well?"

"Eh!? Me, Me!? I'm also blushing.....!"

Doesn't Taiga like me? Am I not the one who's making her frustrated and distressed? Ryuuji was also affected by Taiga's words.

"E-E-E-Enough! Damn it! You middle-aged uncle--! You pretender--!"

Hearing Noto's angry shouts, the owner of the store immediately lifted his head. Ryuuji shook his head, 'We're doing our jobs properly!' While Noto took the opportunity to escape.

Although the owner wasn't affected by Noto's shouts, but he still came out of the store to check on the two of them. Looking at the amount of chocolate left on the cart, he didn't look too happy,

"It's almost six, so it's not very positive that we still have so many boxes left. It's not your fault that you'll meet friends from school since the two of you are standing in front of the store. But since your friends are coming, perhaps you could get some friends who will actually buy the chocolates."

Ryuuji and Taiga looked at each other awkwardly. To be honest, their present earnings could only pay off their salary.

"Hmm..... Even though I'm only standing here, I'm still a little responsible for this. Since it has come to this, I can only summon my secret weapon."

Taiga seemed to have thought of something, as she flipped open her phone to call a certain person.

"Geh, you're not by yourself?"

Hearing that Taiga was working, Ami had come over to laugh at her, but instead glared at Ryuuji.

"I'm going."

Ami turned around to walk off.

Even though she was casually dressed in jeans and a eiderdown jacket, together with a baseball cap and spectacles, Ami still turned heads wherever she went. 'That girl's really cute.' 'Is she a model? She's really tall.' The slim figure, together with the long hair that flowed out from the baseball cap, was so captivating that everyone knew she wasn't a normal person.

"Ah, since you're already here, don't leave so quickly. Here, baka-chi, hold this."

Taiga looked around carefully before passing five boxes of chocolates to Ami.

"Eh? I don't want these, don't ask me to do something strange. Ami-chan's so pretty, everyone will notice my actions."

"Yes yes yes, baka-chi's really pretty and stands out in a crowd, which is why I called you here. Here, hold these and shout, 'I love these chocolates!'"

"What? So you want me to cheat for you....."

"Something like that."

"No way! Why must Ami-chan do something like this!? And there's an extra fellow beside you..... Don't joke with me!"

Hmph! Ami glared at Ryuuji out of the corner of her eyes, looking as though she liked nothing better than to spit at him. But Ryuuji--

"Yo....."

Although he felt extremely awkward, Ryuuji still raised a hand in greeting,

"How have you been?"

You haven't quit school yet? -- Ryuuji shot a questioning glance at Ami, but Ami merely tutted at him and said 'Go away.'

Of course Ryuuji would be angry at Ami's attitude, but Ryuuji continued to face Ami, even if he would be given the cold shoulder, just like how the loyal customers of that ramen shop hoped for the boiling hot water to satisfy their inner masochist. Because despite his appearance, Ryuuji was the type of person that liked to be treated coldly by pretty girls, to satisfy their impossible requests, he was the type of passionate loyal masochist -- Of course not.

Ryuuji only did that because he did not want to fulfill Ami's hope that he will disappear from her life. He didn't want to give up just because Ami said 'I failed!'. He felt a surprising and unknown emotion in his heart.

That kind of emotion wasn't exactly kindhearted thoughts like 'don't say that you want to quit school' or 'I'm sorry for not making the effort to understand you', but a harder kind of rebelliousness, something like 'I will not accept you giving me the expression of knowing everything single thing'. It seemed as though Ami was saying -- I understand you, but you don't understand me. This point was what Ryuuji could not accept.

I don't want Ami to look at me like this, I won't accept that she looks at me like this, that she gave up on me without even taking my future development into account. The main point is that I wish to be 'acknowledged' by Kawashima Ami.

Taiga looked at Ryuuji and Ami confusedly.

".....I never knew that baka-chi's on such bad terms with Ryuuji? Could it be because of what I said to baka-chi before the school trip that you took it out on Ryuuji?"

"Of, Course, Not! We just don't click. We're not friends anymore."

Hmph! Ami turned her face away, wanting to take the chance to leave, but Taiga grabbed hold of her sleeve.

"Ah, baka-chi, don't say such serious things! Right, why don't you just be more honest and buy this box of chocolates to give it to Ryuuji to make up? It's Valentine's Day anyway, the timing's just right."

"What are you talking about!? And.....Eh.....You want me to spend my own money..... This is worse than cheating....."

"Alright, I'll give it to you. Ah, but I can only give you one box! And, why don't you buy one for yourself, and buy another for Minorin to make up with her. I've seen everything..... I know that you actually want to make it up with Minorin..... If you're afraid of feeling awkward, why don't I go with you to call her out? Hehe, who would have thought that I would be the one helping the proud baka-chi, life is so unpredictable."

".....Hmph!"

Ami took off one of her gloves and slapped Taiga in the face with it. In the middle ages, this would signal a duel between nobles - no. As for Ryuuji, who knew what Ami was thinking, he could understand why she would do such a thing -- even though he didn't dare to intervene.

"That hurt! Baka-chi, that really hurt--! Stop it! If you continue like this, I'll upload your imitation DVD onto the internet!"

"Like that's any of my business! Do whatever you want to do!"

"Then I'll let you see something that will inflict serious psychological damage! Take this!"

Taiga flipped open her cellphone.

"Eh.....? This can't be.....Hah!"

Ami, who was looking intently at the picture on the cellphone, suddenly became extremely weak, so much so that her cap dropped off. She glanced at Ryuuji for a moment before starting to laugh again.

"Hey.....Hey! I want to take a look too, just how bad is it?"

"I would advise you not to look, or you may never be able to pull yourself together again."

"Let me see it! If it's that bad, then I'm going to delete it!"

"How could I let you delete something as interesting as that!"

Ryuuji had completely forgotten that he was currently working, as he attempted to snatch the cellphone from Taiga, even using basketball movements to block her. At that moment --

"Ah! Isn't that Kawashima Ami!"

A middle school girl shouted loudly. The shopping street was crowded with middle school students who were going home after their club activities. The number of people kept increasing, as wave after wave of middle school girls appeared.

"So it's true that she lives near here!"

"Eh! Who's that!?" "A model! She's really cute! Can I use my phone to take a picture?" -- In the blink of an eye, a huge crowd of girls had gathered around the cart. Can I shake hands with you? Which school do you go to?

"Kawashima's really popular....."

"I was like them not long ago. Now I feel that it's much better to not know about her true colours."

"I didn't think that anyone would notice. Thank you for your support--" Ami carefully rejected any photo requests, going into watery chihuahua mode at the same time, as she shook hands and gave out signatures with the people around her. The adults who were passing by didn't recognize Ami, as they looked at the commotion with questioning eyes. But to the middle school students, Kawashima Ami was an idol.

"Right, is Ami-chan buying chocolates from here....."

"Ami-chan bought five boxes!"

Ami was holding the five boxes of chocolates that Taiga had stuffed into her hands. The girls who had noticed the chocolates immediately surrounded the cart.

"I want one too! I want the same one as Ami-chan!"

"I want one I want one too! Ah, it's so expensive--! But I still have to buy it!"

Everyone took out their wallets. Hearing the shouts of the middle school girls, even the housewives who didn't recognise Ami gathered around the cart.

* * *

Even though they weren't able to sell everything, but the sales record was still rather positive. Taiga bought four small boxes when she went home, making the chocolate mountain even smaller.

"I had planned to return some favours on Valentine's Day. I had wanted to buy chocolate from the basement of the department store, but since I had to work, I'll have to make do with these chocolate."

"Favours? What favours?"

On the way home, Ryuuji and Taiga walked side by side with a small gap between them.

"I want to give chocolates to Kitamura-kun, Minorin, and you to thank you guys for saving me. Even though it's a little embarrassing to give this kind of chocolate..... Oh, and I have to thank baka-chi as well, since I called her down to help. I forgot to give her the box of chocolates that I promised her just now. So I'll bring four boxes of chocolates to school tomorrow. It wouldn't be very nice if I just used these wrappers would it?"

"You're giving me a box too..... It'll be a little too commonplace if you used the original wrappers. We're going to sell the same thing tomorrow you see."

"Then I'll try to change the packaging tonight."

"Why don't you melt the chocolates? Then you'll be able to say that you made it yourself if you melt it and let it solidify. You can just put the packaging out of the equation like that."

Two clouds of white mist rose up into the night sky. The two of them withdrew into their coats, their hands in their pockets as they walked on the road that they stepped on everyday. The chilly winter breeze was full of humidity, making them feel as though their nose were going to be frozen.

Taiga looked at the tips of her toes as she said,

".....Time really flies. I was still thinking about how time passed so slowly when we first started until the customers started coming."

"I feel the same way."

Ryuuji pulled his muffler to his lips as he lowered his head, making use of his breath to warm himself.

"Even though it's tiring, but I really feel like I did something significant."

"You're right, even though I didn't do much."

"You helped with the cello tape."

Ryuuji felt a little sad that his part-time job would end tomorrow, as he wanted to continue.

In comparison with just thinking about it, it looks like one sees things more clearly through actions. The sense of helplessness and insecurity that Ryuuji had felt the day before wasn't as strong due to his weariness.

"About what I said to you yesterday..... I'm really sorry."

It's also because of Taiga that he got to work. It wasn't just the moral support that she gave. In truth Ryuuji got the job only because Taiga was also there.

"Thank you. If I was alone, I would probably have just came up with a lame excuse not to work."

"What are you talking about, there's nothing for you to thank me about. I should be the one thanking you."

"It's rare to see you so serious. Since you're like this, then maybe you should seriously do some research on the internet regarding how to melt chocolate."

Looking at Ryuuji's joking smile, Taiga pouted at him,

"Speaking of which.....Would you be happy if I gave you chocolates for Valentine's Day?"

".....Huh?"

Why would she ask me something like this? Ryuuji looked at Taiga with a surprised expression on his face. Taiga seemed to understand the question in his look,

"Because I don't know."

"What do you not know?"

It was Ryuuji's turn to pout,

"Of course I will be happy if you gave me chocolates for Valentine's Day..... Am I such an inhumane person? Do you really not know that?"

"I get it..... Then I'll work harder, and think of ways to work harder."

Taiga opened up the plastic bag that she was holding and nodded at the four boxes of chocolate in the bag.

She sounds like she wants to work hard to make me happy -- Ryuuji was a little stunned at that interpretation.

Taiga was working hard to make Ryuuji happy, because she liked him.

Looking at the side of her face, Ryuuji stopped walking.

Taiga had once said that it was useless to work hard, for the result of not giving up despite being helpless was to fall off a cliff. But now that she is ready to push to the very end, does it mean that she was mentally prepared for another probable fall of the cliff? To work hard for Ryuuji, even if she could fail and be hurt again, Taiga still wanted to work hard for Ryuuji.

Since it's like this --- What should Ryuuji, the person who rescued Taiga from the bottom of the cliff, do? The Ryuuji that wanted to grab hold of the falling Taiga and pull her up to safety, what should he do?

Ryuuji suddenly felt as though the ground that he was standing on was breaking up, as he stood there, trembling. If he hadn't heard Taiga's true feelings in that snowstorm, Ryuuji probably wouldn't have noticed the change in Taiga -- Ryuuji finally understood the meaning behind that.

Ryuuji had always felt that if he hadn't heard about Taiga's true feelings, then nothing would change. As long as he forgot about what he knew, everything would go back to normal.

In reality, he couldn't be more wrong.

Taiga fell off the cliff and got hurt again and again. But even then, she stubbornly refused to call for help, merely letting herself fall down, disappear, and go away. This was what she planned to do. She left Ryuuji on the cliff in the snowstorm, while she continued to fall until she was out of the picture.

Taiga hadn't realised that Ryuuji had stopped walking as she continued walking forward in the wintry night. The figure that was bathed in moonlight moved further and further away, Taiga's long hair swaying in rhythm to her footsteps. Right now, Ryuuji's hand and voice was extremely far away from her. Taiga had left by herself, this was the direction that she had decided on.

-- Then what about me?

Taiga made a mistake, as Ryuuji heard her hidden feelings. If something happens because of her mistake, then who should take the responsibility? Would it be alright if I forget about it? But.....But, but, but, but.....I can't. I can't do it, Taiga. Ryuuji wanted to say this to her. He was unable to just watch as Taiga walked away by herself. He was unable to ignore her feelings. Even if he was really able to

forget it, and act as though nothing happened, Ryuuji wouldn't want to do that. He no longer wanted to see Taiga injure herself and turn away one more time.

Ryuuji wanted to save Taiga.

He was just like Taiga, forcing down the voice that cried for help. Wanting to grab hold, wanting to rely on someone, but still forcing himself to let go. Because this was something Ryuuji would surely go through.

As for Taiga -- She took everything that was thrown at her, continued to work hard even if she was covered in injuries, all for the sake of reaching the goal that is 'Ryuuji'.

No matter how many times he had to run into the snowstorm to grab hold of Taiga's hand, Ryuuji wanted to save her. He wanted to hold on to her hand tightly, to prevent her from being hurt again, or from falling again. He never wanted to abandon Taiga ever again.

Ryuuji wished that Taiga would understand that.

As Taiga pressed onto her hair that was being blown around by the wind, she finally realised that Ryuuji wasn't beside her, and turned around to look at him. Her snowy-white Angola coat danced in the wind, as her long dress billowed in the breeze. Her eyes blazing on her doll-like face, her cherry-petal lips moved slightly, and Ryuuji could hear --

"Ryuuji! What are you doing! I thought you were walking with me when in actual fact, I was talking to myself all this while!"

--That is Aisaka Taiga.

My classmate, and coincidentally, my neighbor. She is also known as the Palmtop Tiger, a brash, violent and self-centered daughter of a rich family, also a child who was abandoned by her parents. Clumsy and lazy, but also fragile and in need of careful treatment at the same time, and also as lonely as a paper plane that did not know where to fly to.

She is Aisaka Taiga.

"Taiga....."

Ryuuji thought to himself, I want to use this pair of hands to save you.

I want to hand that unique, radiant sense of happiness to you personally -- No matter what I have to do, no matter what that sense of happiness is.

That is why I don't want to forget, nor do I want to continue pretending that I never heard your voice. I want to always be able to listen to your true feelings.

Chapter 5

After school on Valentine's Day, Taiga called everyone to an empty classroom in the old school campus -- A disused assembly room. Taiga had deliberately gone to school earlier without Minori to place handwritten notes into the shoe lockers of these three people -- Ryuuji, Minori, and Kitamura.

Taiga also forcibly dragged a reluctant Ami into the classroom before closing the door. The traditional paper slip was useless for Ami.

"Heh heh heh, you guys are unlucky to meet me here."

Taiga gave an evil smile as she closed the door. It seemed as though she felt extremely embarrassed about having to formally thank her classmates.

"Meet? You were the one who dragged me here....."

"Baka-chi, now's not the time to talk about such inconsequential things! Kitamura-kun needs to go to the student council room later, Minori needs to go for her club activities,

Ryuuji and I also have an important job to do, so we'll have to make this fast."

"Important job? Are you referring to that part-time job?"

Tsk! Ami crossed her arms in front of her chest unhappily as she stood in a corner of the empty classroom. She also ignored Minori when she smiled and said, 'Ah, there's nothing wrong with this anyway.'. Even when her childhood friend walked towards her in an attempt to appease her, Ami walked away and turned her back on Kitamura, keeping her distance from him. Taiga, who didn't seem to mind, continued to speak,

"Even though the atmosphere isn't very good, but today's Valentine's Day. I've made chocolates as a way of expressing my gratitude towards every one of you!"

After which she carefully took out four wrapped boxes from a paper bag.

"You made it yourself!? Taiga.....You're brilliant!"

Minori, who was sitting in front of Taiga, who was standing up, clapped loudly and patted her head. Kitamura, who had once been attacked by her fried egg illusions, sat next to Minori and started clapping as well,

"Aisaka made chocolates for me.....Heh! I'm unwilling to even eat it."

Kitamura happily said in a loud voice.

".....Aren't those the very chocolates that you were selling yesterday? I would never have thought that you even dare to say such a lie....."

"Of course not! I merely used the wrapper because I thought it was pretty, I melted the chocolate and solidified it myself! Even though the shape is that of the bottom of a bowl, but I managed to make perfect circles! Look! Dark eye pouches! I stayed up for most of the night to do this!"

Taiga pointed towards her eye pouches in response to Ami's accusation. Ryuuji knew for a fact that Taiga only went to sleep at five o'clock in the morning -- Because Ryuuji couldn't fall asleep, so he ended up looking at the light coming from Taiga's room the whole night.

"Takasu-kun must have helped you again."

"He didn't! I'm going to give a box of chocolates to Ryuuji too."

"But Takasu-kun has dark eye pouches too."

".....That's a normal part of my face."

As if anyone will believe you -- Ami retorted softly. Ryuuji sat down beside Kitamura, but didn't even feel like wiping off the thick layer of dust on the chair as he merely looked listlessly at Taiga's happy face. Taiga was busy placing the boxes on the table; she had made up her mind to continue to get hurt, and to continue to keep quiet.

Ryuuji suddenly realized that there were some things that were able to make people feel completely helpless, and to 'change the heart' of another was one of those things.

"Firstly -- Here! Baka-chi! Thank you for your help yesterday!"

".....It's got nothing to do with me, I was merely called there under false pretences."

Ami looked extremely unhappy as she received her box of chocolates.

"Next up is Minorin! Thank you for saving my life during the school trip!"

"What are you talking about, you idiot. Of course I would help you in any way that I can. As long as Taiga is in danger, I will surely fly to your side!"

"Minorin, I love you!"

"I love you too! Oh oh! Taiga!"

Taiga and Minorin confirmed their feelings of friendship as each held the arms of the other. And then --

"Ryuuji! This is for you, thank you! I researched on the internet on how to heat food with water! You should eat this together with Ya-chan!"

"Oh....."

Ryuuji wasn't able to look at Taiga's face as he received his box of chocolates. He had wanted to reply with a smile, but somehow he ended up scratching his nose, frantically trying to hide his expression.

"Last but not least, Kitamura-kun! The biggest one is for you!"

"Oh oh.....! It's really heavy! I'm really happy. But would it be alright to give me the biggest one?"

"Of course! Because you pulled me up from below the cliff without any regard for your own safety! Ryuuji told me everything! Ah, it's so embarrassing! I'm really stupid! What expression did I have when I was buried in the snow? Were the whites of my eyes showing? Or was I lying facedown in the snow-"

Taiga's style of speaking became even more difficult to understand than usual as she attempted to mask her embarrassment. However, Taiga's words elicited a soft sound of surprise from Minori as she looked at Ryuuji. Kitamura seemed to have heard Minori as well, as his smile towards Taiga froze, his gaze unfocused. Ryuuji desperately tried to avoid Minori's gaze.

Oh no--

Even though I had gotten Kitamura to lie to Taiga, but Minori..... She had seen everything.

Taiga looked extremely bashful as she recalled her accident, sticking out her tongue with her eyes closed as she patted her own cheeks in a feeble attempt to hide her embarrassment.

"Ah! I really can't believe that I did something like that. My legs suddenly sank into the snow as I rolled down, hitting my head, my vision going completely white.....I guess that should be the feeling when you faint. It felt as though I was dreaming, and that I was sleeptalking. I was extremely shocked when I woke up! I couldn't believe what I had done."

Ryuuji, who had finally made his decision, started to try to catch Minori's eye.

I'm begging you, please don't say anything. Please let this incident stay as it is right now -- In return for the ability to telepathically communicate with Minori, Ryuuji would be willing to sell his soul to death or even the devil. But Minori stopped looking at Ryuuji, as she focused her attention on Taiga's blushing face,

".....What did you say in your dream?"

"Hmm.....I can't say it, I won't say it! Even if it's Minorin! I'll never tell anyone about that! So please stop asking me!"

"Just say it!"

"No, no, and that should be just be my imagination."

"I want you to say it."

Minori, who was surprisingly insistent, even grabbed hold of Taiga's wrist. Taiga looked a little flustered, as she smiled awkwardly and attempted to change the topic,

"I've already said that I can't even tell Minorin! Those words should never be heard by anyone! It'll be disastrous if anyone hears it!"

Taiga seemed to believe that she would be able to slide by treating it as a joke, as she stared at the ceiling in a dramatic fashion,

"If someone hears it, then it will not come true, I won't be able to continue living like this, the consequences will be really heavy! Heh heh, I don't think anyone has heard it right?"

"Yes, no one! Right, Takasu!"

Kitamura, who was panicking slightly, followed Taiga's example in smiling awkwardly, as he patted Takasu on the shoulder, seeking support. Ryuuji couldn't help but nod heavily,

"Relax, no one heard it!"

No one heard Taiga saying that she likes Ryuuji --

".....!"

Minori's eyes suddenly turned to glare at Ryuuji. And then she pressed her face towards Ryuuji's so close that they looked as though they were about to kiss, their eyebrows almost touching. Ryuuji was so surprised by Minori's actions that he couldn't help but hold his breath. The pair of lips that were only mere centimetres away from Ryuuji's opened,

"You. Big. Liar."

Her right hand holding Taiga's wrist in a vice-grip, Minori raised her left hand in a fist and said,

"--You really plan to act as though you didn't hear anything?"

Before punching Ryuuji in the chest, where his heart was. Gah! Ryuuji had the wind knocked out of him.

"This is the thing that you are unable to forget, isn't it?"

".....What?"

Taiga gave a weak groan that sounded as though she was about to be murdered. Her peach-coloured lips half open, as her eyes stared unblinkingly at Minori's ears. Hmm? Taiga shook her head lightly as she rubbed her cheeks with the hand that wasn't being held by Minori. Her neck, chin, ears, and cheeks were already in an astounding shade of red.

Ryuuji silently watched these changes as though it didn't concern him. Taiga's porcelain-like skin was dyed a striking shade of rose red, her large eyes looking like a supernova that was close to a meltdown -- Giving out an intense light that had never been seen before.

In the moment that the two pairs of eyes met.

Taiga breathed out carbon dioxide from her mouth and nose before jumping up and twisting her body like a trapped tiger as she attempted to escape from the classroom --

'You're~Not~Getting~Away!' Even when she was being dragged off her feet by Taiga, Minori still refused to let go. Taiga collided with Minori as she was pulled, knocking over the table between the two of them, flipping the chair that Minori was sitting on. Taiga summoned all her strength she she tried to break free of Minori's grip, but Minori stood firm as she attempted to stop Taiga,

"Taiga.....! Don't tell me you also want to act as though nothing happened!"

"Let!"



Ryuuji could only stand there with his jaw open, but Kitamura chose that moment to casually open his mouth,

"Hey, Takasu, do you really plan to let Aisaka run away just like that? Would that really be alright?"

"Takasu-kun saved you.....! But, something happened that forced him to lie! This was all because of you!"

"Let. Me. Go!"

Ryuuji looked at Kitamura's face and shook his head.

This would not be alright.

I want to listen to Taiga's feelings, and I wish that Taiga would be willing to tell me her feelings --

"Why, Taiga! Why can't you even..... Why can't you even say a simple sentence!"

"Let. Me. Go!"

It wasn't clear if it was because of the sweat on their palms, or that Taiga was stronger than Minori, Minori was forced to let go of Taiga's wrist. 'Argh!?' Minori was knocked back a few steps before she was able to regain her balance. Taiga, on the other hand, had fallen down onto the floor of the classroom due to overexertion, but still managed to burst out towards the door of the classroom like a bullet, almost covering the entire length of the classroom in two steps. Just as she was about to open the door that she had closed.....

"Ah!"

Kitamura had stepped in between her and the door. Taiga looked up at Kitamura's face for a moment before running towards the other door.

"Baka-chi!"

Taiga's hopeless scream resounded in the empty classroom. Ami had closed the door in front of Taiga's face.

".....Ah -- You look terrible."

Ami sneered at Taiga.

Minori walked in front of Taiga, who had come to a halt, her escape routes having been cut off, and grabbed her by the shoulders,

"Look here! Taiga! Look at me!"

"No! No No No No No No No--!"

"Look at who I am!? I'm Minori! I'm your best friend! Isn't that right - Didn't you just say that you love me!? Since you do, then trust me! Trust my decision!"

Taiga looked like an exploding timebomb as she swung her arms around unceasingly, resisting even more violently.

"I trust Taiga! I trust that the Taiga who's always going 'Minorin Minorin Minorin' will not attribute your weakness of not reaching out for the thing you want to me! Please don't tell me that I am wrong....."

"Of--course I won't!"

Taiga seemed to finally be able to understand the human language, as she shrilly screamed back,

"I only wish for Minorin to be happy! I only want the Minorin that I love to be happy!"

"Stop.....Joking with me!"

Just like Taiga, Minori shrieked shrilly in reply,

"Only these hands of mine can grab hold of my own happiness! I am the only one who can decide what is my happiness, no one else has the right to decide for me!"

Taiga shook off Minori's hands as she knocked over the desks and chairs in the classroom, looking for another escape route. Minori stepped onto the desks, trying to catch Taiga before her frustration got the better of her, forcing Minori to use her ultimate move,

"Damn it! You're not getting away!"

Minori jumped off the edge of a fallen desk as she charged towards Taiga.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....."

.....That was what she intended to do, but Minori made an uncharacteristic mistake at this point in time. Minori tripped when she landed and ended up with her face on the floor of the classroom, just like what her best friend usually did.

Wow! That's really stupid..... Ami muttered to herself. Taiga took advantage of Minori's fall to once again make her way towards the door of the classroom. Would it be Kitamura or Ami who will be blocking the way? Taiga spent a few seconds looking between the two of them as she tried to guess at their movements --

"Since it has come to this....."

"This is the best we can do!"

The two childhood friends stepped back from the two doors of the classrooms in an identical fashions, looking like siblings, and exchanged a look. 'This is where we have to let go.' 'That's right.' The two of them nodded their heads together.

Taiga easily ran through the door that Ami had opened into the corridor. Minori was the first one to speak,

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, Ami, you traitor....."

At the same moment, Ryuuji had also stood up,

"Kitamura.....!"

Taiga's footsteps grew fainter, as Minori and Ryuuji looked at each other. Ami's sweet voice sounded clearly in the classroom,

"It'll be too late if the people who want to chase after her don't start immediately."

After I catch up with her -- Then what do I do?

Ryuuji took a deep breath, and gazed at the box of chocolates that he had received from Taiga, attempting to stuff it into his pocket; failing that, he stuffed it into his trousers.

What do I do after I catch up with her? What should I do after I ask Taiga about her feelings? After she grabs hold of the hand that I offer her, what do I do?

"Takasu-kun, I'm going to chase after Taiga, because I still have something that I need to say to her. What about you?"

What should I do?

"I....."

Ryuuji looked at Minori, but what else could he do at this point in time?

"No matter what happens, I will not abandon Taiga, so....."

How should he express this feeling of his? Ryuuji only knew one thing -- That he will not hesitate anymore.

I won't let her go, how can I let her go like that!? I won't let her leave me behind.

".....I'm chasing after her!"

Minori took a deep breath and held it, as she pressed her right hand onto her lips --

"Very good, Takasu Ryuuji -- Goodbye, GIANT!"

".....!?"

Lightly touching the hand that she kissed onto Ryuuji's lips, Minori gave Ryuuji a mischievous smile.

"You should go by the left side, I'll go by the right. Taiga's bag is still in our classroom, so she'll have to go through the connecting corridor if she wants to get back to our classroom. We'll catch her on both sides at the connecting corridor. See you!"

Minori ran out of the classroom after throwing down a string of commands, her skirt dancing with her movement. Ryuuji looked at her receding figure before hurriedly running out of the classroom as well. Minori went to the right, while Ryuuji went to the left, their destination being the connecting corridor two floors down. The two of them blatantly broke the school rules in front of the student council president, as they ran in the corridors with all their might.

What do I do after I catch up with Taiga? What will happen? Ryuuji converted the burning in his heart into the speed of his running. After deciding to never abandon Taiga ever again, what will happen? I don't know, but my footsteps will never stop. Never mind if I don't know, never mind, no matter what we will become.

I only ask for Taiga to be by my side.

'Ehhhh.....That's strange!?' 'Oh.....' Ryuuji and Minori ran into each other at the connecting corridor, but Taiga was nowhere to be seen.

"How can this be.....She can't have avoided both of us....."

The two of them suddenly noticed that the chilly winter wind was blowing into the corridor, and saw that the window between the first and second storey was open. It can't be.....The two of them looked towards the other side of the window -- The new school building, where their classroom was at was on the other side of the window, if Taiga had jumped down from here with her indoor shoes, she would be able to return to their classroom in the shortest possible time.

".....The shoe lockers! At the entrance! She can't go home without changing shoes!"

"Oh!"

The two of them were preparing to jump out from the window, but was caught by a teacher sticking his head out of the opposite classroom. 'What are the two of you doing!' Which meant the Ryuuji and Minori could only take the long way down to the entrance of the new school building.

As he was running down the stairs, Ryuuji felt that they were probably too late, something that Minori probably felt as well, but she still continued to jump down the stairs two at one time, running in front of Ryuuji,

"Taiga! Can you hear me....."

Minori shouted at the top of her voice, hoping that Taiga could hear her.

"Hey, Taiga! You've always wanted to know this haven't you.....I.....I also like Takasu, Takasu Ryuuji!"

She didn't turn back to look at Ryuuji.

"I won't use our friendship as an excuse to run away! I've always liked him! I've even thought about hiding my feelings and giving him to you! You're my best friend, and you need Takasu-kun. Since it's like that, I'm willing to take a step back..... But this was only my self-centred way of thinking.....! Haven't I said just a few moments ago? I am the only one who can decide what is my own happiness! I have already decided! I can only be happy if I do this! That's why..... That's why! Taiga! Tell me what you intend to do!"

The two of them only found out that there were other students who were still in school and had turned around upon hearing Minori's shouting when they reached the first floor. Minori and Ryuuji were close to collapsing after their intense running as they finally reached the 2-C shoe lockers.

But Taiga and her shoes were already gone, and it was uncertain whether she had heard Minori's shouting or not.

".....!"

Minori slumped to the ground as she buried her face in her hands. Ryuuji thought that she was crying,

"What's wrong.....!"

".....I probably smashed it when I fell in that classroom..... No wonder I kept smelling the scent of blood. Damn it..... I've had enough of this."

Upon closer inspection, Ryuuji saw that Minori's nose was bleeding.

* * *

After the infirmary teacher had left, Minori was looking in the mirror at her nose.

"It should have stopped bleeding already right? Could you not look at me like that?"

Minori sat on the bed, one hand covering the lower half of her face.

"You scared me, I thought that you were crying."

"You thought that I was crying?"

"Of course. People will usually cry in that kind of situation won't they?"

Then my feelings would have been reciprocated -- Minori mumbled softly, as she gave a bashful smile. The two of them couldn't do anything about Taiga running away, so they went to the infirmary to try to stop Minori's nosebleed.

"I've already decided to stop crying. But if someone were to understand my efforts, then it would be a huge motivation to me. You asked about what you should do to move forward a while ago didn't you?"

"I remember that."

"I told you that as long as you have the will to achieve your goal, you will succeed didn't I? Do you know what was my goal? I decided to work hard to achieve my dream. For that, I decided not to be frustrated or to cry anymore, but to move forward positively -- This is my decision. No matter what kind of reality I am in, I will continue walking. If anyone is able to understand that, then I would feel that my efforts have been recognized."

Minori pushed the tissue used to stem her nosebleed back up her nose, and smiled,

"At the very least, the reason that pushes me to work so hard is to prove a point."

Minori happily started to talk about her brother. Her brother was doing well in the world of baseball, as his team got to Koshien, and he was aiming to be a professional baseball player next. But as Minori was a girl, she was unable to continue playing baseball. Her brother's dream took priority over hers in their family.

"I want to..... continue playing baseball. I want to shout, My dream is just as big, and I will make it come true! But I won't be skillful enough to join an amateur baseball team by the time I graduate from high school, which is why I will save up enough money to get into a sports university so that I can continue playing baseball. And then work towards my goal of playing for the Japanese national team."

"This is the reason for your endless part-time jobs?"

"Yes. I've always been worried that I'll be laughed at if I say it out loud, but now, I can say it without any fear. I want to tell my brother, my parents, the little league coach, the middle school teacher who laughed at me, everyone on the baseball team, I want to shout this from the middle of the world. I want to use my own way to reach my peak! The happiness that I've decided to grab hold of is this! Even though I'm only doing this to prove a point, but this has allowed me to stop crying, to push myself onwards, towards a place where I can reach with my own strength. I want to make the people around me speechless..... Which is why I work hard, and why I will endure anything, even if I want to cry, even if it makes me miserable."

Even if I want to cry, even if it makes me miserable -- From Minori's smiling face, Ryuujii saw his own face, in addition to the faces of Taiga, Ami, Yasuko, and the others. Even if they don't say it out loud, everyone was hurting because of something. Some people would have been defeated, some would have been unable to persevere. Minori will surely be able to continue like this: Continue shining brightly like the sun.

To Ryuujii, the light that Minori emanated was more dazzling than anything in the world; It was like the promise of salvation, while at the same time, it was like a road sign.

".....I believe in you."

"Great! As long as you believe in me, I will be able to continue."

Kushieda Minori was dazzling -- That's right! This is the reason why.

"Although this was after 'Goodbye GIANT!' -- Just what in the world is 'Goodbye GIANT!?' I'm happy to be able to know more about you."

"That's because you're extremely curious about me..... We'll surely be able to always show each other our own efforts and thoughts in the future, This is --"

Minori lifted up her hand in front of her, and Ryuujii naturally raised his hand so that their palms were touching.

"Goodbye."

".....Oh."

-- The result of a love that wasn't able to blossom.

But the bond between the two of them had become an unbreakable vow. It was because the two of them had hurt each other because of their honest feelings that they had matured.

Will they be ridiculed? Will they discuss how illogical something like this is? But Ryuuji thought to himself, this is like a journey -- finally reaching his destination after being knocked down, after going by the longer route, his destination being the moment where he made an eternal promise with Minori, their palms touching each other. Ryuuji had finally reached the destination that he had always wanted to go to.

"I've said everything that I have to say to Taiga. I guess she might have heard it..... should have heard it, so I won't chase after Taiga anymore."

Minori breathed in, and out quickly before lifting her head,

"I still have to chase after Ami. She's always running around, and even though she always makes me [angry] again, and even though we may quarrel again, but I still want to find her, to make up with her. Ami's the only one who can quarrel with me like that. I didn't even know that I could be so opposed to someone. She roughly awakened a part of me that even I didn't know existed..... I will never be able to find another person willing to do such a excessive thing for me."

I understand Ami very well. Minori's smile was still so cheerful and steadfast. Ryuuji firmly believed that the heart of the person who is as clumsy as he is will be lit up by Minori.

Ryuuji also wanted to stand up for a second, third, fourth, as many times as he needed to, in front of Ami.

"Alright, Takasu-kun, you should go now. We both have places that we have to go to."

* * *

"Oh!"

-- Ryuuji hadn't expected that Taiga, who had just ran away from school, would come for work. Ryuuji got to the cake shop just in time, but Taiga was already standing behind the cart, making preparations as though nothing had happened.

"I.....I didn't think that you'd turn up."

".....Of course I would. Even though I don't need to do much, a job is a job."

Hmph! Taiga turned her face away from Ryuuji fiercely, and stood there unmovingly like a doll. The owner had pasted a poster in front of the cart, proclaiming in big red words saying that, 'Half price sale! Only for today!'

Maybe because it was a yearly habit, or perhaps the customers were attracted by the poster, today's half-priced Valentine's Day chocolates were much more popular than yesterday. Many mothers had brought along their children to buy the chocolates, and there were also quite a number of guys who bashfully bought a few boxes of the beautifully wrapped chocolates.

It was so busy that Ryuuji didn't even have time to catch a breath, his hands always busy with something. Taiga, on the other hand, had clammed up, standing there unmovingly.

Even when the tide of customers had finally ebbed, Ryuuji was unable to speak to Taiga when their eyes met, as he ended up pulling the hem of her skirt away from the heater. Even then, Taiga didn't move at all.

As much as Ryuuji wanted to tell her, 'I won't leave you', he was unable to open his mouth.

If they were able to communicate telepathically, everything would be much simpler -- If he was able to differentiate between the things that Taiga wanted to tell him, and the things that she didn't, then Ryuuji would be able to understand what Taiga was thinking of, what she would say, and continue from there.

Even if he didn't know how to go about doing it, Ryuuji still wanted to know the answer. And then he wished that Taiga would be able to find out that happiness was the result. Ryuuji sneaked a peek at Taiga's face. Taiga was like a stone statue, only her eyes moving as she looked at the people walking about on the shopping street.

"I heard what Minorin said."

Taiga mumbled softly when there were finally no customers in front of the cart.

"You..... Don't laugh at me."

".....I'm not laughing."

".....Don't laugh at me, don't look at me, and don't turn your head."

Taiga should have probably closed her eyes due to her embarrassment, as she continued in a serious tone,

"Please don't laugh at me..... Listen to what I have to say after we finish. If I try to run away again..... Please hold on to me."

How could I laugh at you?

"Got it."

Who would laugh at Taiga's feelings?

Ryuuji continued to work tirelessly, feeling that beside him, Taiga was trembling slightly. Ryuuji had a dream -- Not the ones he had when he slept, but one that he had to work towards. That dream was to start work after graduating from high school, lifting the burden from Yasuko's shoulders, and then get Taiga to stay by his side -- So that everyone would be able to live together. No one had the right to laugh at this dream.

Ryuuji looked at the time, it was almost the end of his shift.

After this two-day job has finished, Ryuuji would find out the answer. Ryuuji had already decided to chase after Taiga, to keep her by his side. He wanted to confirm Taiga's true feelings, he wanted to see with his own eyes the results of his actions.

"--You lied."

Hearing that voice, Ryuuji almost dropped the envelope containing his pay onto the ground.

"You lied to Ya-chan."

After reaching the pavement of the main road, Yasuko suddenly appeared. It wasn't clear how long she had been there looking at Ryuuji and Taiga. Just like Ryuuji, Taiga also froze in her footsteps, holding her breath involuntarily.

"Mama....."

"It's the time that we've already agreed on. Let's go home and pack up."

Under the streetlamp, Yasuko was only wearing a eiderdown coat on top of her casual clothes; A black porsche was parked behind her.

"She's..... your mother? But....."

The pregnant woman who had a lighter shade of brown hair than Taiga's had a calm expression on her non-japanese-looking face, was Taiga's mother. Ryuuji remembered Taiga telling him that she got along well with her mother. But just as Taiga's mother walked to her and prepared to grab hold of her hand, Ryuuji instinctively pulled Taiga towards him. Taiga also called out instinctively,

"Don't--Don't touch me! I won't let you touch me again!"

The sudden change in the situation forced Ryuuji and Taiga to lean together as they moved backwards away from their mothers. The only thing that Ryuuji could glean from what just happened was that Taiga had lied. The two of them were indeed mother and daughter, but nowhere could Ryuuji see that they got along well.

".....You must be Takasu-kun? I've heard from my daughter that you've always been taking care of her, thank you very much. But please forget about my daughter. Because of certain reasons, this child will not have any more connection with the Aisaka family, she will be part of a new family with me."

"Who, who will want to stay with someone like you..... together with your lover, and that brat!"

The frenzied Taiga looked as though she was about to spit fire, as she hid behind Ryuujii, shaking uncontrollably.

".....Wh, Why? Wh, What's going on? I don't understand....."

"Taiga-chan's mother came to our home to look for her. Because I couldn't get through to your cellphones, I could only bring her to the family restaurant that Ryu-chan said that the two of you would be studying at. But we couldn't find the two of you anywhere, so I called Kitamura-kun. He was the one who told us that the two of you were working here."

"There's a reason for this--"

"I don't want to listen to excuses!"

Yasuko didn't want to listen to Ryuujii's explanation, as she shouted at him,

"You promised me that you won't work! But you lied, and broke our promise! I'll never forgive you for this!"

"If you won't forgive me..... Then what do you intend to do....."

Ryuujii also had something to say about Yasuko's unreasonable rage and her singular actions.

"You fainted because you started working more for my sake. Since it's like that, then what's wrong with me taking over your job..... Isn't it natural for family members to help each other out....."

"I don't care about other families! In our family, Ryu-chan only needs to study hard! Ya-chan will not allow Ryu-chan to do anything other than studying!"

"If it's like that..... Then don't collapse like that!"

Ryuujii threw his pay packet onto the asphalt road,

"Only someone whose family is rich has the right to say something like that..... A person who collapses as a result of overworking herself has no right to say something like that!"

"That was only an isolated incident! And it's nothing to faint for something like this! Ya-chan only wishes for Ryu-chan to study hard, to find something the Ryu-chan wants to do, and for Ryu-chan to become a great person. As long as Ryu-chan can do that, nothing else matters!"

"Stop joking with me!?"

Ryuujii, who was also shaking uncontrollably, almost wanted to go onto the street and beat up someone. How could he have gotten such an ending for wanting to help Yasuko, who was floating by herself among the waves?

Yasuko had pulled Ryuujii back to her side not because she wanted to help him -- But because of her selfish sense of self-righteousness. Since she's like that, then why should I be worried? Why should I think so much about it? Since parents are all selfish anyway.

"Who is the one who doesn't study? Who is the one who gave up on what she wanted to do, who wasn't able to become a great person? Isn't that person you!?"

"Ryu-chan.....!"

"Your parents were full of hope and expectations for you, but you betrayed them, didn't you..... Because of my existence, you weren't able to do all those things, so now you push everything onto me as my mother! You only want me to achieve the things that you wanted to achieve! You only wish for yourself to turn back into the good kid that your parents loved! And in the end, I--"

Yasuko's face was livid. I never knew that at the very moment that a person's heart shatters, that person will have that kind of expression -- Ryuuji looked at Yasuko's face calmly,

"If not for me, you would have been able to continue being the good kid that you were! You would have been able to have the life that you wanted! If you hadn't given birth to me, if I hadn't existed, you..... Ka-san would have been happy! You're regretting your decision! You're regretting that I exist..... That you gave birth to me.....!"

Tears were flowing uncontrollably down his cheeks, just as Ryuuji was unable to take what he had said back. Yasuko slumped onto the ground, clutching her head in her hands as she trembled pitifully, but Ryuuji was unable to step forward to comfort her.

Because there was only one thing that mattered.

That Ryuuji's very existence on this world was a mistake, something that shouldn't have happened in the first place.

Every single that that he had gone through, his memories of happiness, of tears and laughter, of the faces of his friends, of his many frustrations and the many things that he had learnt, everything -- slipped through his fingers in a blink of an eye, or perhaps it had drained from Ryuuji's heart. He knew that those things had already been shattered in that single moment.

"Ryuuji."

Ryuuji saw that his left hand was being held tightly by someone else's hand.

".....Taiga."

Taiga's mother was busy trying comfort the miserable Yasuko. Ryuuji finally grabbed hold of Taiga's right hand, moving his legs slowly as the two of them started to run.

I want to go to a place without any other person.

Ryuuji and Taiga were sketching a portrait in their mind, whereby the two of them passed each ordinary day together, enjoying the ordinary happiness of being together. Which is why they ran away.

Snowflakes drifted down soundlessly. Though the winter might be extremely cold in this region, snow was a rare sight. Perhaps this would be the first snowfall this winter, and maybe also the last.

Author's Notes

Wow! It's already autumn! It's unbelievable that summer's over already!

The only thirty year-old summer in my life has already passed without anything of note happening.....No, there's nothing to be sad about, for that is only the passing of the seasons, though summer will come again, but just thinking of the fact that I will be even older than I am right now next summer, I feel extremely tired. To discover the value of my existence in this world, it seems like the only way would be to live like a think tank. Just like a Yuyuko-chan pota pota yaki. (Translator's note: I have absolutely no idea what she just wrote -_-)

Even though I am in such a sorry state, but I still managed to get 'Toradora 9!' in a relatively short period of time since the previous volume. For the readers who have supported this series the since the beginning, and has also bought this volume, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! This volume is the tenth volume in the Toradora! series. As more volumes are published, I have also accumulated a huge amount of gratitude towards the readers. It makes me extremely anxious to be unable to express my gratitude no matter how many 'Thank you!'s I write down on paper. To me, you readers are the familiar, strong shield that has always been supporting me from behind. The only definitive bond that I can have with you, the reader is by sending a finished volume into your hands. That will be my strongest motivation to continue writing! Please continue to support the Toradora! series!

On another note. During the summer, I spent the bulk of my time commuting between my home, the cafe where I wrote my scripts, and the supermarket. What would I do if the three places were suddenly linked together to form a demonic summoning magic triangle? 'You went through with a secret summoning ritual, didn't you!' If a beautiful but rash girl suddenly appeared in front of me saying something like that.....What do I do if her silvery hair was tied in a butterfly knot with a black ribbon? What if she had watery blue eyes, and wore a western one piece black lace dress together with knee length stockings.....'You summoned me, so you have to take the responsibility! Humph! What a pitiful home! It's really the worst thing ever to have to live with you in a place like this!.....I think I would probably give her a few punches before forcing her into sports clothes and order her to clean up my apartment. Stop trying to act cute! Go clean my floor with the vacuum cleaner! Then wipe the windows that are full of rain marks! And then tidy up all the <Dengeki Daioh>-related books! Oh right, don't forget the SYLPH magazines! The drainage in the bathroom and kitchen too! Right now, my apartment is so dirty that I broke my own record, it's so dirty that I'm running away from reality. To be honest, I don't want to go home. Is there a choice for me to stay here for a while.....(No)

That's about it, everyone! I'm really grateful that you've finished this volume. The animated version of the Toradora! series has also started broadcasting! Oh! Looks like I'll have to at least clean up the area around my television so that I'll be able to catch the animation!

Takemiya Yuyuko

Project Staff

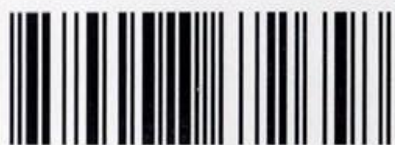
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9784048672658

ISBN978-4-04-867265-8
C0193 ¥510E



1920193005103



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発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: **本体 510円**

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