


竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス



 電撃文庫

Toradora

Volume 10

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Prologue

"Ah? It's you. Mother isn't.....Huh? Help you tell her? And how is that any of my business? Please tell her yourself."

"You're really useless!"

The person on the other end of the line clicked his tongue unhappily.

"What? You have a problem?"

Minori tugged on the cord of her hooded t-shirt, pulling her hood tightly around her head, as the other person retorted, 'Bernie!' This was how Minori and her brother had communicated since a long time ago. 'Tell me this isn't true, Bernie!' Last time, she would have found the urgent-sounding voice on the other end of the line funny, but now -- ('Bernie' and 'Tell me this isn't true, Bernie!' are references from Gundam 0080: War in the pocket)

"Anyway, why didn't you call mother's cellphone in the first place if you really have something urgent to tell her?"

"She didn't pick up!" Hearing her brother's unhappy reply, Minori was extremely unhappy as well, as she spoke to the person that she couldn't see through the phone.

"It's really cold over here! You idiot! Are you looking for trouble, I had to go out into the hallway to pick up your phone!"

"You could have used the handset!"

"Handset?"

"You don't know what a handset is?"

"It's been missing for ages!"

Minori was really freezing. She wasn't wearing socks as she had been sitting at the kotatsu, which is why Minori was freezing as she stood barefooted in the hallway, her breath coming out in white clouds of mist.

"How would I have known that, you ugly girl!"

Hearing the shouting from the other side of the line, 'How dare you!' Minori used her frozen hand to tug even harder on the cord of her hooded t-shirt, binding it even tighter around her head.

"If you dare to come home, I'll kill.....Ah, I think mother's back?"

The unlocking of the door was heard in the hallway, as Minori's mother, had returned home, carrying a shopping bag in one hand. Minori handed over the phone, and merely said 'Minori---',

which was enough to tell her mother that it was her brother, who stayed in a boarding school. 'Hello?' Her mother's excited voice sounded in the hallway.

"You're too loud!"

As Minori prepared to bring the shopping bags to the kitchen, she noticed that there were shiny beads on her mother's coat. For a moment, she thought that those were raindrops.

".....Eh? It can't be?"

Minori opened the cold metal door of her home to the corridor of her apartment block, mildly surprised by the cold air that penetrated deep into her chest.

It's true!

Looking down from the fourth storey, Minori saw that it had started snowing, the street looking as though it was covered by countless white feathers dancing in the wind. Minori momentarily forgot about the cold as she stuck her head out. Even though she had seen enough snow to last her a lifetime during the school trip, but it was another thing altogether when it snowed in her own town.

"Wow! It's beautiful.....!"

I should send a mail to my friends. To tell them, Have you noticed that it's snowing? It's really beautiful. Go outside quickly. What are you doing out?

"Perhaps I could add another sentence: Wouldn't that make this a white Valentine's Day?"

But Minori didn't move, as she stared at the snowflakes falling from the sky, framing the scenery with the thumbs and index fingers of both her hands and looking through the rectangular frame.

Today is Valentine's Day.

Perhaps the snow is a present from the heavens. For the people who weren't able to be honest, the heavens pulled down a white curtain, temporarily blocking out the complications of life.

If it's like this, then please snow all you can. Minori stretched out her hands towards the night sky as she closed her eyes and mouth. I don't think I'll be sending any mail anytime soon, I want to stay here. The snowflakes that fell onto the palms of her outstretched hands looked small, thin and fragile. The warmth that this pair of hands had touched, the memory that was still vividly etched into her mind, their conversations, all those seemed to be flying towards the sky together with the evaporating warmth.

And then the white snowflakes melted into droplets of water before freezing up again in the clouds, to once again descend upon this world. That warmth had silently turned into countless glittering diamonds above the heads of the people in this town--

"Nee-chan! There's miso ramen, shoyu ramen and pork ribs ramen, which one would you like to eat!?"

--Her mother stuck her head out of the door, waving packets of instant noodles in her hands.

".....You're such a spoiler, mother.....!"

Minori couldn't help but groan, clutching her head in her hands in exasperation. Just because of this, because of this.....She ruffled her fringe as she turned around to once again gaze upon the snowing night sky.

Maybe this is how it is. My home is still what it has always been like tonight. She wound the cord that had been stretched to it's limit around her finger, breathing out white clouds of mist towards the night sky. If only the incessant snow and the white clouds that I'm breathing out can become part of the curtain that has descended upon the world; If only they could become a pure-white protective barrier around the two people who are finally willing to face up to each other honestly.

As long as the two of them are alone together, they will surely be able to share their secrets with each other.

Even as Minori prepared to walk back into her home, she forcibly turned her upper body back towards the night sky, her legs crossed. Hey, to the people in the world--! She breathed deeply in the freezing air, as though she was trying to suck in the attention that she did not need, opening her arms theatrically,

"How can there be a mother who asks her daughter, who works in a ramen store, to eat instant ramen!"

"You.....stop trying to be funny....."

Hahahaha-- Minori laughed as she walked back into her home, not noticing that on the bridge below her apartment block, a black-colored sports car was weaving through traffic in a hurry.

* * *

The dark-coloured car that had just drove past looked like her mother's Porsche.

The two of them hid under a darkened saloon's advertisement board at a corner of a cross junction, holding their breath as they waited for the traffic light to change to green.

Under the intense gaze of the red light, a multitude of snowflakes descended from the sky.

She wanted to say: It's really cold.

She wanted to say: The snow will probably pile up won't it.

"....."

She wanted to call, 'Ryūji.' But it was as though her voice was frozen in the depths of her throat, rendering her unable to speak. Taiga blew off the snowflakes that had stuck onto her fringe.

As long as I open my mouth, the conversation will be continued. Ryūji, where are we going? What should we do? What will happen now? But since she couldn't speak, Taiga could only remain silent.

Several large lorries turned around the cross junction and drove past the two of them, their loud ignition sounding like challenging voices in the deathly silent housing district. Even if they weren't intentional, Taiga was still a little afraid, as she stepped back slightly, feeling the coldness of the asphalt road through her boot-clad feet. Her right hand was still holding on to Ryūji's left hand, but he hadn't said anything at all, as his fingers shook uncontrollably despite Taiga tightening and loosening her grip a couple of times.

Taiga looked up at the side of Ryūji's face, feeling as though that familiar silhouette was extremely far away, but also feeling as though she may be able to touch him without even needing to straighten her fingers if she were to reach out. The pair of eyes that curved upwards violently looked as though they were glaring at the traffic light, but his expression must be very calm, his chin should also be relaxed. A single snowflake dropped onto that pair of pale lips, and disappeared in a moment.

It will disappear the moment it touched. Taiga looked away.

A desire so strong that it was scary had been conveyed to the right hand that Taiga held tightly in her left hand. She wanted to hold on even tighter, she wanted to close the distance between them, to use her claws to forcibly shorten the distance, she wanted to be entangled together with him, and then bite down with her teeth -- she wanted to satiate the hunger that she felt. If she could shout out her true feelings as she bit down, so that he would understand.....

She wanted to rush headlong into him, to tell him about the feelings that even she herself did not fully understand. Even though she had already decided on what to do, but she wasn't even able to say his name as she hid behind the saloon's advertisement board. 4500 yen for a haircut,

1000 yen extra for long hair. 2500 yen for a perm. Taiga stared at those words and numbers until she could recite them from memory, but the traffic light still had not changed to green.

If the friend that had pushed this shivering body of mine forward knew that I'm like this right now, I wonder what she would think--

".....!"

--What kind of expression should I have? Because she had lowered her head, mucus was dripping out from her nose. Taiga breathed in loudly as she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Ryūji might have mistaken that for a sob, as he suddenly let go of the hand that he had held on with almost inhuman strength.

"Ah!?"

".....Not so loud, or the people living here will hear us. Remember, right now, we're running away."

Ryūji's grumbled in response to Taiga's sudden shriek, even though he was also speaking in a loud voice. Probably because he hadn't spoken in a long time, his volume control was a little rusty.

But that wasn't the point. Ryūji slowly unraveled the cashmere muffler that was wrapped around his neck inside his eiderdown coat.

"Eh.....It can't be....."

"Yes it can."

Ryūji wrapped the muffler around Taiga's neck--Of course not. Taiga already had her own muffler wrapped around her neck, so Ryūji wrapped his muffler around her head to block the snow. He tied a knot at her chin.

".....Now we'll be able to pick up roaches.....!"

Ryūji's eyes looked like the the eyes that Hades used to banish the spirits of dead people to hell, as he slowly spoke in a low voice,

"You don't pick up roaches, you catch them."

A snowflake dropped onto the tip of his nose, as the white cloud that Ryūji breathed out quavered in the wintry air.

".....Maybe it would have been better if I had told him about it first."

The meaning was unclear in the mumbled sentence.

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

"I should have told Kitamura to keep my part-time job a secret."

The two of them didn't look at each other. Taiga lightly held Ryūji's right hand before letting go again. Will they be able to hold hands again? But, but, but--

The traffic light still had not changed to green.

* * *

--Even so, it was still too early to come to a conclusion.

--It was also true that there were many different perspectives on this matter.

--As of today, the situation still has not been resolved.

"'Difference in opinion'.....There's no way to resolve the difference. 'It is still too early to come to a conclusion'.....'Some say that is still too early'.....Hmm -- 'As of the time of this writing, no conclusion has been made' should be enough. Right, this should be about it."

Kitamura carefully stacked the pages of the report on top of each other as he counted the number of pages. The reports for three people had ten pages each, now all he had to do was to staple them together with a cover page. This will be 2000 yen times 3, 6000 yen altogether. He even changed the handwriting for each of the reports, using a 2B pencil, a 0.3mm HB mechanical pencil and a blue ballpoint pen for each of the report, so it shouldn't be too obvious that all three reports were done by the same person.

Kitamura took off his spectacles and rubbed the spot between his eyebrows as he stretched his back, cracking his joints loudly in the process. And then he moved his arms and neck, groaning like an old man.

Turning off the light on the table that he had used since primary school, Kitamura looked over the three reports that he had done. Even though the content only needed to prove that 'the writer has read the book', but it still wasn't an easy task. It wasn't his brain that was tired, it was his eyes and hand.

According to his brother, fewer and fewer professors allow their students to use typewriters to do their reports (speaking of which, the fact that almost no university student knew how to operate a typewriter nowadays was also a problem. Because more and more students merely copied from the web, some professors had started to only accept handwritten reports. This was what had

brought a money-making opportunity to his younger brother, who was in high school. Of course he wouldn't be able to help with the higher level reports, but if it's only a routine literature review, his younger brother would be able to turn into a 'report-writing machine' to help mass produce handwritten reports.

The softwood board beside the table had a list of his brother's 'reservations'. Kitamura put on his spectacles for a closer look. His brother was in a club that spanned across several famous private universities, so he knew a lot of people. The period from now till the end of the semester was the best time to make money, some of the longer reports even going for 5000 yen. Luckily Kitamura's club activities were on hold for the time being, so he had time to help his brother.

"This is 1000, and then 500, 1000.....and then 2000, 2000, it'll be 28000 yen in total up to here....."

Kitamura counted with his fingers as he thought to himself, It's still not enough. The main problem was the extra costs. And also.....Right, my stingy brother's 10 percent.

"10 percent's a lot of money. Damn it, I have to think of a way.....Hmm? What's that?"

The loud roar of an engine was heard outside his window, as Kitamura lifted his head in surprise. He pulled open his curtains,

"Oh!"

He was also surprised that it was snowing. It looked really cold outside, as numerous snowflakes danced around under the light of the streetlamps. And then--

"Wow....."

Kitamura gave another surprised exclamation as he saw the unique headlights of the car. Judging by the sound of its engine, could it be a Porsche? Sports cars were very uncommon in a housing district like his.

Kitamura closed the curtain due to the cold, as he stood up to press a button on the wall remote to turn on the heater. As the old air-conditioner started to creak and groan, Kitamura noticed that the sound of the Porsche's engine had stopped as he heard the opening of the Porsche's door.

It can't be a visitor to my house can it? Kitamura didn't think that anyone he knew would drive a car like that to visit his house. But at that exact moment -- 'Ding Dong'

Without giving him any time to think, the doorbell had sounded. And then he heard the sound of his mother's footsteps, and -- 'May I ask who is this?' the usual greetings over the intercom.

Kitamura's mother talked to the visitor for a little while before walking up the stairs. She knocked on his door before sticking her head in, an inexplicable expression on her face,

"Could you come down for a while?"

Her tone was serious. This isn't a good sign, Kitamura thought as he mentally prepared himself.

"Me? What's wrong? Who's here?"

"She says that she's Aisaka-san's mother, Aisaka-san is one of the classmates that went with you to Kawashima's summer home during the holidays isn't she? Her mother seems to be.....looking for her. She seems to have disappeared."

Aisaka Taiga disappeared. --Just as Takasu Ryūji has also disappeared.

Kitamura had a very bad feeling about the whole thing. He suddenly pieced together the entire situation. It was that phone call. Everything started from there.

"Hello~Kitamura-kun, I can't find Ryū-chan, do you know where he is~?" -- I stupidly told her the truth.

Something special may happen between Aisaka Taiga and Takasu Ryūji today. I had always thought, and had also hoped that something like that would happen, which was why I had felt that nothing was wrong even if he hadn't gone home when he was supposed to. Which was why I wasn't worried at all. But I had subconsciously felt that since Takasu Yasuko was his guardian, so I was unable to lie to her.

Aisaka Taiga had mentioned that she has been living alone ever since her parents divorced. Since it's like this, then why would her mother choose to appear in this town, appear at my house? If she had wanted to find Aisaka, shouldn't she have gone to Kushieda's or Takasu's place -- Or could it be that during that phone call, my best friend wasn't the only one who was missing? Are the two of them together? Did they disappear together? Is it because they have disappeared that their family members are looking for them? Or is because their family members are looking for them that they disappeared?

"What happened.....Do you know something about it?"

Kitamura's mother knitted her eyebrows together as she asked him. Walking out of his room, Kitamura didn't answer, as he thought to himself while walking down the stairs: Because I don't know anything, that's why I need to think about it.

Chapter 1

A solution? Of course he didn't have one.

Just like a person who hates spiders running into a huge spider web, like a person who hates snakes stepping on one, like a criminal running straight into a policeman, Ryuuji turned and ran. If the other party was really a spider, snake or a policeman, then he might have the choice of choosing the 'battle' command, but the problem was that the person blocking his way was his mother, so he couldn't exactly beat her with a stick (and he didn't have a stick handy in the first place). No, the damage caused by his words was far greater than any stick could have inflicted on his mother. His mother -- Yasuko slumped to the ground, her face deathly pale.

But Ryuuji ran off without turning back.

".....Ah!"

"Oh.....!? Be careful!"

Taiga suddenly lost her balance, to which Ryuuji responded by swiftly grabbing her hand to steady her. A strong beam of light shot out from Taiga's round eyes for a moment there. Ryuuji pulled on the hand that he was holding as Taiga finally managed to stand up again in the soft snow, the two of them then continuing their escape. Their entwined hands were already inseparable.

The two of them didn't use umbrellas to shield themselves from the snow as they blindly stumbled through the snowing darkness, trying to get as far away as possible from their respective mothers. The two of them incessantly breathed out huge clouds of white mist as they panted, all their effort concentrated on running away from that place.

Yasuko's selfish protective tendencies blocked Ryuuji's way, making him feel that his existence would lose all meaning if he was unable to call out for Yasuko. On the other hand, Taiga's mother wanted to take her away from Ryuuji's side, also becoming an obstacle.

He had Taiga by his side.

Ryuuji adjusted his grip on Taiga's hand, not hiding the fact that his palm was full of sweat.

In that single moment, all this hand wanted, and all that wanted this hand, was Taiga's hand. Ryuuji wanted to run away with Taiga, and Taiga wanted to run away with Ryuuji as well. Even though they didn't know the true face of the enemy standing in front of Taiga, but it was certain that Taiga wanted to run away with Ryuuji before she was taken away.

Their mothers would probably chase after them in the car wouldn't they? Which was why they ran into the small alleyways that cars couldn't drive through, weaving through the housing district aimlessly. And then -- The problem was.

The problem was.....

"We'll be crossing the bridge soon, be careful."

It'll be enough as long as Ryuuji chose to get the answer to his question.

"The bridge....."

"We'll go over to the neighboring town to take a bus there, we'll surely get caught if we continue to stay here, and we won't get far if we take the train."

It'd be enough if he were able to confirm Taiga's feelings. And then he wanted to tell Taiga all about the complicated and overflowing feelings he had for her. That would be enough.

To hear Taiga tell me how she really feels, and for myself to tell her about how I really see her. I want to ask, I want to say -- I only want to do that.

If something like this could be solved so easily, then the world would probably change color, and everything would have a new beginning. Ryuuji felt his heart beating wildly.

And then, why had things come to this?

Every breath that takes in air under zero degrees hurts the cells in a person's respiratory organs. From the other side of the white curtain, two rows of street lamps illuminated the pavement on the bridge, their light looking abnormally dull. The route crossed over the river that was completely black at night to the neighboring town, but it was completely dark at the other end of the bridge. Because it was an aimless escape, Ryuuji and Taiga had no idea where they would end up at.

Ryuuji walked towards the side of the road which had more cover, as there was only one way forward. Pulling Taiga along behind him, Ryuuji watched his surroundings carefully before crossing the dual-lane road. The two of them then got on to the bridge under the cover of a loud truck.

But.

".....Ah, money!"

They'll need money to take the bus. The two of them only thought about such a simple thing after crossing roughly one-third of the bridge.

"Oh no! I didn't bring money!"

Ryuuji couldn't help but knit his eyebrows tightly together as he continued to walk. How could he have made such a mistake at this time. He only had spare change in his wallet, and his bank card was at home, while he had thrown his salary from Albus at Yasuko's feet.

"Don't worry! I should have quite a bit of money on me!"

Taiga took out her cat-shaped purse as she ran, letting go of Ryuuji's hand as she pulled open the zip of the wallet,

"See, there's one, two 10000-yen notes....."

"It's dangerous to do something like this while you're running, be careful of falling down."

"But I have to confirm the exact amount of cash I have on me! You're also not feeling completely at ease aren't you? There's also two, three, four 1000-yen notes.....no spare change."

Taiga clumsily counted the number of notes that she had taken out from her purse. and then--

"Ah, I heard a rustling sound in my pocket, could it be money? Ah, those are only receipts."

At the very moment that Taiga pouted at the receipts, a strong gust of wind suddenly blew up from the river, crashing into the side of the two people standing on the bridge.

The wind blew away the exposed 24000 yen in an instant.

"....."

"....."

The two of them were speechless.

The notes danced in the strong wind as they flew higher and higher, swinging in unexpected directions with the wind, as though it was trying to get the attention of Ryuuji and Taiga. 'Ah, ah, ah.', 'Oh, oh, oh.'From a passerby's perspective, the two of them probably looked like weirdos trying to summon the spirit of a sea-dog that was lost in the sky. But Taiga and Ryuuji were extremely serious, as they tried with all their might to grab on to the notes that were dancing in the sky. But the notes merely changed its direction together with the wind, as though taunting them.

"Ah, ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.....!"

"Oh, oh, oh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.....!"

The two of them followed the direction of the wind as they ran across the road, weaving through the traffic before rushing to the barrier, stretching out their hands.

"....."

"....."

24000 yen in cash floated through their outstretched fingers as the notes continued their journey towards the surface of the river.

The outstretched fingers of the two people standing on the bridge tried to follow the path of the notes, but the 24000 yen had already disappeared into the darkness. No matter how one cried out to it, no matter how one called out to it, the river continued to flow mercilessly.

The two of them looked at each other.

"....."

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"....."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-why do you have such a calm expression on your face.....What do we do now!?"

"....."

Taiga grabbed onto the railing and leaned forward, trying to get a better look at the surface of the river. Beside her, Ryuuji was in the exact same position. He wasn't calm, but stunned. He didn't say anything because he couldn't believe what had just happened.

What just happened?

Don't tell me?

That's the 'divine intervention' that I've heard so much about? Retribution?

Snowflakes continued to float onto the surface of the river. Ryuuji stared at the river, not even able to move a single finger.

Is the sin of telling the mother who had sacrificed her life to give birth to him and to bring him up 'You were wrong' so heavy? But I was merely stating the truth, not giving birth to me would have been the correct choice. Did I just get punished for shouting out the truth? Do I deserve something like this?

Is my sin that heavy?

"What do we do now!? What do we do.....!"

What do we do now, what do we do now, what do we do now? Taiga repeated these few words over and over as she hugged her head and plastered herself onto the railing like how she slept in class.

The two of them had nothing to say.

Beside the stunned Ryuuji, the shoulders under a snowy white coat also froze. Countless small snowflakes fell onto her shoulders, the muffler that Ryuuji had wrapped around her cheeks, and the long strands of hair on her back, one after another, unceasingly. Ryuuji's eiderdown coat, his back, and his face were also completely covered in snowflakes.

From the riverside walkway to the bridge.

Eight o'clock on the night of the sacred Valentine's Day.

Stepping on the thin layer of ice that had covered the ground, with snowflakes swirling around them, the two of them finally stopped.

Looking towards the other side of the bridge--It was only a normal housing district, with lights coming out of every house. In the unceasing snow, the other end of the bridge seemed like another world.

They couldn't take the buses or the trains without money. Due to the cold weather, Ryuuji couldn't stop shivering. Just standing there for a few minutes was enough to freeze his joints. But the Porsche may catch up to them which they rested, so they couldn't afford to stop now.

There isn't a place that would accept the two of us in this world.

Ryuuji looked at Taiga's slim backline, thinking about what Taiga was thinking about. Uneasiness, hopelessness, regret -- It was certain that she was cursing her own clumsiness, her slim fingers holding the head that was protected by Ryuuji's muffler so tightly that they shook. She probably wants nothing more than to rifle through her own hair right now.

"Ryuuji, what do we do?"

Ryuuji couldn't answer, as he merely stood in the snow, not even able to squeeze a simple question like 'What do you want to do?' out of his mouth.

Was it because that question implied that it was Taiga's fault? I'm merely doing what you want to do, it's not my fault, I'm a man who wants a woman to bear the responsibility-

-Is that not it?

Of course not, but the fear of not being able to ask 'What do you want to do?' did exist, but it was a fear of something else.

Ryuuji realised that he was merely pretending to be focussing on running away so as to be able to look away from this fear, as he tensed his back muscles.

Taiga held my hand and ran away together with me, so I can be 100% sure that she wants to be together with me. But the problem is.....

To be honest, I'm really scared.

I know myself. When Taiga's mother appeared and told me that she was going to take Taiga away, I only wanted to run away. No matter what happens, no matter what I do, I can't bear to be separated from Taiga, I can't live on in a place without Taiga. Even if you ask me for the reason, I can only tell you that I'll think about it after all this is over. When I decided to abandon the Takasu-residence that was protected by my mother, my hand held Taiga's, and that is my true feeling.

But I don't know what Taiga is thinking, or rather, I don't even want to know.

The reason behind why I feel afraid, why I can't speak, why I can't bear to face this fear.

"Taiga."

Because I have a feeling that this will reopen a wound.

Everytime I wish that this feeling is wrong, something will happen.

".....Let's go. No matter what, we shouldn't be standing here."

Ryuuji forced out a sentence, and grabbed on to Taiga's slim fingers once again. 'Let's go.' He tried to pull Taiga along.

Taiga's body swayed in response to his pulling.

"Go.....Where are we going to....."

Taiga's body swayed, and returned to her original position. Ryuuji felt that his bad feeling was swiftly becoming reality. Ryuuji could feel that before he even opened his mouth, the boundaries of reality was becoming clearer and clearer. Like the swaying of Taiga's body, and her previous words. The reason behind why Taiga abandoned her home, the reason behind why she was left to live by herself in the apartment block beside the Takasu residence, and why Taiga didn't want to stay with her mother, and why Taiga's mother wanted to separate Taiga and I.

The feeling was right.

The wound -- Was horrifying. Ryuuji couldn't help but shiver.

Taiga lifted her head, her hand still holding Ryuuji's,

".....We, don't have any money left."

She looked into Ryuuji's eyes.

"Seriously, we don't have any money left."

".....I know. Our money just floated out of your hands didn't they?"

Yes, yes, that's how it is. Ryuuji nodded towards Taiga, but wasn't able to laugh it off.

"Umm, I have something to tell you.....Hmm....."

Taiga let go of Ryuuji's hand, as she brushed a strand of hair off her face and stuck her hands into her coat pockets.

Perhaps this is the beginning of a terrifying scene. Ryuuji instinctively looked away from Taiga's eyes, afraid of being stared at by Taiga's somber eyes.

"I have something to tell you."

How did things come to this? What happened to Taiga? Ryuuji was afraid of finding out the answers to these questions. Taiga had already become an indispensable part of my life, so what just what is coming to slice open our bodies and souls? Ryuuji's facial expression twisted subconsciously. Taiga repeated herself: I have to tell you something.

"I really don't have any money left. The money in my purse were the last bit of money I had, my bank account is empty. I haven't received any money this year, though there was a sizeable amount of money in my account, but since I drew money by the hundred thousands, it's already empty."

"--!"

White flames shot out from Ryuuji's eyes, ears and nose.

Of course.

Just as he expected.

Just as Ryuuji expected, it was that person's fault! Ryuuji trembled with uncontrollable anger as he thought to himself: Just explode. It would be illogical and agonizing if you don't. Ryuuji couldn't help but ask,

"What is that old man trying to do!?"

Ryuuji gave a loud, primal roar, as though he had poison stuck in his throat. Taiga would probably have been contaminated by the poison spewing out of Ryuuji's mouth, but Ryuuji couldn't endure the agony of keeping that poison in his throat.

It's that old man again! He's here to torment Taiga again! He's using this method to make Taiga distressed again -- Damn it, he should just die.

"Don't let that fellow intervene in your life!"

Disappear! Taiga lowered her head slightly, as though accepting the curse that Ryuuji had thrown out. 'He didn't intervene.' Ryuuji heard her mumble.

".....I heard that he lost a court case. He had been fighting a court case for a long time already."

Snowflakes landed on Taiga's fringe.

"That's why father ran away with Yuu. He had to pay an astonishing amount of money, so much so that he would have to declare bankruptcy. His company, his home, his car, everything's gone. That apartment is no longer mine, I'm an illegal occupant."

On the snow-covered ground, there were marbles that looked like eyes, a piece of dry leaf that looked like a nose, and a twig that looked like a mouth. On the crayon-sketched oval shape, there were round eyes, a triangular nose, and a rectangular mouth -- There was no hint of life, no degree of warmth.

That was Taiga's face.

"Now that father has run away, what will happen next? Will he be arrested one day? I don't know. What industry did he work in? Did he even work? I don't even know that..... I never thought that there was anything wrong with not knowing any of those, so much so that I didn't even know that he had become like that. I only found out when mother came to get me during the school trip. I didn't know that mother was about to get married again either."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Ryuuji didn't even realize that it was his own voice that asked the question, thinking that it was an alarm from a parallel universe.

"I'm sorry for not telling you, I'm sorry."

And then? What do you intend to do about it?

Ryuuji muttered,

"Mother wants to take me in, so I told her to buy the apartment that I'm staying in, and send money to me every month, just like what father used to do. I even said that if she was unwilling, then she could just leave me to my own devices. I may be clumsy, but I should be able to get a job, I'll find a way to survive, but mother was against it. Unlike me, mother wants to sever all ties with father, she doesn't want her own daughter to be 'Aisaka Rikuro's daughter', so she fought for my custody rights, and wants to bring me to a place where no one can find me. I suddenly feel that it may be better if Yuu was around--"

Ryuuji recalled the faces that Taiga had shown before today. The Taiga who attempted to mask everything with lies, but would still have occasionally looks of helplessness. He also recalled the words that Taiga had shouted in the unused classroom, and the feelings that he should be able to express.

The feelings that he wanted to express.

"--Ryuuji?"

Ryuuji was defeated by reality, as he couldn't help but surrender.

He crouched down at Taiga's feet, holding his breath as he attempted to swallow that sobs that were coming out of his mouth, despite his feeble attempts at covering his face.

But crying wouldn't solve anything, nor would it make things better.

"Hahaha....."

Taiga laughed.

Something soft was placed on Ryuuji's head. It was the muffler that Ryuuji had wrapped around Taiga's cheeks, which now carried her body heat.

"The problem lies with me doesn't it."

Kneeling down in front of Ryuuji, Taiga reached out her hands and hugged him. Ryuuji's body gave an involuntary shudder at her soft murmurings, the long hair that came into contact with his nose feeling extremely cold. Above the two of them, snow continued to fall onto the river and the town.

"Things like this always happen."

Under the protection of Taiga's body heat and the muffler, tears continued to roll down Ryuuji's cheeks. If the problem lies with you, then I'm not normal either. Ryuuji couldn't speak. If the problem lies with Aisaka Taiga, the most important person to me, then I, Takasu Ryuuji would also be abnormal -- He couldn't say it, as sobs continued to rack his body. He couldn't speak, he didn't know what to do, he didn't even have a place to go back to anymore.

Ryuuji struggled to stand up as he stretched out both of his hands. He wanted to tell Taiga that no matter what, no matter where, he would never change, the reality of his existence would not change. Ryuuji hugged Taiga with all his strength.

"Why are you....."

Taiga hugged him back tightly,

"Willing to stay by my side.....?"

You idiot! Ryuuji didn't shout it out, but instead lifted his face, burying his chin into Taiga's hair as he looked up into the snow-filled sky. His tear-stained face was already frozen.

".....You mean you don't know!? You really don't know!?"

There were no stars in the night sky. With no constellations to guide the way, Ryuuji didn't know where he was. He only knew that Taiga was in his arms, and he was together with her.

This was the only thing that was certain.

"Is there any other place where I should be besides here!?"

The gaze in his eyes was brighter than any star.

Huh? Taiga blinked in confusion. Even Ryuuji was so surprised at saying such a thing so nonchalantly that he let go of Taiga. He finally realized that the answers to all his questions were here.

Ryuuji took half a step back as he brushed the strands of hair on Taiga's face behind her ears, bending down to look at her pale face. 'Here?' Ryuuji nodded in response, placing his palm on Taiga's cheek. Although her soft cheeks were still frozen solid, but the warmth in them had returned.

"Yes."

Ryuuji nodded his head seriously once again, expressing his decision without hesitation,

"That's right, here."

Although he didn't know why, but he felt that this answer was definitely correct. I'm the one who made this decision. Ryuuji sucked a lungful of the freezing winter air into his body before slowly breathing out a sizeable cloud of white mist. Layer after layer of snow had piled onto the thin layer of ice on the ground beside his feet. If Ryuuji had looked closer, he would have noticed that layers of snow had piled up on both the railing and Taiga's head.

To be honest, Ryuuji didn't understand why he didn't realize that he had already reached this decision.

If Taiga was unwilling, she'll kick me, explode, smash my head, run away with all her might. Even though she's a palmtop tiger, but a tiger's still a tiger. Even if Ryuuji had that thought, but he didn't want Taiga to run away, so he did a fake -- He hung the muffler that was on his head on his neck, moving towards the face that he held in his hands.

Why would humans do something like this? It didn't matter if it was a promise, to prove something, a contract, a practice, instinct, or if even if it had no meaning at all. To protect himself, to protect Taiga, to protect their relationship, to protect everything, Ryuuji stepped over the boundaries that his conscience had set for him. We are not father and daughter, or brother and sister, or just friends, nor are we landlord and customer. We're just classmates, but not just classmates, not neighbors, we don't have a master and servant relationship, or a family-like

relationship, nor are we secretly in love with each other's best friends. Ryuuji knew that by doing that, he would destroy every dangerous connection there was, and also knew that by doing that, the grey areas in their relationship would be swept away, but he still wanted to make contact.

Ryuuji wanted to kiss Taiga.

Ryuuji slowly closed the distance between him and Taiga in time with the falling of the snowflakes. All these were irreversible actions, and they would never be the same ever again.

Their lips came into contact.

Taiga, who hadn't noticed Ryuuji moving towards her until their lips came into contact, trembled for a moment.

Never mind, it's only a momentary contact. Just like the actions of a cute puppy, Ryuuji moved his lips closer.....And then he used his wrapped his right hand around the back of Taiga's head, pushing her towards himself.

He didn't want to break contact, but Ryuuji could also be trying to ensure that Taiga wouldn't run away.

Even though he was taking the initiative, Ryuuji was trembling. Other people also kiss -- Are they all like this? The soft feel of Taiga's lips was almost searingly hot, the experience almost too much for Ryuuji to bear. Ryuuji's mind was blank. The happiness that came from the contact flashed across his mind, his heartbeat also rising to an impossibly high number. Just as he had learnt in Biology, feelings are a type of electric current. The current shot into his brain, bursting into fireworks in Ryuuji's eyes.

It was almost unbelievable that humans were able to carry out such an amazing feat.

This action, was very--

"You--"

Short-lived.

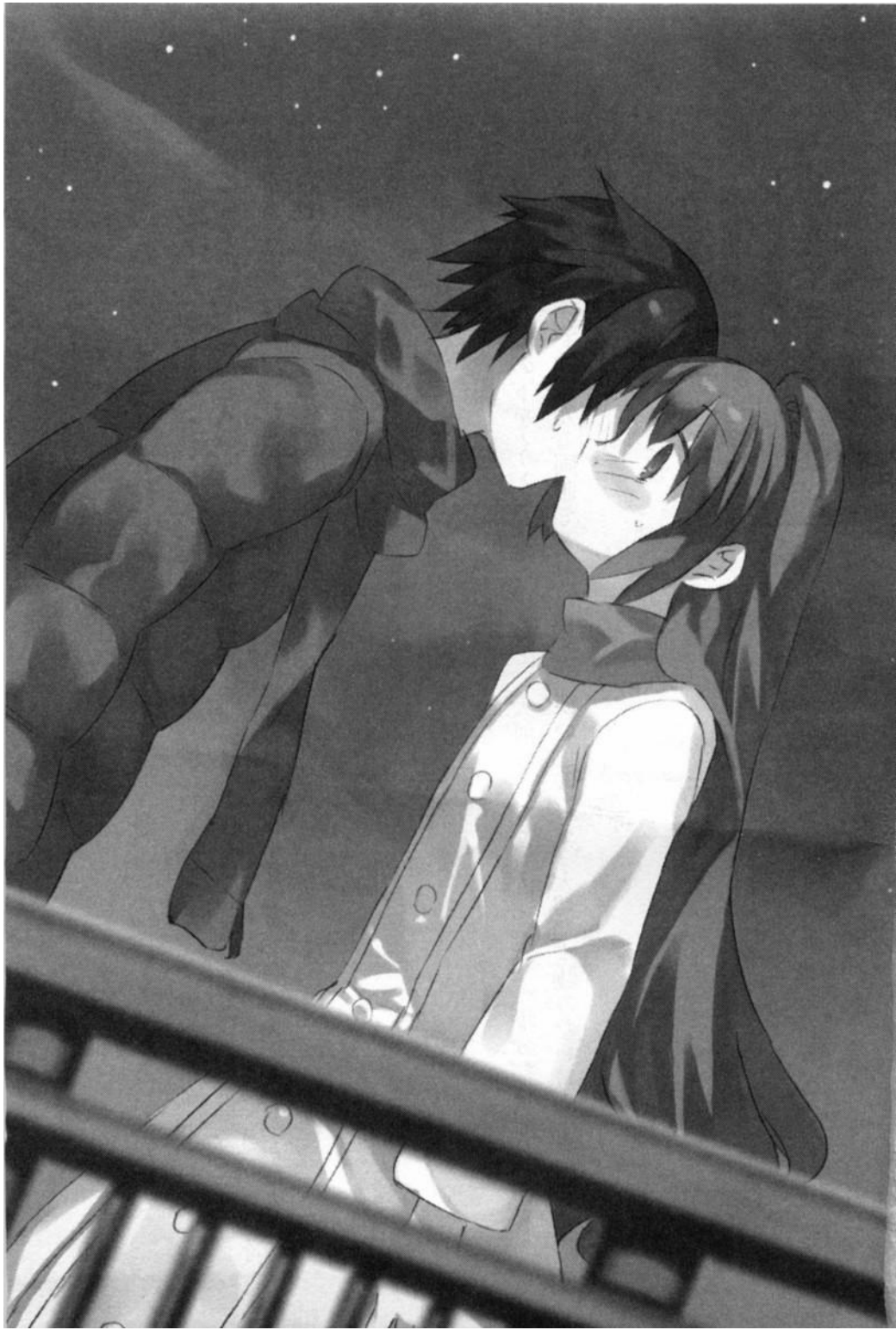
".....You kissed me?"

Taiga sidestepped Ryuuji's right hand as she stepped a step back away from him, looking at Ryuuji with a feral intensity in her eyes, her hands covering her mouth as though hiding some valuable treasure as she shook her head in disbelief.

".....I kissed you."

I kissed Taiga.

"Ki,Ki,Ki,Kissed.....?"



"Kissed Kissed Kissed!"

I really kissed her.

Ryuuji shook uncontrollably as he nodded with inhuman frequency, covering his mouth with one hand at the same time. This was definitely not normal. Was it surprising because it was the first kiss for both of them? Will they get used to it in the future? Could anyone get used to this kind of thing? Ryuuji wasn't able to look at Taiga's face as his eyes darted around her. But his body and mind weren't fully synchronized, as his body tried to do something even more terrifying. Maybe it'll be better if we kissed again. No, maybe it'll be worse. Ryuuji stretched out his hand--

".....Uguuuu.....You idiot....."

But his hand was stopped in its tracks by another hand. Taiga's entire body was made of deadly poison, something that Ryuuji had already experienced when they first met, so she was untouchable, but now --- it was too late. Ryuuji had already tasted the poison. The poison that Ryuuji tasted would take over his body both sweetly and agonizingly.

Even Ryuuji couldn't control how far they would be able to go now that he had made the first step. He turned his body awkwardly, almost injuring his back. 'But I want to see where we can go.' 'Not now.' Ryuuji stepped away from Taiga. 'But I want to try to get to our goal.' 'Don't go, you idiot.' Two steps back. Ryuuji, who was now three steps away from Taiga, shook his head. He wasn't able to throw away everything and give into his desire.

"You, you....."

Ryuuji swayed dangerously, like a drunk man, his back against the railing, as he held on tightly to it. Taiga's boots came into the perimeter of Ryuuji's swaying.

"Hey, wait! Go away go away go away! Don't come over!"

No! Don't come over! Ryuuji shouted, fearing that Taiga couldn't understand him. He climbed up the concrete railing, his eyes looking away from the flow of the river, as he mumbled with his body slanted sideways. Ryuuji bit down on his lip tightly, not able to forget the feeling he got from that moment of contact, and not knowing what to do about it.

Right, I have to think about our situation. The adults have taken away the only place which we could go back too, Taiga also stretched out her hand to grab onto my body, to close up the distance between us, to let our skin come into contact with each other. Even then, we will still be forcibly separated.

No, I don't want that. Never. Ryuuji grabbed his slightly wet hair with both hands. He could smell the river that was two inches below his position. What should I do? I have to protect our

relationship, to prevent other people from taking it away from us. Ryuuji held his breath and closed his eyes as he leaned over the railing, trying to think of a solution. Are there any solutions? Where should we run to? Please, can anyone give the kid who only knows how to throw tantrums a drama-like development ---

"Argh---!"

"Gah!"

--Taiga made her move.

At the same that Ryuuji heard a strange cry coming from a position slightly above his ears to his right, he was attacked. Losing his balance, Ryuuji couldn't help but grab on to the railing. But--

"You you you you you are such an id-id-idiot idiot idiot idiot--"

"Wh-Wh-What, Hey, ahhhhhhhh!"

Taiga grabbed Ryuuji's collar with one hand as her legs swung from right to left. Although her steps looked unstable, but her waist was as solid as a rock, the upper body that was hidden beneath her coat swinging expertly as she punched Ryuuji repeatedly.

"Idiot! Idiot! Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot! Idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot!"

"Stop it.....It's really.....Painful.....Ahhh....."

"You idiot! How stupid can you get!?"

"Don't hit me anymore, seriously, you.....Gah!"

The hands that Ryuuji had put up to shield himself were swept away cleanly, staggering him. He had no idea why things would become like this. I really shouldn't have kissed her should I? Is she angry because of that kiss? But--

"I'm sorry for slapping you!"

Taiga's voice was a little hoarse, as though she was screaming with all her strength. Ryuuji only one thing: That Taiga saw her destructive 'Breaking Palm!' and 'Fist Attack!' were merely 'slaps'. Those attacks were definitely not slaps.

"But my hands hurt when I hit you!"

"How does that work!? Gah.....!"

Ryuuji tried to stretch out his right hand to block as he retorted, but was easily swept away by the back of Taiga's left hand.

"Why don't you try to jump into the river again! I'll definitely, definitely, definitely....."

"Arghhhhhh.....!"

Taiga seemed to have misunderstood something, as she locked both of her hands onto Ryuuji's collar. In her eyes --

"I'll definitely kill you.....!"

A bestial glare.

Ryuuji couldn't move his eyes away from her scary gaze.

Blood rushed into Taiga's cold, pale face as she revealed her tiger fangs, Ryuuji already rooted to the ground by her gaze alone. The white mist that Taiga spat out rushed towards the tip of Ryuuji's nose cruelly,

"I also once thought about how good it would be if I hadn't been born into this world! I've thought about this.....A lot of times! Sob....."

Taiga's rose-coloured cheeks were covered in tears, her voice trembling, her soft lips twisted painfully, as the snowy-white hands that had grabbed on to Ryuuji's collar shook uncontrollably.

"But I continued to live.....Because....."

Ryuuji finally understood the reason behind Taiga's anger, but as his neck was being forcibly constricted, he wasn't able to calm Taiga down, or to resolve the misunderstanding.

Ryuuji felt that Taiga was really a stupid little fellow. She was just clumsy, she also liked to jump to conclusions, was extremely violent, refused to listen others, only knowing how to make use of her strength, and ---

"Because of you!"

And very direct.

Sob.....Even though sobs racked her throat, Taiga's gaze didn't falter, as she stubbornly looked up at Ryuuji, her hands locking on to his collar, telling him about her deepest, truest feelings as she wept. Taiga was running towards Ryuuji as she wept, as she exposed the deepest recesses of her heart to him.

Placing her life on the line for her feelings.

"Because I like you!"

Taiga screamed.

With the speed and velocity of a bullet, Taiga's voice shot into Ryuuji's heart. It set his heart on fire, shaking his very existence. Ryuuji felt as though his entire body was burning up.

"Are you trying to kill me.....!?"

Ryuuji threw his true feelings back at Taiga.

"I really want to kill you! That's right, I've been angry at you for a long time now! What was that just now!? What did you just say to Ya-chan!?"

"That, that was....."

"Stop giving excuses, baldy!"

Taiga shook Ryuuji roughly, dulling his vision as though he was going to get a concussion.

"I won't allow you to say those kind of things again! What do you mean by it'll be better if you weren't born? You better not say something like that ever again! I won't let you! You must live! It has nothing to do with who you like, or who you will be living with in the future! I will continue to be here, only for one reason, because I want to look at you, I want to look at Takasu Ryuuji! That is the only reason! It doesn't matter if I'm nothing to you, I just want to be near you.....Just that! But, but you kissed me, so..... So! I want! To be by your side! I've decided to stay by your side! I've already decided! Already, already, already.....! Do you get it now.....!"

Taiga's fingers suddenly let go of Ryuuji's eiderdown jacket.

Taiga was almost dissolving in tears. Ryuuji wanted to embrace the girl that no amount of words could make her understand. But just as he stepped towards Taiga, 'Oh!?' He slipped on the soft snow as he cursed his luck.

"Hey! Do you get it!?"

"Yes--"

At that very moment, in a movement that could only be explained as fate, Taiga was also rushing towards Ryuuji, either to grab on to him or to hit him. The two overly-energetic high school students smashed into each other. Losing his balance, Ryuuji mustered his remaining strength to shift his body to the left -- to the railing. His feet couldn't find purchase on the soft snow, while the hand that had grabbed onto the railing slipped off the thin layer of ice on it. To compound Ryuuji's misery, Taiga's attempt to steady herself ended up in a knuckle to the back of Ryuuji's neck.

"--Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Ryuuji's body went over the railing.

It's definitely divine punishment.

No, it's divine retribution.

The journey downwards seemed to be endless, and Ryuuji thinking that he saw a glimpse of the buddha on his way down. So there is such a thing as retribution in this world -- In the next second after Ryuuji's thought, he fell into the freezing river. Seeing a pillar of water shoot up as a result of his landing, Ryuuji's heart contracted painfully.

In total darkness, Ryuuji stopped breathing, the dead silence around him making him think, 'I'm going to die.' He didn't feel the cold, nor did he feel any pain, his senses were numbed by the cold.

Kya--Oh~~No.

Above him, Taiga screamed, her voice sounding like a slow-motion recording to Ryuuji's ears. It's the end..... Ryuuji's brain thought, but his limbs flailed instinctively, touching the riverbed almost instantly. It turned out that the river was so shallow that he could sit down and half his body would still be above the water.

"Achoo achoo achoo!"

Ryuuji jumped up.

"Achoo.....Ah! Achoo!"

Ryuuji coughed as he breathed painfully. I could die, I could really die. 'Achooooooooooooooooooo!' --As Takasu Ryuuji died, he decided to take all the living things in this world together with him. He turned into a bomb that could destroy the world, his wild eyes staring into space, his lips curving into a unnerving smile, with his dark wings disintegrating, a beam of blinding light shot out of his heart, declaring that he will be reborn as a demon king in a thousand years' time -- Of course it wasn't like that.

"See..... You brought this upon yourself....."

Ryuuji couldn't help but think that Taiga, who was looking down at him from the bridge was the scariest thing in the world. His vision was blurred, but Taiga nodded her head repeatedly as though she understood everything.

"You're lucky that you didn't get hurt. But..... You should have experienced it by now shouldn't you? You're not allowed to try to kill yourself by jumping into the river anymore. It's not a nice way to die."

"I, I, I --"

"I know that you're trying to say 'I get it'. Very good, you finally get it....."

She rubbed her nose and wiped the tears off her face before saying, 'Can you get back up?' Now's not the time to say something like that! So Ryuuji told her what he really was thinking,

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-it's because y-y-y-y-y-you p-p-p-pushed me d-d-d-d-down!?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? I can't hear you properly."

"I-I-I-I-I wasn't trying to kill myself!"

"Hmm? Is that it?"

"Y-Y-You're the one who misunderstood, a-a-a-and h-h-h-h-h-hit me! W-W-W-Which is why I-I-I became I-I-I-like this.....!"

"Oh, you should have said so earlier!"

I could have said so earlier? No one who has just been pushed into a river will accept that kind of attitude. Ryuuji was still standing in the river, as he looked up at Taiga, breathing deeply, thinking about what he wanted to say to her. The white snowflakes fell onto his wet and frozen body, compounding his misery, as Ryuuji couldn't feel his limbs anymore.

"Hey--Are you alright--?"

Taiga stuck out her body to get a better look at Ryuuji while she wiped off the tear stains on her face with the back of her hand.

"H, how can I be alright..... I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I'm freezinggggggg!"

"That's such a pity....."

"It's all your fault!?"

"Yes, but because I didn't mean it....."

"What do you mean by 'I didn't mean it.....'? You, You, You..... Idiot! Clumsy girl! Slow! Violent girl! You're being too much!"

Ryuuji couldn't help but shout at Taiga to ease his anger. Even though he was almost freezing, his anger was like a hot stove inside him. Looking at Taiga, Ryuuji breathed out large clouds of white mist as he rubbed his numb hands against his cheeks, slowly easing some blood into his hands.

From Ryuuji's forcibly cooled-down brain, he was able to clearly see the distance between Taiga and him. One was on the bridge, while the other was in the river, they wouldn't be able to touch each other even if they stretched out their hands. The snowy-white face was at a place where he couldn't reach.

"Hadn't I already apologized?"

"You didn't....."

Even at this kind of time, Taiga still continued to throw tantrums, as she pouted unhappily. Within the mess of dancing snowflakes, Taiga's soft hair was caught in the wind.

Ryuuji couldn't endure the fact that he was unable to touch her hair, her face, her lips. He wanted to be by her side, he wanted to be even closer, he wanted to be with her forever, he wanted to continue living together with Taiga.

He won't allow anyone to take that away from him.

Because he didn't want that to be taken away, he'll have to fight. The main opposition were the adults. After defeating the adults, he'll also become an adult, and once he becomes an adult, it'll mean that--

"Taiga....."

--It'll mean that.

Ryuuji waved at Taiga to get her attention. Taiga tutted as she turned slightly to look at Ryuuji.

This wasn't about feelings. It was about getting recognition from adults that he had become an adult by going by their rules. Ryuuji wanted to break free of being the child that could only listen to what the adults told him to do. Aren't animals like this too? The beasts on the ground, the birds in the sky, the fish in the water, even the bugs on the tree, as long as they grow up, they will stick out their chest and assert, 'This is my territory.' and fight for it.

"I'm seventeen years old right now."

Taiga fell silent for a moment before nodding,

"Me too.....Because we're classmates....."

"That's not the point."

The finger that pointed towards Taiga was trembling, and not because of the cold.

"And I'll be eighteen very soon."

The place that he wanted to bring Taiga to, the destination of their great escape, Ryuuji finally could represent it with a clear-cut number.

As long as they continue to escape detection for Thursday, Friday and Saturday, it'll be Ryuuji's birthday. And then, I'll be able to shout: I will continue to live! Before that, I have to run away with Taiga, until I turn eighteen.

And so, Ryuuji breathed deeply before locking his eyes onto Taiga again,

"Marry me."

Under the streetlights that illuminated the bridge, Taiga's white coat was blinding.

"From today onwards, I want to be with you every day, I want to be with you for the rest of my life."

In the direction that his trembling finger was pointing to, Ryuuji found the light that he had always been seeking. Ryuuji wanted to grab that shining star with his hands, and then glare at the rest of the world, not letting anyone else have it. He wanted to shout: This is mine!

".....Are you.....doing this to save me?"

Taiga's face changed, her voice as cold as the ice beneath her feet.

"Are you doing this because you pity me..... Because you sympathize with me? Is it kindness? Are you saying such things so that you can be happy at becoming a sacrifice, at being a good boy?"

If it's like that -- Ryuuji felt that Taiga was gnashing her teeth, and that was probably true as well. Taiga shot a bestial glare at Ryuuji, her small hands tightly clenched into fists, the blood in her veins burning at a higher temperature than molten lava. If it's really like this, I'll tear you apart. One wrong move would result in Ryuuji being torn apart. Taiga's body was trembling at the bestial instinct in her.

The eyes that no longer contained any semblance of reason, only revealed a bestial hunger for the truth.

Take all tha back, or else -- Her gaze told Ryuuji.

But I won't admit defeat.

"Ahhhhh.....Damn it.....I'm f-f-f-f-f-freezinggggg....."

I'm putting in just as much effort as her, so I will not lose. Ryuuji looked back at Taiga as he opened his eyes and bit down on his frozen lips, straightening his back as much as could before stretching out both of his hands,

"I don't care about what you think! I only have one thing to say!"

Ryuuji shouted hoarsely,

"I like you! That's why I want to resist the people who want to take you away! No matter who the opposition is, I will fight!"

"Like..... Me?"

".....It's freezing! It's so cold so cold so cold that I'm going to freeze to death!"

".....Ryuuji, likes me?"

"Ah-----I'm really going to freeze to death!"

"You just told me that you like me. You said it, you said it, you said it..... You said it. I'm very sure you said it, I heard it."

Why are you still asking questions then? Ryuuji was already at his limit, the strength draining away from his hands and knees. 'Ahhhhh.....' Ryuuji lowered his head and bent down--

".....I like you."

Ryuuji felt as though he had nothing left to say, that he had already emptied everything that was hidden in his heart. In the end, it all boiled down to one simple sentence, something that he finally was able to say after going through so much.

"I can't endure every heart-breaking thing that has happened to you, and I don't want to have anymore sad memories. But if all the sadness and unbearable things were required for me to get her -- to get to your side, and for you to come to my side, then I will treasure everything. You will be my world."

You are the one who holds my world together.

Ryuuji felt as though he had given away the last of his body heat with the worlds. After speaking, Ryuuji saw something unbelievable, as Taiga disappeared from the back of the railing, and then--

".....Wai, wai,wait, stop, hey, arghhhh.....!"

She jumped down.

She was aiming to jump past everything that was separating them into Ryuuji's arms. Taiga ignored Ryuuji's attempts to stop her, and shouted 'Get--Set!' before jumping off the bridge.

Her dress billowing out into the wintery air, covering Ryuuji's field of vision completely.

"I can't catch you! I can't! Arghhhh!"

In the next moment, Ryuuji grabbed on to Taiga with all his remaining strength, using his shoulders, his back and his waist to support her weight. Ryuuji had thought that Taiga would scream.

"I'm already here."

Ryuuji stepped back unsteadily, causing large ripples on the surface of the river. She came, she really came. Ryuuji held on to Taiga tightly, but was still unable to completely keep his balance, as he almost fell down.

"Non-cancellable, non-refundable, and I'll never leave you. Regret isn't an option."

"You, are you a monkey!?"

Taiga wrapped her limbs around Ryuuji, giving him her entire weight, her chin on Ryuuji's shoulder, her entire body depending on Ryuuji's arms for support. She breathed out roughly, her teeth pressing against Ryuuji's neck as though she was going to bite down on his jugular. The warmth of her tongue made Ryuuji tingle.

"I don't care if you call me a monkey, you're not allowed to regret.....!"

".....Of course. Who would regret something like that."

It has already been decided. And barely one second of silence later, Ryuuji really couldn't take Taiga's weight, and both of them fell backwards into the river, causing a large splash and loud screams.

It's all your fault, it's your fault for blaming me, you idiot, stupid, clumsy--! Amid the screams, there were also sounds of the two of them shouting abuse at each other.

* * *

"Ugu~~Ahhhhh....."

A certain someone groaned as she stared at something intently before talking to herself,

"Just as I thought."

She instinctively hid herself in the darkness beside the streetlamps as she looked down at the river from the riverside walkway at 'those two' dangerous characters who were splashing around in the water in this kind of snow. She covered her mouth with her sleeve as she twisted her slim body around to take another look at those two people.

Ahh---It's freezing! I'm going to freeze to death! My leg's stuck! Kya! Help me pull it out! Taiga! Ryuuji! Gah! They were definitely the two people that many people had been looking for. But even though she had found them, she suddenly felt that she didn't want to be connected to the two of them in any way. The two of them look very energetic, so there shouldn't be any problems. Just as she prepared to walk home --

".....Achoo!"

The legs that had planned to turn around didn't move in the end.

Clicking her tongue, she flipped open her cellphone and counted the number of rings as she walked. I'll go home if he doesn't pick up in five rings -- Definitely. She noticed that there was a small wet spot on her boots that was caused by a stray snowflake. Sigh. Just as she was about to switch faces, her childhood friend picked up the phone,

"Hello! I'm in front of the Takasu and Aisaka residences. No one answered when I pressed the doorbell, so I guess both of them aren't here. Where are you now?"

".....I'm beside the river. And..... I found them. They're below the bridge, in the river, the two of them look really scary!"

"What!? Are you serious!?"

"I have a bad feeling about this."

She patted the snow off her shoulder, as she thought about how she should have brought an umbrella while sticking her other hand into her pocket, leaning against the streetlamp.

Snowflakes continued to fall onto her cold figure.

"It can't be, that can it!? It's a little too scary to say it out loud, that..... the two, two of them, together..... committing suicide together?"

"No, it's even crazier than that."

She looked at the two of them again. The two crazy people were still splashing about in the water.

"Even crazier? It doesn't sound good. I'm coming over straight away!"

"Can Ami-chan go home already?"

Ami's voice sounded funny, as her nose was blocked. She had a little bit of the flu already, and had planned to sleep early today. Since it was snowing outside, Ami didn't feel like jogging today, and thus planned to massage her face after bathing.

--She hadn't wanted to care about what happened to those two.

"No! Go get the two crazy fellows back to normal. I'll be there immediately. Ah, and help me tell Kushieda!"

"Huh? I don't have her number."

"Liar."

"I'm serious..... Huh? He hung up on me."

It was an emergency.

Looks like it's really serious.

Anyone would be affected by the serious call that she had earlier received from her childhood friend. No wonder he spoke in that tone, that manner. It was because of her childhood friend's tone that Ami couldn't help but walk to her door and pull on her newly-bought boots, rushing out of her home without even bringing an umbrella.

"..... You have got to be joking with me."

Ami muttered to herself as she pressed on her cellphone with her frozen fingers to make a call. The other party picked up within a single ring.

"Ah. Hello?"

Ami pretended to not care as she lowered her voice and spoke in as emotionless a tone as possible, 'I found them near the bridge. Yuusaku says he'll be here immediately.' 'No way? Seriously? I got it, I'm coming over now.' The other person also replied in four short sentences, sounding as though she was running.

Ami kept her cellphone into her pocket as she breathed out into the night sky. Alright, now what do I do? She could still hear the dying screams coming from the river. Even though those sounded like dying screams, but since they could shout so loudly, they shouldn't be in any danger. Looks like I should continue to pretend to not know them for the moment.

".....Fu.....It's really cold....."

There wasn't anyone on the road as Ami walked over, only the soundless accumulation of snow on the ground, a deathly silence descending over the surroundings. Ami looked at the other side of the river, thinking that the other side should be this quiet too. The endless snowflakes seemed to be a silent curtain that separated the two sides of the river.

Even though it was only a small distance, but the two sides of the river felt as though they were as far away as the distance between stars. Looking at the loneliness that seemed to have been cut off from the world, Ami thought to herself, which side do I belong to? Do I belong to the side where two idiots are screaming and shouting at the top of their voices? Or do I belong to the side that is far away and blurred?

Just which side should I select?

"Ah!? It's Bakachi!"

"Oh!? You're right, it's Kawashima!"

No way..... Ami turned around slowly. She wasn't hearing things. Takasu Ryuuji and Aisaka Taiga stood in the knee-deep water, looking like river monsters with their soaked bodies as they splashed towards her while waving their hands frantically,

"Ba-Ka-Chi!"

"Kawashima! Hey! Hey hey hey--hey!"

Ami suddenly looked confused, as though she was hearing things -- Is the snow fairy talking to Ami-chan? Ami gave that kind of expression before turning away. Because the two of them looked terrifying.

"Kya! Stupid Bakachi, how dare you pretend not to hear us!"

"Gahhhh you've got to be kidding me! We're dying here!"

Baddie--! Baddie--! Listening to their horrifying screams, Ami was still confused. There was only a pretty, kind and classy young woman here, where did the baddie come from.

"Ah---It's really freezing, we should go get a cup of coffee."

"Ahhhh! Are you really planning to just walk away!? Wait a minute, Bakachi! I told you to wait! Don't go! Don't walk away! Save us--!"

The palmtop tiger finally threw away her pride as she shouted for help. That arrogant tiger actually cried 'save us' to me..... Heh heh. Ami couldn't help but sneer. She should have done that from the beginning. Ami stopped and prepared to turn around --

"The pretty model Kawashima Ami-san! Ka,Wa,Shi,Ma,A,Mi,San! Are you preparing to leave your friends, who are freezing to death, in the lurch? Ryuuji, say something!"

"Brilliant, Taiga! Kawashima Anna's daughter A---Mi---Sa----N! Are you just going to leave us here like this!?"

"Hey hey hey wait a minute! Shut up, shut up! I'm telling the two of you to shut up!"

Ami hurried towards the two of them. This was a serious matter, I'm still planning to be in the entertainment industry for about sixty more years you know!? I can't have any weird rumors flying around here! Ami stumbled down the sloped river bank,

"What are the two of you trying to do! What are the two of you shouting about! How could the two of you shout my name! Are the two of you idiots!? Why can't the two of you shout 'help' like normal people!?"

"I knew she could hear us! Help us!"

"Help us---!"

The more Ami looked at the two of them, the scarier they looked. Soaked from head to toe, their faces were green, their lips black, and still splashing with all their strength towards her. Ami suddenly didn't have the strength to continue scolding them,

"Now that I think of it..... How did the two of you end up like this.....?"

"How should I say this..... It's a long story, I can't really just explain it to you in a few sentences. Ah, Ahhhh~~ My boot came off.....!"

"Ka-Kawashima, I'm begging you, lend me a hand! The riverbed's too soft, I can't walk properly!"

"Alright."

Ami stood on a block of concrete on the riverbank.

"Ah--That's such a pity, looks like my hand isn't long enough--"

Ami stuck out her arm and waved it about nonchalantly, not planning to help at all. 'How could you!' -- Hearing the angry mutterings of the palmtop tiger, Ami tutted,

"Of course I'm joking. Ah~ It's~ Freezing!"

Ami grabbed onto Takasu Ryuuji's hand and pulled him onto the river bank before the two of them grabbed onto Taiga's hands. Her hand was so cold that Ami couldn't stop shivering, this was really serious.

"Yuusaku and that fellow..... Kushieda Minori will be here in a while. And the two of you are ridiculously cold! You don't look normal at all!"

"It's r-r-r-r-r-really bad! S-S-S-S-S-Seriously b-b-b-b-b-b-bad."

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes it's r-r-r-r-really bad. We're t-t-t-t-t-t-too s-s-s-s-s-stupid."

"..... I'm surprised that the two of you are still alive, looks like the your bodies are really strong."

Looks like now's not the time to ask for an explanation, Ami thought to herself as she took off her water-proof coat and draped it over the two of them. The cold air that seeped into her high-collared sweater made goosebumps break out on Ami's skin, but it was much better than those two. But --

"I think I'm going to get a cold."

Looking at the two of them who were shivering while leaning into each other, Ami almost said, I'm alone here. She forcibly swallowed her words at the last moment as she converted it into a sigh. It looks like the most pitiful person in the end is me. Even though I don't want to think about it like this, but--

"How could Ami-chan be so pitiful..... Just how naive and kind can I be....."

Ami also knew that she was unable to leave anyone who asked her for help in the lurch. She always ended up being the one who lost out. After getting a call from her childhood friend, she rushed out, found the missing people, and even lent them her coat, leaving her own self to shiver in the cold air. Ami also wished that someone would treat her like that.

She really wished that there would be something who would treat her like that.

I'm really stupid -- Ami rubbed her cheeks with her hands in place of biting her lips as she pouted and swallowed the words that she wanted to say before speaking in a sweet voice,

"It must be because God gave me unparalleled beauty that I have to go through more hardships than normal people..... Sigh!"

"Ah--Bakachi's really warm....."

The feeling that nobody understood her was smashed in an instant as Ami was caught in a tight embrace from the dripping palmtop tiger, her hands even sneaking into her sweater.

Ami's entire body stiffened because of the cold.

"You're really warm, Bakachi's a lifesaver....."

"Kya~~!"

Taking advantage of Ami's momentary lapse in concentration, Taiga went one step further as she stuck her hands into Ami's skin-tight T-shirt, rubbing her freezing hands against her hands and sucking away the warmth from Ami's skin, causing her to scream a certain sea creature's name (the sound word for a scream in Japanese is the same as tunicates, or sea squirts)

As though summoned by the inhuman, 'Hey, over there! Hey--!' Ami's childhood friend waved as he hurried over, sliding down the slippery slope.

"You just screamed 'Sea squirt' didn't you!?"

That's not the point! The three of them retorted at the same time. Following closely behind Kitamura Yuusaku was--

"I found you guys! Everyone! Wai, gah!"

Kushieda Minori. She had wanted to slide down the slope like Kitamura, but landed on her butt instead. Looking at how she struggled to stand up, the others had thought that she was going to say something important, but--

"Did Ami just shout 'sea squirt!'?"



No! The four of them retorted at the same time. 'Sorry, I must have heard wrongly!' Minori stuck out her tongue.

"Speaking of which, what happened to the two of you....."

Minori pointed at the two people who were soaked to the bone. Takasu Ryuuji and the tiger looked at each other as they continued to shake uncontrollably, not knowing where to begin.

"And, what's with you!?"

".....What?"

Realising that Minori had suddenly pointed at her, Ami, who didn't have any makeup on, looked at her,

"Your dressing! Why are you only wearing a sweater!?"

"M-M-M-Minori, B-b-b-bakachi's coat is here. She l-l-l-lent her coat to us. Right, B-b-b-b-bakachi?"

Ami didn't even have time to nod before---

"Ah--Ah--Ah--! I feel cold just by looking at you! Are you alright!?"

Kushieda Minori's hands reached towards Ami, rubbing her arms. Ami couldn't help but mutter 'Busybody!', but Minori merely ignored her.

"The two of you should take off your coats first. Here, give them to me."

"Let Takasu-kun wear Ami's coat, Taiga can wear mine. And then Ami, this is for you! You're freezing!"

Minori wrapped a square-patterned muffler around Ami's shivering shoulders. Ami instinctively drew her neck back at the sudden warmth--

"I'll take that."

Ami's childhood friend, who was holding two soaked coats, took away the muffler that was wrapped around her shoulders,

"It's freezing, so the two of you should share this."

In exchange for the muffler, Ami's childhood friend took off his coat. 'Thanks!' Kushieda Minori took the coat and grabbed Ami's hand,

"Lean over! Hey, come over! Closer!"

"....."

Minori dragged Ami into the cover of Kitamura's coat. Under not-so-warm cover of the wool coat, Ami suddenly opened her mouth,

"Hot bath."

She coughed lightly to hide her sob, as she continued speaking as though nothing happened,

".....The two of you will probably die if you don't take a hot bath soon right?"

Chapter 2

Only when his entire body was enveloped in hot water did Ryuuji's frozen muscles return to normal. Ryuuji wiped the water off his body with a towel as he sighed. This is only the beginning, they've only managed to avoid the more immediate dangers, it wasn't over yet.

'Are you done?' Kitamura's voice came from the other side of the bathroom door. 'Yeah.' Ryuuji wrapped the towel around his waist as he poked his head out of the door.

"Though most of your clothes are only half-dry, but at least your underwear and socks are dry. Your clothes, on the other hand.....Hmm.....are still....."

Kitamura touched the pair of jeans that Ryuuji had left on the washing machine with his palm before crossing his arms in front of his chest, looking as though the state of Ryuuji's jeans was completely unacceptable. 'This is dry.' Kitamura passed Ryuuji his underwear as he spoke, while waving a hairdryer in one hand,

"Perhaps I should dry it for a while longer."

"This is enough, I just need it to be wearable."

Thank you so much for helping. Ryuuji bowed in gratitude as he eased into a sumo wrestling stance, waving his right hand up and down in a karate move. Kitamura had used the hairdrier to help Ryuuji dry his clothes while he was bathing. Even though Kitamura also walked in the snow without a coat, even though he was feeling just as cold as Ryuuji, but he didn't rest. Ryuuji heard the sound of the hairdryer all the while when he was bathing.

After being dipped in the freezing river, it was expected that his clothes won't be easily dried, but the underwear that Ryuuji took from Kitamura was completely dry and warm.

"Ah.....I finally feel comfortable. It was torture to have a completely wet piece of cloth stuck on my freezing butt."

Ryuuji nodded his head as he pulled up his underwear from under the towel. Looking at Ryuuji's actions, Kitamura spoke,

"You change the same way as the girls before swimming class."

After saying such a creepy thing, Kitamura had intended to laugh it off.

"What.....Huh.....?"

After thinking about it, Ryuuji couldn't help but stare at Kitamura, his eyes opening to their largest extent. Girls changing before swimming class? I really like that kind of play, it makes me -- Of

course Ryuuji wasn't thinking about something like that, he merely found his best friend to be extremely scary for a moment there.

".....You've peeped at the girls changing before.....?"

"You--What---Are you----Thinking!?"

Kitamura took off his spectacles that had fogged up to wipe them as he retorted while answering in a disturbing tone,

"There wasn't a changing room in my primary school, so the boys and girls changed in the classroom together."

"I, I see.....You really scared me for a moment there. And speaking of which, could you stop looking at me like that. I'm not like you, you know, I get embarrassed when other people look at my exposed body."

"I'm not looking, I'm not looking."

Look -- I'm not looking. Kitamura stood directly in front of Ryuuji as he deliberately pushed up his spectacles while widening the pair of eyes behind the lens as far as they would go. 'You idiot! You're on the same level as Haruta!' Ryuuji shot back. After horsing around for a while,

".....I wonder if Aisaka has finished changing?"

"Her.....hair's curly and long, so I shouldn't think that she'll be so fast."

The two of them seemed to be looking for the right moment to talk about the most important thing.

Even though they couldn't look through the ceiling, Ryuuji and Kitamura still looked up silently. Ami's father's brother and his family lived on the first floor, while the second floor was converted into four separate apartments. Ami lived in one of the apartments. Even though she lived in a separate apartment, but everyone would eat together on the first floor. According to Ami, her apartment was merely a room that was a little far away.

For the time being, there weren't anyone on the first floor. After opening the door for the guys, Ami led the girls up to the second floor. Even though Ryuuji was concerned that it'll be obvious that someone had used the bathroom, but Ami merely answered, 'I'll just tell them that I was the one who used it. Help yourself to the toiletries.'

Kitamura and Ryuuji stayed in the living room of the Kawashima residence discreetly. The two of them really wished that they were here to visit as Ami's friends, and not as such suspicious characters. The warm-colored light shot up the ceiling that curved upwards, bolsters, sweaters, magazines and other things were randomly placed on the sofa, indicating the places of every

family member, making the living room look warm and comfortable. The living room was completely enveloped in a sense of class and beauty.

Personally, Ryuuji felt that for Ami, who had been forced to run away from her own home because of the stalker, this must be her sanctuary. But --

".....If Kawashima's uncle comes back to see us here, he'll surely think that we're thieves who're blatantly showering in his home....."

Stepping on the thick shower mat, Ryuuji looked around nervously at the neatly arranged towels, shavers, toothpaste and toothbrush -- Even though it was really comfortable here, but he was on the run, so he can't stay for long.

As though he was in a hurry, Ryuuji didn't care that the rest of his clothes were only half-dry as he pulled on the rest of his clothes. Right now, he didn't know what to expect.

"At least we won't have to worry about anything for tonight. Ami says that her uncle's out for the night shift tonight."

"Night shift. Are both her uncle and his wife doctors?"

An image of his mother going to work at night flashed into Ryuuji's mind. As though to banish that image, Ryuuji roughly pulled at his hair, trying to get it to dry in the shortest time possible.

"Her uncle works in the university hospital, his wife is a nurse in another hospital. Ami says that they won't be back before next morning, so we don't have to worry for the time being. But.....The problem is in my home. 'That person' came to my home."

Kitamura took off his spectacles again, roughly wiping the fog off the lens with a corner of his shirt. Ryuuji's finger couldn't stop flipping the switch of the hairdryer on and off,

.....That person. Sounds like a conspiracy."

"Yes. I guess that person can be counted as the last boss?"

"The way that person appears is really scary too. A Porsche right?"

"Yes, it's a Porsche. And she's also pregnant."

Taiga's mother had come to Kitamura's home, and Kitamura had told her 'I think I know where she will be. I'll bring her back, so please wait here for me.' After leaving his home, Kitamura immediately contacted Ami and Minori to help look for Ryuuji and Taiga.

Which is to say, Taiga's mother was still waiting at Kitamura's home. Kitamura's cellphone had already received countless calls from his home.

"If my mother mentions Ami, then they might find this place. But.....I guess we can pretend that no one's at home if they really come."

Kitamura scrunched his eyes as he smiled at Ryuuji.

".....I'm really sorry."

Only now did Ryuuji truly realize that even though he shouted, 'I want to fight! I want to run away! I like Taiga! I, I, I!' like a real man, but as a result, he had troubled his friends so much that they had to help him.

Ryuuji rubbed his eyes and lowered his head as he thought about the present situation. Even though Taiga and Ryuuji had finally confirmed each other's feelings, but without the help and sacrifice of other people, their dream of being together would not come true. What did I shout when I saw Ami by the river? In the end, after being pulled ashore, I still had to borrow my friend's coat and hide in Ami's home.

No, if not for that accident -- If I hadn't dropped into the river, would things have turned out differently? I don't even have enough money on me to take the bus. If Taiga hadn't lost her money -- Where could we have ran to, until when could we have continued to run with 24000 yen? The most we could have done would be to hide in some cheap hotel for about a week. Our parents would also have called the police if we had really ran away. And there was one more unshakable fact -- It was our friends who worried about us, who ran about in the snow looking for us.

If it was only the two of us, then we won't be able to get very far. That is why we had to get help, and that is why we have the luxury of a hot water bath.

Is it alright?

Is there only one way?

But I don't know what to do.

"It shouldn't be like this."

Then what do you want it to be? I'll give you a chance to say it. Even if the god of destiny asked me that, I would still be unable to answer.

"But, but, how do I say it? I'm serious.....Taiga and I really didn't want things to become like this."

"Don't mind it."

Kitamura shook his head forcefully.

"Even I went through the phase of dying my hair golden.....I'm not repaying you for helping me the other time. Of course, I do remember that you once helped me, but that's not my point. Takasu, I also have enough reason to participate in this 'battle'."

His best friend's words sounded in the brightly-lit, vanilla-smelling changing room. Ryuuji felt that this was what his best friend really felt. But even if it is Kitamura's true feelings, that doesn't mean that Taiga and I can get help from him and the others, or to drag them into this.

Ryuuji felt that there was something wrong, but no matter how he tried, he couldn't put his finger on it.

"But from what I've heard, Aisaka's going to be taken away by her mother isn't she? Aisaka had once said that she didn't want to be forced to leave this place, to disappear from our sight. Since it has come to this, then this isn't Aisaka's and your problem anymore. Aisaka is also my friend, so I can't just stand by and watch this happen."

Kitamura spoke without hesitating,

"And you're also my friend. I'm helping because I can't bear to see two of my friends who really like each other to be separated like this.

No exaggerated seriousness, no sign of unwillingness, without hesitation.

"Since Aisaka and you finally managed to clear things up, didn't the two of you?"

Ryuuji nodded honestly. Even though he might not understand everything that was in his own heart, but at this moment, he wanted to express how he truly felt.

".....I don't want to be separated from Taiga."

Ryuuji pulled off the hair that was stuck to his face, as he clumsily opened his mouth,

"Because I like her."

Ryuuji felt that his toes were freezing up again, so he bent down to pull on his socks. Because of his stiff body, Ryuuji had trouble maintaining his balance as he struggled to pull on his socks.

Kitamura should be able to understand.

Taiga's feelings towards Kitamura were all real. And Ryuuji had also wished that Taiga and Kitamura would get together --- the thought that 'it'll be better if they don't get together' was probably hidden in some dark corner of his heart; this was also true. My feelings towards Kushieda are also true. These are not mistakes, but proof of the time that we have lived through.

It is because we have lived through those times that we have come here. But our road here wasn't easy, we stumbled, we hurt ourselves, we ended up looking like rags. Even then, we still

lived through it. Not just himself, Ryuuji felt that everyone who was alive in the world had been hurt because of the 'present time', but still managed to live through the past.

To get to this present time, for him to like Taiga.

"Since you've said it, then don't leave her."

Kitamura put on his spectacles once again as he replied in a clear and powerful voice,

"I will support the two of you."

We have the same reality. Kitamura is definitely on my side, but darkness and uneasiness still shrouds my heart. Is it really alright to drag my best friend into my own battle?

Right now, Ryuuji didn't know the answer.

".....But I'm thinking that.....My way of going about this battle is wrong."

"Think about it. I will surely support you."

In the time that Ryuuji dried his hair with the hairdryer, Kitamura waited silently. Even though his hair was dry, Ryuuji's reflection in the mirror was abnormally tensed up, like a nervous hooligan -- no, a nervous small animal.

Ryuuji slipped into his wet sports shoes before locking the door to the first floor with the borrowed key as he walked up towards Ami's apartment. They knocked on the door before going in after hearing Ami say 'Come in, the door's not locked.'

"Ala, this has to be a rock. This is long past the acceptable level of hardness for food."

"What did you put in it? What's your motive? Who's the target?"

"That's strange.....All I did was to melt the chocolate and let it solidify again."

"This is truly a miraculous chemical reaction. I should think that even the cocoa powder would be surprised at this reaction."

"This can already be counted as a weapon. You probably could assassinate two, three people with this."

"This is really strange, why did it become like this....."

The first thing Ryuuji and Kitamura saw when they walked in was that the three girls were expressing their opinions about the chocolate that was on the kotatsu. The chocolate in question was the one that Taiga had made. Ryuuji also saw three different teeth marks on the chocolate.

Minori turned towards Ryuuji and Kitamura as she wrinkled her eyebrows,

"This is really powerful. I had wanted to eat something sweet, but then I realized that no one would be able to bite into that thing after trying to eat it. It's really scary."

Ami opened her mouth immediately after Minori had finished speaking,

"Guh! Takasu-kun smells really bad! That river's really dirty!"

"Yes, the water looks really murky in the day. Ah ah, my 24000 yen....."

Taiga was wearing a cute-looking tracksuit that she had borrowed from Ami, as she looked at Ryuuji with a serious expression on her face,

"If we had worked harder just now, we would probably have found the 24000 yen."

"You.....What are you talking about.....And why are you the only who got to borrow nice-looking clothes.....!"

"Ala, that's because I don't think Ryuuji would be able to fit into these clothes."

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness! Where are your clothes!?"

Over there. Taiga had sunk in so deep under the kotatsu that even her shoulders were covered, as she stuck her chin towards a corner of the room. Her coat was hung up on the clothes rack, but her other wet clothes were kept in a plastic bag.

"Argh argh argh....."

Ryuuji was almost swept away by the waves of reality, as his mind was easily battered into submission by the relentless waves. Just what is this overwhelming sense of reality? No matter how he thought about it, no matter how he let himself go with the flow of the waves, the clothes in the plastic bag were disintegrating bit by bit.

"Don't just stand there, come into the kotatsu. Yuusaku too. The two of you should be able to squeeze into on side right?"

Ami pulled up one side of the blanket covering the kotatsu as she asked.

The curtain covering the window was a little short, leaving a bit of space between the hem and floor. Most of the furniture in the room was made of metal. A small television, a small heap of magazines, an iPod speaker, branded bags and other assorted items were randomly stewn across the metal frame, making Ami's room give the impression that she was only staying here temporarily.

".....Where do you sleep? I don't see a bed."

"I sleep in a futon. When the kotatsu's out, I keep the futon in the cupboard."

"You don't have a study table either."

"This is my study table."

Ami also sank her entire body into the kotatsu as she patted the tabletop with her palm.

No bed, no study table, I'm surprised that Ami's room is so normal.....Ryuuji surveyed Ami's apartment as he mumbled. Ami nodded in response,

"Don't worry, my original room's really stylish.....And this fellow just fell asleep."

Beside her, Taiga's head was under the kotatsu, as she slept happily in Minori's lap.

"She's really tired, so let's just leave her as she is."

Hearing Kitamura's words, Ami, who had already stretched out her hand to wake Taiga up, stopped her intended actions. The room fell silent for a while, as everyone listened to Taiga's soft snores, before Minori finally spoke,

"Umm, I didn't ask Taiga something while I was talking to her just now."

She lowered her voice as she played with the braid that hung down from her cap, staring at the orange skin that a certain someone had left on the kotatsu,

"That is, ugh..... Taiga's situation with her mother is really bad isn't it? She dislikes her mother's marriage partner, and also dislikes her mother..... Is that how it is?"

"Of course."

Ami looked at the side of Minori's face out of the corner of her eyes, as she answered for Taiga,

"We can see that from the fact that she went with her father after her parents divorced can't we? Under normal circumstances, even though both parties are responsible, but daughters usually go with their mothers -- Why is it that you seem to not be very well-informed about Taiga's situation even though you're her best friend?"

"I had quarreled with Taiga about that old man..... Taiga's father in the past. Even though we made up, but then we never talked about her family ever again."

Ryuuji suddenly thought of something. After saying that she wanted to be a good girl during Christmas, there were only presents for her father and his second wife, and none for her mother. At least Ryuuji hadn't seen anything addressed to her mother among the presents. Taiga didn't even know that her mother was pregnant. And also -- Right, when she was cruelly betrayed by her father during the school festival, when she was suspended for fighting with Kano Sumire, Taiga hadn't turned to her mother for help. That her mother would appear during the school trip also had nothing to do with Taiga.

Ryuuji didn't know if Taiga didn't want to turn to her mother for help at all, or was prevented from by some unknown reasons. In short, the chasm between Taiga and her mother looked to be more serious than he had originally thought.

No matter what, Tiger ran away because she didn't want to be separated from Takasu-kun, right? Because if she goes with her mother, than she will have to be separated from Takasu-kun..... I'll say this while she's sleeping--"

Ami glanced at the back of Taiga's head as she deliberately lowered her voice. She seemed to be hesitatingly slightly, as she looked determinedly into space,

"Takasu-kun should already have made a decision, which is why things are like this now..... Honestly, I think what the two of you are planning to do is too unrealistic."

I want to run away together with Ryuuji, and then marry him. Once we're married, no one will be able to separated us anymore. Even if we're still children, they won't be able to separate us -- Ami seemed to be thinking of Taiga's words, as the ripples of emotion in her eyes showed. Ryuuji looked at Ami's expression as he thought: I'm the best example of that.

Ryuuji was able to exist in this world solely because Yasuko had done something extremely unrealistic in the past. Yasuko left her home after she got pregnant, gave birth to Ryuuji and then cut of all communications with her parents, bringing Ryuuji up by herself. Therefore, Ryuuji as able to use his very own existance that even high-schoolers can successfully run away if they really put their heart into it. Which is why Ryuuji believed that he'll be able to do it.

Of course Ami didn't know about such things, as she continued,

"Even if the two of you successfully elope and get married, how can you be so sure that the two of you will be happy? Even though it's good that the Takasu-kun and Tiger have decided to live together, but how do I put it. To prepare to get married once you turn eighteen just because your parents want to separate te two of you? To get legal protection from the authorities? Do you seriously think that your parents would just give up? Just like that? Ah--Ah--This is enough, I don't even know what I'm trying to say anymore.

Anyway, would it really be alright for the two of you to just ignore and give up on your parents? And speaking of which, talking about what you'll do when you become an adult, and then hit back at your parents, thinking that this would solve all your problems..... Aren't those exactly the things that a kid would do? It'll be alright as long as eveything goes according to your wishes?"

Ryuuji didn't reply as he looked at the tip of his fingers. Ami was right.

The problem was that Ryuuji kept thinking about Yasuko's way of life. That was the example, and Ryuuji was planning to do the same thing. On the other hand, he also felt that he was a victim of Yasuko's selfish way of living.

Yasuko had regretted her decision, and that's why she wanted to make amends through Ryuuji. Ryuuji thought to himself, since it's like this, then what's wrong with me running away?

I had tried to go along with the opinions of the adults, hiding my own aspirations and dreams, thinking that it'll be alright as long as I go along with the script that the adults have set for me. But the adults around me only wish to control my actions on their own whims. Discovering that, I'm unable to meekly submit to their orders, even though I don't want to completely cut off all relations with them. But since I dislike being controlled by the people around me, can't I just run away? If I'm unable to take Taiga away from all this to a life that belongs only to the two of us, I will not be able to be in control of my own life, and I will not be able to become an adult.

This could possibly lead to the two of them dropping out of school, working to support themselves, and they may never see Yasuko every again. Even though Ryuuji didn't want that to happen, but he had no intention of letting Yasuko support both him and Taiga.

".....If Takasu and Aisaka have already decided, then I'll do whatever I can to support them."

Kitamura left the overcrowded table to sit on Ami's exercise ball, stretching his back as he did so. His eyes met Ryuuji's, who had turned around, and Kitamura shrugged to hide his embarrassment,

"I was really happy when I heard that the two of you intend to overcome all obstacles to get married. Even though this is against the rules, and in the eyes of the world, it's too early, but what does that matter!"

As expected of Kitamura, even when lifting his hands straight up into the air while sitting on the exercise ball, he was still able to maintain his balance.

"Didn't Kushieda say that she will decide her own happiness? I completely agree with her. Takasu and Aisaka should decide their own happiness, and grab own to it with all your might! I'm just clumsy, but no matter how clumsy a person is, he'll still be able to eventually grasp his own happiness! It doesn't matter how messy the process was. What does it matter! The only thing that matters is that you're happy in the end!"

"Even though we're not doing a majority decision here, but--" Ami spoke as she lifted a single finger from each of her hands,

"One against, one for, Yuusaku and I have voted, you're last. What do you think?"

Minori stopped playing with the orange skin on the kotatsu as she lifted a hand towards Ami as though asking her to wait, while her other hand covered her lowered face.

"Kushieda....."

Ryuuji couldn't help but move to get a closer look at her, thinking: Is our situation so bad that even Minori can't bear to say what she really thinks? Ami pouted slightly, as she copied Ryuuji's motion to get a closer look at Minori's face. And then--

".....Hah!"

"Hahahaha!"

The two of them started laughing uncontrollably.

".....I,I'm sorry.....It's a little too big....."

The orange that was in Minori's mouth had filled up the space between her teeth so tightly that she was unable to even chew it. Minori's face twisted in agony as orange juice flowed out of her mouth and down her chin. 'Wait, wait.' Minori said as she desperately tried to swallow the orange, looking like a snake trying to swallow a whole rat as she did so. After a while --

"Ahahah, I almost died there.....Looks like my mouth was smaller than I thought it was....."

After drinking some tea to soothe her rattled breathing, Minori told them what she had wanted to say,

"|--"

She glanced at the sleeping Taiga before continuing,

"I think that Taiga's mother's really unreasonable in trying to bring her away like this, I won't accept it, and I don't want to be separated from Taiga. I also don't want Taiga or Takasu-kun to be sad. Or rather, I just don't think that this is the correct way. There's no such thing as the 'correct way' in this world, humans are not fit to decide whether their actions are right or wrong. I'm only choosing the way that I like the most, and that would make Taiga and Takasu-kun happy. I think they should run away for the time being."

"Is that how you think!?"

Ami tensely retorted in a loud voice,

"I'll also feel sad if Tiger's not around anymore! I also want to think of a solution! But! Do you guys really think that this will turn out the way you want it to be!?"

"I understand what Ami wants to say, but you may not know that Taiga's parents are ---"



Rubbish.

--She was probably going to say that. Ryuuji thought as he looked at the shape of Minori's lips. But it was probably the right choice to not label the parents of her best friend as 'rubbish'.

Without anyone noticing, Taiga had woken up, digging her petite shoulders out of the kotatsu, tidying the messy hair that had fallen all over her face and shoulders,

".....Minorin, I think you shouldn't continue that sentence."

Taiga said as she rubbed her head against Minori's shoulders playfully like she always did. Minori touched Taiga's forehead with her own as though she was trying to measure Taiga's temperature, biting her lips unwillingly before nodding lightly and whispering, "I'm really sorry.'. Though Minori whispered in a very low voice, Ryuuji still heard it.

"I know that baka-chi's worried about us."

Taiga's face was red from the warmth of the kotatsu, the rims of her eyes also slightly red,

"Moth..... old woman..... that woman..... Mother's here to help me, I understand that. I should think that she wants to take up the responsibility as my mother. But I can't forget that mother left me behind after the divorce to be with another man. And now she has a child in her, that's her own choice, the child of the person she loves, and I'm the child that my mother abandoned..... No matter what, I'm unable to hope that my mother would love me as much as she loves her unborn child. Even though she's here to help me, but as long as I have even a bit of expectation for a certain thing, the opposite will happen. I'm used to such things, and I know that as long as it's something I want, I'll never be able to get it. From another perspective, that's also because of the environment I grew up in, but --"

In stark contrast to her heavy words, Taiga had a light smile on her face. And then she looked at Ami, Kitamura and Minori before looking into Ryuuji's eyes,

"..... I fell for a boy. He's very kind, he understands me, and I'm very happy when I'm together with him. It's like I've been poisoned, as I don't want to leave him. He's a little strange, but I like his voice, the way he speaks, the way he opens his mouth when he eats. I like his hands, his fingers, his lips..... But in truth, all these things aren't important at all--"

The hand that supported Ryuuji's face slipped off the kotatsu. 'Not important at all?' Minori retorted softly. 'Not important at all.' Taiga nodded in response. Kitamura merely remained silent, while Ami's eyebrows knotted together.

"I just want to keep looking at him, to remember him forever and ever. Honestly, my heart beats uncontrollably just by looking at him, but I can't resist the urge to keep looking at him. My mind

goes blank when I'm close to him..... It became like this without me even noticing. I was unable to stop it, even though my heart told me to stop, to stop it, that I can't do this, but it was useless..... The main reason why I had to stop was because that boy liked another girl, and that girl also liked him. Even though all these were true, but those feelings were covered by the curtain of friendship and loyalty. And the real reason for me to look away was that I couldn't expect anything, because everything will be destroyed the moment I start to expect something. It already has nothing to do with whether Ryuuji likes me or not, or that I didn't want to be jealous of Minorin, because as long as I have a certain expectation, in the moment that I reach out for something, everything will disappear, just like magic -- Even though it's a really stupid way of thinking, but I really believe it."

After saying everything in one breath, Taiga breathed lightly,

"I guess I still believe in that, but I'm unable to stop. I really want to grab hold on to Ryuuji, and maybe this is the reason why the Aisaka family got destroyed. It's all my fault."

"That's not it!"

"How can there be something like that!"

"That's impossible!"

"Are you stupid!?"

The four of them retorted at the same time, as Minori finished off with an eyeball poke. 'Ah..... I accidentally poked too hard..... I'm sorry..... What do I do now.....' Taiga covered her eyelids as she plastered herself onto the kotatsu,

".....But this kind of thing is of no consequence to me anymore."

Taiga mumbled as she continued to cover her injured eyes,

"I want to fight back. If my wish to be with Ryuuji will lead to the destruction of the world, then I'll do anything to survive, even if I have to leave this world, I will not be defeated, I will not give up on Ryuuji. And, I won't give up on Minorin, Kitamura-kun.....and baka-chi, because I like all of you, no matter how serious the consequences, no matter where I am, I will always remember the people I like."

Ryuuji looked at the whorl in Taiga's hair that was in front of his eyes, thinking of what to say. What could he say that could express his decision and feelings to Taiga and the others more strongly?

After thinking about it for a while, Ryuuji spoke half-jokingly,

"..... So..... Do you intend to cry out for love in the center of the world.....?"

Takasu.....

Takasu-kun.....

Takasu-kun.....

Why you little.....

Was it because of the snow that he was feeling cold? Or because he had fallen into the river? Or because of the temperature in the room? The freezing silence in the room lasted for five whole seconds --

"Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!! That's really disgusting!!!!"

".....Is it really so bad that you're crying....."

Ami gave an extremely long scream before tearing up. Looking at her out of the corners of his eyes, Ryuuji had thought that she was merely pretending to cry as usual, but was glared at by Ami's red eyes,

"Oh no, I can't stop.....Huu.....Hah....."

".....Is it that bad....."

Now Ryuuji knew that the cold joke attack was the most effective one. Ami stood up as she said,

"Take this and go~~"

"Oh.....!"

Ami took a set of keys of the LV key bag that was hanging on the metal rack and threw it to Ryuuji, who barely caught it. As Ryuuji took a closer look, the set of yellow keys seemed vaguely familiar.

".....Are these the keys to your summer home?"

"Yes."

Ami sighed as she wiped away the tears on her face lightly,

"There's electricity, but no gas. You just have to flip the switch on the water storage container for water. But it'll be obvious that the two of you have been there."

Ryuuji looked at Taiga's face, as Taiga looked back at him hesitantly, the two of them unable to make up their minds---

".....We can't bother you like this--"

Ryuuji wanted to return the keys to Ami, but Ami hid her hands behind her back, refusing to take the keys,

"What do the two of you plan to do then? Now's not the time to be polite."

"Haven't the two of you already decided to elope? Then the two of you should run as far away as you can, no matter how clumsy or ugly your way of escape is! I'm not asking the two of you to live there for the rest of your lives anyway! The two of you still need a place to stay while you guys are working right! Even if the two of you aren't planning to stay there, just take the keys as an insurance policy!"

--If this gets out in the open, how will Ami be blamed for their escape?

After thinking about the possible consequences, Ryuuji was unable to keep the set of keys in his pocket, as he stopped moving like a robot whose batteries had ran out. After the police come to know that it was Ami who provided them with a place to hide, she'll probably receive the same punishment as the two of us..... or an even worse punishment, and she could also be seen as the person who encouraged them to run away.

Is Ami prepared for all that? The power of 'emotions' are always so surprising that it shakes you to the very core of your existence.

But is it really alright?

"What has that got to do with anything!"

Is it really alright?"

"Ah.....'At least send a message back home. I'm worried.' From my mother. I think this is as far as we can get tonight. They'll probably come here soon. Are the two of you leaving directly?"

".....Even if we were to go to Ami's summer home, I don't think we'll be able to make the train. If I remember correctly, that line of trains stop very early in the evening. If we leave from here....."

"Ryuuji and I are penniless."

"I'll lend you some. Ah, but I think there really aren't any trains that you can take. Hang on, I'll check the timetable with my cellphone."

".....No, It's alright, you don't have to check it."

Ryuuji said to Ami, who had flipped open her cellphone before looking at Taiga,

"Taiga, lets go home first. I'll go get money. Try to come to school tomorrow. Can you beg your mother to at least let you go to school for one last time?"

"..... I'm not sure. Mother had said that the application for me to quit school can be sent through the mail, but..... maybe I'll be able to go to school if I tell her that I want to give it to my class teacher personally..... What do you intend to tell Ya-chan?"

Ryuuji couldn't answer. Would Yasuko be at home when he goes back? It seemed as though only Taiga's mother was at Kitamura's home, so Yasuko should have gone back alone after quarelling with Ryuuji. She could have gone to work.

".....I should think that she has gone for work. But--"

What if she's at home-- What should he do then? What would he say? He can't possibly say nothing before disappearing from school the next day.

"You have to apologize for what you told her just now. And then tell Ya-chan about us, try to get her to understand. Ya-chan will surely be able to understand, she'll be on our side."

She won't understand, and she won't be on our side. Ryuuji thought, but didn't tell Taiga that. Yasuko's selfishness was the enemy that they had to face, and now had to run away from. Ryuuji had to fight to let everything go according to plan.

Right now, he could only struggle to move forward.

When the five of them walked out of the door, the snow had already stopped.

The snow that had piled up on the asphalt road was at most one or two centimetres, easily wiped off with the sole of a shoe or evaporated with a slight rise in temperature.

All five of them immediately noticed the Porsche that moved towards them from the cross junction before stopping in front of them. Taiga's mother stepped out of the car and towards Taiga without even turning off the engine,

"Juicycouture."

She grabbed the collar of the hooded t-shirt that Ami had lent Taiga, looking at the tag. Perhaps it was because of the fact that her eyes looked to be grey in the night that her gaze felt cold and unwavering.

"Who's Kawashima-san? Is that you?"

Her gaze settled on Ami's face after looking past Ryuuji, Kitamura, and Minori,

"This isn't cheap. I'll pay you."

"Huh? No, it's alright! Please don't mind it!"

Ami waved her hand in her usual good-girl style, but Taiga's mother still took out her wallet without slowing a beat, mirroring the dominating design of the Porsche.

"Would this be enough?"

"Ugh, actually I didn't buy it.....My parents bought it for me---"

"Then please pass this to your parents."

Ami held 50000 yen on her hands. Ryuuji didn't know if the money was enough, but it looked like Taiga's mother wanted to buy the clothes that Taiga was wearing. She wanted to erase all traces of Taiga's existence.

Ryuuji couldn't help but think of a female fox clearing the area surrounding her foxhole of any traces of her children, slamming and kicking the ground to prevent any traces of her children from remaining.

"Let's go."

Taiga turned back uneasily.

She looked at Kitamura -- He was the person that Taiga looked up to. Taiga looked at his face.

She looked at Ami -- They fought and quarrelled, but suddenly, they realised that they had become good friends. Taiga looked at her face.

She looked at Minori -- Her best friend.

And then, Taiga looked at her one and only sweetheart.

"Take -- Take care."

Ryuuji couldn't help but tremble lightly at Taiga's words.

Even though he knew that this was an act, that this was only a temporary separation, but Ryuuji still felt afraid. What would he do if this turned out to be an eternal separation? 'Oh.' Ryuuji waved as he frantically tried to stop himself from running over to Taiga.

But the car cut off his thought by giving off a loud bang as the door closed. He was unable to see the inside of the car as the windows were misted up, as Taiga left in her mother's car.

Minori also almost ran over to Taiga, but she felt the Ryuuji's breathing next to him, as the two of them desperately tried to resist that urge.

"It..... Should be alright....."

Kitamura mumbled.

"It will be alright. Because even though Tiger looks as though she's gone, she's actually still here."

Hearing Ami's words, Minori nodded in agreement.

* * *

In the hallway that was missing one pair of shoes, the curtains were closed shut as the apartment was shrouded in cold and darkness -- This was how the apartment looked like when Yasuko was at work. Stepping into the freezing darkness, Ryuuji looked around him slowly.

He noticed that something was wrong when he saw that Inko-chan's cage wasn't at its usually position.

He looked at his room, and also Yasuko's room, before confirming that the cage had indeed disappeared. Ryuuji forgot to even change out of his wet clothes as he walked around in his home. He felt that it was better to just ask instead of imagining things in his head, so he called Yasuko's store. When he had said that he was Yasuko's son, the other party asked him, 'How's your mother? When will she be resting until?' Ryuuji knew that Yasuko hadn't gone to work. It was only when he put down the phone, planning to go talk to the landlord that Ryuuji noticed the thing on the small table in the middle of the living room. An address was written on the squirrel-logo note paper of the bank that Ryuuji and Yasuko used.

The location of the nearest train station and a phone number was also written on the paper. The watch that Ryuuji had worn for the Christmas party was placed beside the piece of paper.

"....."

A strange sound came out of Ryuuji's throat.

Without even thinking about it, Ryuuji understood. He had been thinking about whether it was really alright for him to abandon Yasuko. Whether it was really how an adult should behave. But this was the only think that he could do to resist the adults, so he had to abandon his family, and then, together with Taiga..... But..... In the end, he didn't even need to think about it.

Because I was the one who got abandoned in the end.

This time, Yasuko had returned to the home that she had ran away from, abandoning Ryuuji.

"Ah."

He had no thoughts about it, his mind completely blank. How can there be such a pair of stupid mother and son in the world?

We're really alike aren't we, we choose to run away whenever we're forced into a corner. It's like a competition whereby the person who runs away first wins. Ryuuji really had not expected that Yasuko would take Inko-chan with her and run off.

Looks like I lost.

Ryuuji knelt down onto the floor -- Or rather, there wasn't any reason to continue standing. By the time Ryuuji had come to his senses, he had already sat down on the tatami floor. Slowly, he was unable to discern the things that he was seeing, hearing, doing, and thinking, as he tried to breathe deeply. His breath wavered in the air, breaking up his breathing into small segments.

Do I have to start from here again?

He couldn't remember where he had heard that sentence from. 'Do I have to start from here again?' Kept repeating itself in his head. 'Do I have to start from here again?' Ryuuji even forgot to blink, or perhaps he couldn't even stand up. He was already exhausted, his body devoid of strength. Even so, do I have to start -- he felt as though his body was being shattered, bone by bone, as he was unable to even move a finger.

Do I have to destroy everything and start all over again?

How many times must I repeat this?

Tick, Tick -- Ryuuji finally noticed the soft ticking of his wristwatch. The second hand would tick everytime it moved -- '.....Wah,ahhhh,ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The frightening aura was cut off as Ryuuji smashed into the door.

"Do I have to start from here again!?"

Ryuuji flipped over the small table in the living room as he sank to the ground, smashing his body into the wall, his fists pummeling the tatami mats. He clutched his head in agony; there weren't anything nearby for him to hit, so Ryuuji punched his own leg over and over again,

"Whyitsnotfunnyitsnotfunny! Stop, It! Do, I, Have, To, Start, From, Here, Again.....Do I.....Still have to continue!?"

Ryuuji twisted his body as he screamed, grabbing on to himself. How many more nights like this must he go through, how many more times must he lose control and cry like this before he can reach his destination? When will this end?

"Taiga.....Taiga! Taiga-----!"

Ryuuji bawled like a baby as he cried out for Taiga. Come over! I'm begging you, come over to my side! Ryuuji repeatedly screamed out the feelings that would never reach Taiga, before he collapsed onto the tatami.

--Is this the 'destruction' that Taiga had talked about?"

As long as you hope to obtain something, you'll lose the exact same thing; As long as you have expectations of something, everything will be destroyed. Is it like this? Even though I have been abandoned by my mother, but I don't have the right to feel hurt, because I was planning to abandon her in the first place.

That's right, in the end, this is what he had hoped for. Isn't this what I had wished for?

Ryuuji struggled to lift his contorted face as he looked at the wretched state of the silent living room. He wanted to see with his own eyes the consequences of his wish coming true. The legs of the small table had smashed into the door, pushing it out of place. Other than that--

".....Ah.....Ah ah.....!"

He saw that the watch had smashed a hole through the door.

".....Taiga.....!"

Ryuuji shouted out Taiga's name once again as he buried his head between his knees. This was the result of his own actions. Ryuuji cried uncontrollable. The place that the watch had smashed through was the exact place the Taiga had attacked when she first entered this home in spring. The hole had originally been covered up by a paper flower-petal cut out from the love letter that Taiga had written to Kitamura, giving the drab-looking door a refreshing look, something that Ryuuji really liked, which was why he always found an excuse to refrain from covering the door with something else. He never thought that that very spot would be smashed through by the watch.

Yet another piece of evidence of Taiga's existence had disappeared.

Could it be that the more I cry out her name, the further she'll be from me?

I don't want that. Ryuuji desperately tried to imagine him holding Taiga's small hand in his, the two of them running towards somewhere. As they ran, the ground behind them was breaking up, forcing them to keep running -- How is it that even in my imagination, the world is falling apart?

His throat devoid of moisture from all the screaming, Ryuuji started to cough.

If this is retribution, then it's really thorough, seriously.....Ryuuji thought wearily.

Yasuko, who had abandoned her parents, now abandoned Ryuuji. Because if she didn't do that, Ryuuji would abandon her. Ryuuji's child would probably abandon him as well. If not, then Ryuuji will abandon his child. And the that child will also abandon his parents, his child or be abandoned. Since I grew up in this kind of environment, then maybe I should just accept my fate. Taiga was also abandoned by her parents, so she abandoned them, and will abandon her child, or be abandoned by her child. The bonds of kinship will always be cut like this, a vicious cycle.

Because we don't know how to bond across generations.

Ryuuji slowly realized. That being left behind wasn't the most sorrowful thing. It was what he could see that was sorrowful. Not just this moment's sadness, but also the sorrows of the past and the future, because Ryuuji could see that the sorrow would continue on into the future, that was the most sorrowful thing.

Ryuuji also saw the result of running away with Taiga, and the sorrow in it.

In the future where the two of them successfully elope, Taiga will be sad. And then she will surely doubt whether it was really what she had wanted. She will see that she hadn't given up on Ryuuji, but after giving up her bond with her parents, the only the that was left in Taiga's eyes was sorrow. So that was it. Ryuuji crying by himself. No one else saw him like this, as Ryuuji didn't even have the strength to wipe the tears that were running down his cheeks. Taiga had chosen to sacrifice her parents' love in order to protect her love for Takasu Ryuuji. I don't know if Taiga really intend to do this, but..... that is it. Where do I want to bring Taiga to? What do I want her to see? What do we want for the life that we will have after throwing everything else aside?

The destruction that Taiga speaks of does not exist! It's not a bad thing to have expectations! Ryuuji really wanted to say that, but he himself was like the death god who was ripping the world apart with his scythe. And the friends that gave everything for us could also become part of the world that will be destroyed. The friends who helped Ryuuji and Taiga run away, telling them 'We're willing to do anything for your happiness' were also locking themselves into the chain of sorrows.

I can't drag them into this, so I can't do that. I'm just an idiotic kid who doesn't know his limits. I'm just a kid who looks mature on the surface, do I really have the ability to take Taiga away and disappear? I'm also afraid of my own stupidity.

".....Am I.....Wrong....."

Ryuuji wanted to ask Taiga that.

He felt as though he was at the bottom of a body of water -- So I've been in this kind of place all along. Have I always been sleeping in this darkness, where it's deeper than a frozen river, where

light cannot reach? But it's very safe here. Rolling up into a ball to protect his head, Ryuuji had always been here. He felt as though he finally let out a long-awaited breath.

Taiga.

The voice that called out for her rose up together with the bubbles. The eyelids that seemed to be as hard as fish scales opened to chase after the bubbles, as the heavy head finally rose up. Pushing against the tatami to stand up, Ryuuji awoke from his slumber, his limbs grabbing hold of the ground in the depths of the water body as he twisted the body that he didn't even know the size of.

Opening the pair of eyes from which a blinding light shot out from, Ryuuji floated up carefully.

Parting the burdensome weight of the water, Ryuuji shook his tail as he chased the bubbles towards the surface of the water, slowly increasing the speed of his ascent.

(Up, Up, a little faster.)

In the living room, in front of the small table that he had flipped over, Ryuuji wiped the tears of his face as he slowly stood up. He moved his legs towards the washroom, splashing freezing water onto his face before wiping his face with a towel, taking off the clothes that were becoming smelly after that.

After changing into a dry set of clothes, Ryuuji stared at the face in the mirror with a look that could kill.

(--I have to float up to the surface as quickly as possible.)

Breaking out from the surface of the water body, a gigantic shadow stretched itself over the body of water creating huge waves that sliced into the land, creating countless new islands. And then Ryuuji kicked his limbs as he shot through the clouds, swallowing the lightning in the sky as he learnt how to fly.

There was something that he wanted to see in this world, so he started searching for it. Right now, Ryuuji's imagination was running at full capacity.

(Eat. I should eat first. Where should I go? Where must I go? A marble room with a window on the ceiling, a kotatsu in the middle..... No, if I could see the night scenery from the top of the Tokyo Tower..... or would the night scenery at rainbow bridge be better? It definitely be very beautiful. Flying under the starry sky wouldn't be bad either. Or I could just fly to the Moon, Mars, or Jupiter..... No, Earth is still the best. I want to see a rainbow..... I'll be able to create a rainbow with the water from a huge waterfall. The sky is..... I like the evening sky.)

Huff -- Ryuuji lifted the small table off the ground to avoid scratching the tatami as he lightly placed it back to its original position. The cushions were also put back into their respective places, in the order of Ryuuji, Yasuko, and Taiga. And then the television's remote control was placed on the right in accordance with the angle of the table.

(The red evening sun. The grey clouds shining as though they are burning up. It was raining beneath that cloud. I'll place a really big table at.....the sea.....no, in the middle of a tropical grassland at evening time. There will be a waterfall and a rainbow on the horizon, while buffalos and deer saunter past.)

Ryuuji's hand wiped the small table forcefully.

(The tablecloth will be pure white.)

Opening a package, Ryuuji saw the tablecloth billowing in the warm air of the tropical grassland. The star-filled sky of the grassland stretched all the way to the horizon. The cries of animals and birds could be heard in the distance -- Ryuuji always kept a few pieces of the Takasu-stick in the television cabinet so that he could start cleaning anytime he wanted. He sliced a piece of the Takasu-stick along the underside of the television, that place always attracts lots of dust. Ryuuji smiled.

(We'll drink sweet fruit wine before the meal. Plum wine.....that's too normal. Strawberry wine would be nice. I'll use small glass cups that will mirror the setting sun.)

Ryuuji squatted down beside the television cabinet, his eyes shining like an experienced hunter. His target was the plug that was behind the television. No matter how Ryuuji cleaned that area, dust would always gather at that area.

Heh heh heh --- Ryuuji revealed his teeth as he stabbed at that area with the thin end of the Takasu-stick. The first step was to wipe off the dust that could be seen, but the next step was key to success. Ryuuji pulled out the plug carefully, 'oh!' he couldn't help but cry out. The hidden bits of dust fell onto the ground, and Ryuuji quickly wiped them away with a piece of cloth.

(And then it'll be the soup and the appetizer.....Hang on, you can't just care about yourself you know?"

Before everyone took their place at the table, the meal would not start.

Taiga will surely pout and complain about the mosquitoes and the smell of the animals, "That thing looks like animal poo! I can't take it anymore! Ryuuji! Turn back time and take care of it before I see it! Beside her, Minori will say, 'They're animals, so it's normal for them to do their business out in the open.'..... She'll surely stand up and help Ryuuji. As for Ami -- 'Alala, Minori is, so, nice~~? The two of you look really suspicious you know?' She'll place her Chanel bag on her

thighs as a sneaky expression shows up on her beautiful face. 'I made it! Sorry for coming late! I had student council work to do! Ah! '..... I can understand your sincerity from the way you rushed here, but Kitamura, please don't take off your clothes!?' There are still empty places at the table. 'Kushieda~~ When you're eating poo later, don't anyhow shout curry~~curry~~alright!' Looks like Haruta wants to eat curry. Noto, on the other hand, looks a little nervous. Ah, I see. He's looking at Kashii and Kihara, who're sitting beside Ami and chatting. He should just go and talk to them.

".....Oh. Ugh, oh.....owah....."

There were dust stuck between the metallic plates in the plug as well. It has been said that sparks from static electricity could ignite the dust that is around it, causing a fire. Ryuuji agilely controlled the Takasu-stick as he cleaned up the area behind the television cabinet thoroughly, not even letting go of small areas.

The warm wind of the grassland blew across the back of his head. Turning around, Ryuuji saw that an endless patch of grassland had appeared in the living room.

French cuisine? Italian cuisine? Chinese cuisine? Let's just have Japanese cuisine. They'll probably be very excited if I bring out an huge bowl of steamed yam. An entire row of steaming bowls giving off streams of hot air, cooking the food that was in them. There will be spaghetti with meatballs, and baked rice with a thick layer of cheese on top. There will also be delicious seafood soup. There will be a huge bowl overflowing with pudding. A towering cake with strawberries. There'll also be white rice, because there's also curry. Haruta will clap loudly to welcome the arrival of curry. Kano Sumire also appeared beside the gigantic table, as Kitamura stood up to help her carry a heavy looking luggage bag. After much persuasion by her students, Koigakubo sensei came all dressed-up. Inko-chan was also standing quietly beside the plates, and the landlord was also there. Of course Yasuko will also be there. Aisaka Rikuro also came in a pseudo imported-car. Yuu, which Ryuuji had not seen before, was also there. Taiga's mother, her second husband, and their healthy baby was also there. Yasuko's parents were also there. And Ryuuji's father also came, his stomach stuffed full of megazines, a shiny rolex watch on his wrist. The people whom Ryuuji had left in the past, and will meet in the future were all there.

Everyone crowded around Ryuuji's table.

Everyone was laughing happily. Because everyone was there, Ryuuji's beloved Taiga was able to laugh happily in the middle of his world. Because Taiga was able to laugh happily, Ryuuji was also able to laugh more happily than anyone else.

Every single person that Taiga liked was in this world, and they were all laughing happily. It must be like this. This is the tomorrow that I want to spend together with Taiga.

That was the thing that Ryuuji wished for.

".....Alright!"

After clearing the area around the plug, Ryuuji flipped the cloth over and wiped the television cabinet forcefully. After washing and drying the cloth in the washroom, Ryuuji started to wipe the basin, and then knelt down to wipe the floor before washing the cloth once again.

"Let's go!"

Ryuuji crouched on the small wooden hallway, his hands preparing to wipe the floor with the cloth. 'Get set--' He held his breath, 'Go!' and began to wipe the floor. After wiping all the way to the corner of the kitchen, Ryuuji used his hands to wipe the side of the walls carefully before turning around to wipe the hallway again.

That is what I wish for.

What's wrong with having dreams? Is it a sin to hope for something?

Everyone must be present. I won't give up. The 'destruction' will never, ever come. I want to let Taiga see the world that I saw when I was flying. But to do that, maybe--

".....Rice....."

Ryuuji picked up the grain of rice that his knee had squashed as he bit down on his lips. All the sorrow and agony must then be absorbed by Ryuuji himself. Now is not the time to step away.

To look forward without any hesitation in his eyes. If he was able to think of himself as the dragon that flew into the sky, then he would no longer need to be afraid of anything.

Chapter 3

There were still a little bit of snow left over on the roads, but they were already stained with mud from the antics of primary school students on their way to school. Under the trees lining the entrance to Taiga's apartment block, there was a line of snowballs that could hardly be described as 'pretty' lined up by size. Ryuuji looked at the smallest snowball and smiled -- though he had actually wanted to laugh out loud. The smallest snowball was the size of a bean.

Is it because of yesterday's snow? The cold air this morning felt especially fresh and pure.

On the rooftops of houses and on top of traffic lights, where little children couldn't reach, a layer of white snow still remained, but didn't look to be staying for long under the glare of the morning sun. As the sides of the layers of snow started to melt, large droplets of water started to drip down, forming puddles on the asphalt road.

Ryuuji avoided the puddles as he walked under the sakura-tree lined road, finally seeing a figure waving to him at the cross junction.

"Ta--Ka--Su--Ku--N. Good morning, Ousame--"

"Sankhon."

Ryuuji lightly raised his hand in response, hearing the middle-school girl behind him mutter, 'It's so cold!' before running off as fast as she could after she had taken a look at Ryuuji's face. As usual, Minori stood at the cross junction, her face red from the cold weather. A square-patterned muffler was wrapped around her neck, as she stuck both her hands into the pockets of her coat, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

".....Taiga's not here? I had thought that she would appear as usual if I waited here."

The hair draped beside Minori's chin was blown away by a gust of wind, making Ryuuji squint his eyes at the sight.

"She didn't go back?"

"No. I was hoping that she would, so I waited until three o'clock in the morning.....But she never came back."

I see. Minori breathed out a stream of white mist.

"I believe that she will come to school..... or things will become complicated."

"Yes. Oh, what were you doing while you waited till three o'clock in the morning?"

"Cleaning up the apartment, the kitchen, the drains, and I wiped the cooking utensils."

"Oh..... What was....."

"And then I ate breakfast. I had wanted to eat the chocolate from Taiga, but I gave up in the end."

"Ah, me too. I seriously think that my teeth could break from eating that thing."

"In the end, I melted it with milk and drank it as hot chocolate."

"Oh! That's a good idea! I'll give it a try! Does milk really work?"

"After scooping up an unbelievable layer of oil that floated up, I lost consciousness....."

".....Just what did Taiga give us to eat?"

The two of them stood at the cross junction, watching as the traffic light turned from green to red. Only at the next green light did the two of them walk forward silently.

It's really cold, but the weather's good. Within the distance of a few centimeters, the two of them chatted aimlessly, before--

".....You sure you want to run away?"

"Definitely."

"Where are you planning to go? Ami's summer home? Or are the two of you planning to disappear altogether?"

"What are you talking about, and why are you even worried about that kind of thing? Am I that untrustworthy?"

The two of them looked into each other's eyes, as Minori waved her hands animatedly and shouted,

"No no, I don't mean it like that. But I'm really worried--!"

".....That's exactly what you mean."

Minori was still worried about how Ryuuji and Taiga's plan to elope would turn out. 'I believe Takasu-kun, but I still couldn't stop myself from reading 'The Poem of Wind and Trees' a few times over!' -- Ryuuji also felt that it was natural for Minori to be worried. If it was him, he could possibly be even more naggy, more uneasy than Minori, and may even intervene. Even though he had never read 'The Poem of Wind and Trees' before.

"I shan't say anything else since you've never read it before. But it's really tragic! What about 'High School Teacher' then, try to recall the story! I couldn't sleep for the whole night as I kept imagining things. I thought about what Ami said, what Kitamura said, what Taiga said, what I said. And I also thought about many other things....."

"What about what I said?"

"It was really cold so I forgot about it..... Anyway, what was that about? To cry out for love in the center of the world.....? You made me think of that story again. Even Ami cried."

Minori bent down as though her duffel bag was too heavy, as she spoke half-jokingly, before looking down at her feet, her eyes looking slightly upward.

Ryuuji hesitated a little before---

"Hey, 'Minorin'."

Hitting Minori on the back with his schoolbag. His bag swung harder than he expected as it hit the back of Minori's coat with a loud 'thump'.

"Ugh.....!"

Maybe because she didn't want to admit that she was caught off-balance by Ryuuji's sneak attack, the slightly shorter Minori turned and gave an Ryuuji a face that reminded him of a candle that was being consumed by the flames of hatred. In that snowy December day many years ago, this must have been the face which Kira Kouzukenozuke had on when he was killed.

"Your face is terrifying....."

Ryuuji couldn't help but blurt out his true feelings. Minori turned and shouted, "What....."

"But since we've promised to move forward, I'll promise to continue believing in you, Minorin.....Kushieda."

".....I guess."

"Since it's like this, then stop thinking about it and get a move on. Move on to the next step, moving forward is always frightening, but once you've decided to move forward, then you must not regret it. This is what you taught me."

"Have I made my decision? Have you made your decision?"

"I've decided. I've decided to run away, and then return."

".....What about Taiga?"

"Taiga too. She will definitely return, return to the place where you and I and everyone else is. For that, we must run away."

Ryuuji drew a large circle in the air with his finger before pointing to the ground. Minori's head followed the line that his finger drew like a cat, as she said, 'I see.' Before lifting her head and giving Ryuuji the first real smile of the day. Under the bright rays of the morning sun, Minori's eyes looked to be even brighter than the sun itself. She stretched loudly, looking as though she was warming up.

"Alright, we're going to be late! Let's run!"

"Huh!? Wa, wait for me!"

Minori ran with huge steps on the road that they always took to school. Ryuuji hurriedly ran to keep up with her. To Ryuuji, who hadn't slept well the night before, the sudden burst of sprinting felt excruciating, but the cold air that flew into his lungs made him feel rather comfortable.

'Ah--Kushieda senpai! Good morning!' A girl from their school smiled as she greeted Minori. 'Morning!' Minori raised her right hand as she replied. 'The two of you are really energetic this morning.' A classmate smiled as he went past them on a bicycle. 'That's great!' 'That's great!' The two of them imitated what Taiga had said yesterday in reply.

"Hey--Takasu! You're too fast, wait a minute, you're too fast!"

Noto flailed his hands around desperately as he tried to catch up. Oh! Ryuuji slowed down as he waited for Noto.

"Where's Tiger? She didn't come to school together with you today!?"

"Taiga had something on. She could be in school already."

"Th, that's great.....Umm---Umm, Well....."

Noto placed one hand on his spectacles to prevent it from slipping off as he ran beside Ryuuji, stammering as he tried to speak (not cute at all).

".....Has Takasu heard anything from the master?"

"What?"

".....Did you hear about the chocolates he received yesterday or something?"

"From who?"

".....Ne, never mind! Hmph (he's really not cute)!"

"Sorry, I was just joking. I know what you're trying to say."

Ryuuji caught up with his friend as the two of them reached the school gate--

"Ah! I found the traitors!"

"Hmm? And here I was, wondering who the traitors were. So it's Noto-chan, Taka-chan, and Kushieda! Good~Morning~!"

Haruta had stuffed his grey hood into his school shirt, completing his usual idiotic demeanor. The first thing he did when he saw the three of them was to pose in an arabesque position. But Noto

crossed his hands in front of his chest and placed his legs together in rejection as he groaned in a twisted voice, 'Trai~tor~!'

"Huh! Don't say that! I didn't even try to hide it!"

"Tsk! You perverted noble! Just go and build the tower of Babel where all your naked desires are revealed together with your girlfriend! One day, the hammer of divine punishment will give you your just desserts.....!"

"Noto-chan! Wait! Believe me~ I'm innocent~! We haven't revealed our naked desires yet~ Nothing has happened between us yet~!"

Haruta chased after Noto pitifully, but--

"Haruta-kun has a girlfriend!? Are you serious!? Wait! Tell daddy everything!"

Behind Haruta, Minori, whose eyes had lit up at the smell of gossip, began to chase after Haruta.

"His girlfriend is an elder-sister type pretty girl! How can I tolerate something like this.....!"

Noto answered for Haruta,

"He could have told us earlier! But no, the two of them stunned me by appearing in front of me suddenly! I feel like I've been abandoned! I feel like I've been betrayed! Do you understand my feelings!?"

As everyone ran towards the shoe lockers noisily, Ryuuji patted Noto on the shoulder lightly,

"Noto, since it has come to this, I guess I have something to tell you too. Actually--"

"Argghhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

His friend leaped into the air. 'Enough, I don't want to hear about this anymore!' -- Before running away at full speed. Ryuuji had wanted to tell him: I've proposed to Taiga, and she has accepted my proposal. If Noto had heard that, he would probably have died to indignation. Noto rushed up the stairs into the school's entrance hallway.

"Argghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Don't shout so loudly beside me!? Oh it's you, Noto!?"

It was really an unexpected situation. Noto spun violently on the spot, the soles of his shoes almost burning up. 'Shut up!' The person who coldly raised her eyebrows at him was Kihara Maya. She pulled on a strand of hair that hung below her chest as she pouted, her chin buried in a gold and purple coloured muffler that didn't really suit her.

"Wh, What did I do wrong!? Damn it, you're the one with the Miwa Akihiro-style muffler!" (Miwa Akihiro's a famous japanese cross-dresser)

"Huh!? You can't be serious!? How can I look like Miwa!?"

Ryuuji, who just reached the shoe lockers at that point in time, got the joke, and pretended to choke on something as he desperately tried to keep himself from laughing.

"Hmm--About that, Hmm--"

Beside her, Kashii Nanako, who was playing with her soft, curly hair, could only shake her head ambiguously in response. 'Eh, what are you trying to say?' Maya opened her beautiful, double-lidded eyes to their full extent--

"Don't worry, Maya!"

"Ami.....!"

Ami seemed to have gone to school together with the two girls. Hearing Ami's confident voice, Maya immediately turned back.....

"Maya doesn't look like Miwa at all! Even though your muffler's really his style!"

"Are you serious!?"

Maya was completely defeated. 'I had wanted to say that because this is new, the two of you shouldn't have something like this.....' Maya took off her muffler and stuffed it into her bag. Haruta, who already had a girlfriend, said nonchalantly,

"I think it's really nice! It looks really mysterious!"

He ran up to Noto as he threw out words of praise, but.....

"I don't really care about what you think....."

Maya pouted like a kitten as she watched Haruta chase after Noto. Ryuuji kept his shoes in his bag and not in the shoe locker. He had wanted to chase after Noto and Haruta, but hesitated a little before stopping,

"Kihara, haven't you made up with Noto?"

".....When was I ever friends with Noto?"

"Now that I think about it, never. Did you give Kitamura chocolates?"

".....What has that got to do with you?"

"Didn't you say that that two of us were comrades? Which is why I'm telling you--I confessed my feelings."

"Even if we're comrades, I.....Hmm? Eh? Huh!? I didn't give Kitamura chocolates, but.....You said! Ugh!? What do you mean? Are you saying that, that, that.....Tiger!? Kya--!"

Giving a high-pitched scream, Maya whacked Nanako on the shoulder, 'Big news big news! Takasu-kun and Tiger!' '.....Say it clearly!' Nanako's lips curved upwards as she inched towards Maya. Wait up, tell us about it--Ryuuji was chased up the stairs by the two noisy girls and turned the corner of the staircase before he saw Ami and Minori talking.

"Ah--ah--ah--this is so exciting.....What was that about!?"

"Speaking of which, did you hear that? It seems that Haruta-kun has a girlfriend.....What do we do?"

".....What--!? You have got to be joking....."

"It must be the end of the world."

"The twenty-first century has just began. I'm saying that..... Gah! Even that idiot has a girlfriend!? That's really bad! Why is it that I.....I.....! Ami-chan's going into depression....."

What's so exciting about that, the real thing is just beginning--Ryuuji dodged the questions of the girls as he opened the door of 2-C. Morning! Morning! He greeted the familiar faces in the classroom. And then--

"Morning, Takasu. There.....may be a problem."

Ryuuji looked at the uneasy Kitamura.

Taiga didn't appear in the classroom. Homeroom was also not conducted by Koigakubo Yuri, but by another teacher. And then, the first lesson began, and the second lesson began.

Taiga still didn't come.

* * *

The class president always had to confirm the daily announcements with the class teacher every morning before homeroom. While thinking about other things at the same time, Kitamura Yuusaku still dutifully went to the staff room, but saw that Koigakubo-sensei was not in her place because she had visitors. It can't be? Kitamura had thought of the possibility that it was Taiga and her mother, but was unable to confirm his suspicions.

".....Don't you think there's something wrong?"

Ryuuji didn't who spoke.

But because of that question, the students of 2-C started to whisper among themselves after being told that the third lesson of the day would be a self-study period. It was supposed to be the English class, taught by their class teacher, but she hadn't appeared, while the teacher that had passed down the message to her students completely ignored the questions of the students before closing the door with a loud 'snap!'.

"Did something happen to Yuri-chan?"

"She didn't take leave of anything right? What's happening?"

"Is she sick? But even if she is, someone should have informed us."

"I just asked, A-class's English class was also changed to self-study."

"Come to think of it, when I told her that Tiger hadn't come to school, she merely replied 'I see!'"

--Something's wrong. Ryuuji didn't even bother flipping open his English textbook as he grabbed on to the sides of his table, cold sweat dripping from his palms.

"Takasu, is Tiger not coming today?"

".....No, I should think that she's coming. She told me that she would come."

That was the only thing that Ryuuji could say, and as for the other question-- Could it be linked to the reason why Yuri-chan isn't here? He was unable to answer.

Ryuuji was also afraid. If the short-term separation at the cross junction yesterday was the last time that he saw Taiga, then what should he do? They didn't have any money, nor did they have any plans yesterday. Which was why they had decided to go home to prepare, making Taiga's mother let her guard down at the same time so that it would be easier to run away-- That was what Ryuuji had planned, but was it too naive a plan?

Take care-- If Taiga were to disappear and bond between them cut off just like this, while he only said those two words to her..... You have got to be joking! Ryuuji glared at the bag that held all he needed to run away.

I've already preaped myself, and have made my choice, but if Taiga doesn't appear, then how am I expected to execute my plan of escape?

"Be quiet! The other classes are still having lessons."

Kitamura stood up and reminded everyone in his capacity as class president. But the way with which he pushed up his spectacles seemed to lack its usual calmness; Minori flipped open her cellphone tirelessly; Ami also seemed to be deep in thought, as her finger was incessantly

pressed onto her lips; Maya and Nanako, who had been noisily trying to find out the truth a while ago, were now silent; Noto had also noticed the strange rigidity in Ryuuji's voice, as he turned and asked, 'Are you alright?'. Even Haruta was awake.

".....Could it be that Yuri-chan would suddenly announce that she's getting married and then resign?"

Some of the students laughed at the joke.

"I say.....Could it be that Tiger has done something big again?"

The entire class lapsed into silence. It was not that long ago when groups of third year seniors had run into the class shouting, 'The Palmtop Tiger's gone crazy!', and that incident had left a deep impression on everyone in the class.

".....If it's really like this, then it's going to be really big."

"She was suspended the last time, could it be that she'll be expelled this time round.....?"

"No way.....That'll be really bad.....Kushieda, do you know anything!?"

The girls surrounded Minori with their questions, while Minori looked at Ryuuji hesitantly.

"Taiga, she--"

Ryuuji lifted up his head, and spoke as though trying to convince himself,

"--Will definitely not disappear like this. Definitely! I won't let that happen!"

Taka-chan, what's wrong? What happened? Upon hearing Haruta's uneasy voice, 'Even Haruta's uneasy, this really isn't good!' -- And just as the class was about to descend into complete chaos.

The classroom door opened.

"Sit down, everyone, please sit down. Sensei has something to tell all of you."

Koigakubo Yuri (30), who had been missing up till a minute ago, finally appeared in front of her student, her face buried in a hankerchief,

"About that....."

The single woman covered her teary face as she attempted to control her sobs, her shoulders shaking visibly.....Eh Eh Eh? Class 2-C was completely silent. Taiga walked in behind the single woman, and looking at the pale petite face that was covered by both hands, everyone understood that something bad had happened to Taiga.



Taiga -- Ryuuji's eyes radiated with a glimmer of light. You're really late, you mini slow-witted girl! I'm not going to go easy on you today! I'll kill everyone! Of course Ryuuji wasn't doing something like that. On the contrary, he was finally able to let out the breath that he had held inside the entire morning, and was able to breathe deeply again.

Ryuuji understood her.

"Would Aisaka-san like to say it? Or would you rather sensei.....?"

".....Sen,Sensei.....Sob,sob,sob....."

She was pretending to cry.

There didn't seem to be any sign of Taiga's mother outside the class. Ryuuji grabbed hold of the bag that was hanging by his desk. 'Then let sensei help you sat it. Everyone, please listen to me. Actually--' Koigakubo probably have had been crying since a while ago, as she lifted up her face that was red from crying and spoke to the students,

"Aisaka-san has to move because of family reasons, so she will have to leave our school."

Huh---!? You can't be serious--!? In front of the agitated students, Taiga, who was standing behind Koigakubo slowly lowered the hands that were covering her face as she opened her rose-coloured lips: Ryuuji. As expected, she wasn't crying, as a rebellious and stubborn look returned to her beautiful face. She fearlessly lifted her chin, her bag slung sideways over her coat, and on one hand--Very good. Ryuuji nodded towards her--was the plastic bag containing her shoes.

"I know that everyone is shocked, and even sensei is unable to accept this."

Taiga silently jabbed her thumb towards the corridor, giving the signal for Ryuuji to 'get out of the classroom'. Ryuuji nodded towards her again.

The students of 2-C were bewildered by the contrast between what the single woman was saying and the signals that Taiga was giving Ryuuji behind her, along with the fierce expression on her face. But now that it has come to this, Ryuuji was unable to move. The single Koigakubo, who was standing in front of the teacher's table, said,

"I've been trying to get Aisaka-san's mother to reconsider, but---"

The single woman suddenly seemed extremely large to Ryuuji. Physically, the class teacher was the barrier that separated Ryuuji and Taiga. Ryuuji felt that he would be caught as soon as he did anything suspicious. Taiga was already inching towards the classroom door. Ryuuji also hugged his bag to his chest, his bottom preparing to take off from the chair--

"Aisaka-san's very sad as well."

Koigakubo's tears started flowing once again. She looked around the classroom, trying to decrease the impact of her message to the bare minimum, but to Ryuuji, she looked like an alert guardian, ready to pounce on any suspicious activity.

"Sensei also.....I'm also upset, I'm also wondering why.....didn't I put in more effort to protect her....."

After saying these words, Taiga will have to go back to her mother's side. Ryuuji's bottom left his seat, his entire body trembling in this unnatural position. If he doesn't go now.....but he didn't want to get caught either, Ryuuji was caught between a rock and a hard place.

At that very moment, behind Ryuuji's back--

"Tiger-----!"

As though the class had gone back into time to a similar incident in the past, a scream sounded in the room. Ryuuji jumped at the terrifying scream as he looked back. Haruta, who had screamed at the top of his voice, rolled his eyes into the back of his head as he pretended to be dead. Kya! Among the cries of the girls, the idiotic Haruta spasmed on the floor as he exaggeratedly knocked into some tables and chairs before dropping to the ground like a stringless puppet.

"H, Haruta-kun!?"

Koigakubo stared at the idiot who had fallen onto the ground 'What happened to Haruta?' Noto slid on his knees to Haruta's side, his black-framed spectacles askew,

"Sensei, this is really bad! Sensei! Haruta fainted!"

"Why!? What's wrong!? Is he alright!?"

Koigakubo walked down from lecture podium, weaving through the agitated students before coming to Haruta's side, kneeling down to check his breathing -- 'So-So-Somebody run to the staff room to get help! We've got to get him to the infirmary!' Koigakubo shouted loudly as she looked around at her students.

".....Huh.....?"

Koigakubo seemed to have caught an image of Ryuuji and Taiga holding hands as they ran out of the classroom. When she finally realized that it wasn't an image, but reality--

".....Koigakubo-sensei, I'm sorry, but we're the Haruta drama troupe....."

The idiot who was supposed to have 'fainted' opened his eyes apologetically. The other students who had gone along with Haruta's script also started to apologize to Koigakubo, but it was already too late.

".....This, this, this..... this-----!?"

Koigakubo didn't even know which direction the two of them had ran off to.

Kushieda Minori also ran out of the classroom, while Kawashima Ami ran off in the opposite direction. 'I'm don't really know what's going on, but let's go!' Maya and Nanako ran off after Ami. The other students also kicked their chairs away and ran out of the classroom amid shouts of 'Let's run away from school!' 'Let's go together!' 'What is going on!?!'. Heavy footsteps sounded all around the classroom, as the entire class descended into utter chaos.

There were still twelve whole months to the university entrance exams, so some students sat on their seats and studied as though it was none of their business, some students were stunned at the sudden chaos, while some students even started sleeping on their desks, while others planned to shout, 'You guys are too much!', trying to control the situation. The rest of the students were one step behind Minori and the others, as they finally decided to follow the escaping students out of the classroom.

"I will not let you guys do this--!"

"Gah!"

The slower students groaned as Koigakubo dragged them back by the collars. and in front of Koigakubo--

"I'm really sorry!"

"But, but.....this is a mass breakout!?"

In the midst of all the chaos, Kitamura Yuusaku bowed deeply in apology.

"We've really troubled sensei. We're idiots, fools, kids.....I'm really sorry.....!"

"Ah, ah, ah."

Koigakubo grabbed onto Kitamura's shoulders and shook him violently.

"If an apology can solve the problem, then we wouldn't need the police anymore! I will definitely, not, agree, with such a childish action! Damn it! You kids have severely underestimated me! By hook or by crook, I'll get every single one of you!"

"Sensei, take a look at this!"

Somebody passed the piece of notepaper that Ryuuji had left on his desk. After finishing the note that started off with 'Sensei...', Koigakubo couldn't help but glare towards the corridor as she threw away her tear-stained handkerchief before sprinting out of the classroom.

Grabbing hold of an unlucky male student on the stairs, Koigakubo dragged him to the staff room as she shouted at the teachers who were not at class, 'They've ran away from school--! Please help me catch them--!' What!? After handing the unlucky runaway to a male teacher, Koigakubo rushed into the visitor room without even knocking.

"They, they ran away!"

"....."

Clink! Taiga's mother, who was sitting on the sofa, slammed the tea cup that she was holding onto the coffee table, as she glared at Koigakubo, who was about to burst into tears again,

".....I was so shocked that my child almost came out....."

"Eh---!?"

".....Not. This is why I wanted to bring her away straight away just now! How could it have become like this..... How could I have such a stupid daughter! Where do the two of them plan to run to!?"

"Please take a look at this first."

Koigakubo placed Ryuuji's hastily written note onto the table -- 'Sensei, I'm sorry, but Taiga will not just leave this school like this. Please believe us. She will definitely contact her mother before tomorrow.' -- What is this? Her brown eyes narrowing in anger, Taiga's mother glared at her daughter's class teacher. The horrifying gaze, the impatiently twisting lips-- Koigakubo couldn't help but think that this mother-daughter pair was really alike.

"Takasu-kun is someone who will keep his promise, he surely has his own way. Of course, we're trying our best to find him and Aisaka-san. But please believe him.....believe me, could you at least wait until tomorrow?"

"I don't know Takasu-kun personally, nor do I know you personally. But I know my daughter very well, and she is not the type of person who will contact me and return! The same thing happened yesterday, and she betrayed me once again the next day. Just what do you want me to believe in!?"

"Pardon my rudeness, but the trust that has already been broken cannot be repaired immediately, it takes time to heal. This applies to both Aisaka-san and you."

"I am her mother!"

"I am her teacher!"

In that moment, the two women glared at each other, flames spewing out of their eyes. But in the next moment, Koigakubo immediately lowered her head as she took a step back,

".....I'm very sorry, but I believe in the two of them. And I believe that the two of them trust me as well. I am willing to bet my eight years of teaching, my entire career on this. Perhaps all that I have done these eight years aren't much, but to me, this is my entire life after I stepped into society as an adult. I'm willing to place my trust in them, the two of them will come back, so please trust them."

"You're willing to bet your entire career on this? But didn't they run away in front of you, betraying your trust in the end? Even so, you still trust them?"

"Yes. Because they know that I believe in them, and because they trust me, they ran away, promising to return. I believe in their promise, in their bond with me, in my relationship with them, I believe in all this. Because this trust is part of my job."

".....Very well, then could you please write down an agreement stating that if my daughter doesn't come back tomorrow, you will resign from your job. Koigakubo-sensei, I should think that the trust that you think so highly of will not be overthrown by a piece of paper?"

".....Alright."

Koigakubo flipped over the piece of notepaper that Ryuuji had left behind as she wrote down the agreement on the marble coffee table, the tip of her pen shaking uncontrollably. She had really put her entire teacher career on the line. This small piece of paper could make Koigakubo lose her job. I'm begging you, Takasu-kun, I'm begging you, Aisaka-san. Koigakubo mumbled, the only thing she could do was to trust those kids.

".....I know that Taiga doesn't trust me. Because I've consistently betrayed her trust. Aisaka and I have been hurting each other, disrupting Taiga's life in the process, as we used her as a tool in our personal battle. In the end, it resulted in me not being able to meet her, until now.....I am not a good mother, and I never will be."

Taiga's mother looked at Koigakubo writing as she seemed to mumble to herself,

"But right now, I can't possibly leave that child like this."

Koigakubo seemed to be seeing a proud schoolgirl of seventeen sitting in front of her. It must have been because she spoke in exactly the same way as her daughter, Koigakubo thought to herself. Koigakubo put down her pen before looking at Taiga's mother. She was wearing a set of expensive looking clothes, and also wore heels even though she was heavily pregnant, her

carefully-sculpted face made even an impatient expression look cultured. Her eyebrows suddenly knotted together painfully,

"Mm.....If I give birth here, would you help me.....?"

".....You're joking, right.....?"

"Yes, I'm joking."

"It's really frightening so please stop it! Are you feeling alright!?"

"I guess."

From the arrogance with which she looked at people to the mocking tone with which she spoke, she was really similar to that child -- Koigakubo couldn't help but think.

Before the third period ended, the escapees from class 2-C were finally dragged back to class, while some of them walked back by themselves.

At this time, Ryuuji and Taiga, not knowing that their class teacher had already put her entire teaching career on the line for the, had already jumped out of the window and climbed over the school walls to escape into a small alleyway.

"Listen up, if someone stops us and asks, 'Why aren't the two of you in school?', just answer that we're late and that we're rushing to school now..... Taiga!?"

"....."

"Taiga! Now's not the time to take a trip to dreamland!"

"Ah....."

Ryuuji patted Taiga on the shoulder. Taiga, who's eyes were unfocussed, hit Ryuuji back instinctively as she said, 'It hurts doesn't it!?!'. Looks like she was back in the world of the living.

".....No. I'm trying to clear my mind of all thoughts."

"Why?"

"I've been thinking about what happened yesterday. And those stupid things, like making you fall into the river, happened because I let my thoughts run wild, Which is why I have decided to go into a state of mind where my mind is completely clear, and I just have to follow you, and to make sure that I don't fall. So you have to lead the way properly,

We're going to Baka-chii's house aren't we?"

"How can that kind of thing work! You have to think about this too! We already have a problem."

Ryuuji grabbed Taiga's elbow, steering her into a small pathway. He already had an escape route in his mind, planning to go to the further train station instead of the one closest to school. As for their destination--

"A problem!? What do you mean!"

"I went home yesterday and found out that Yasuko ran away from home!"

"....."

Seeing that Taiga didn't reply him, Ryuuji had thought that she had gone into that state of mind again, but then realized that she was merely in shock. Her jaw dropping in surprise, Taiga stared speechlessly at Ryuuji as she stopped running and grabbed onto Ryuuji's elbow roughly,

".....Wait.....Wait a minute."

Taiga's eyelashes trembled as her eyes couldn't stop blinking while she repeated 'wait a minute' weakly, rubbing her snowy-white forehead roughly with the back of her hand,

"Ya-chan left home? Is it..... because she was upset with what you said yesterday?"

"I..... guess so."

"What do you mean you guess so!? Are the two of us planning to run away just like this!? If Ya-chan has also ran away.....Then we may never meet up again ever again....."

"Maybe."

".....I don't want that!"

Ryuuji looked at the agitated Taiga calmly.

"I may have decided to live together with you, but that isn't to hurt Ya-chan, or to abandon Ya-chan! Yes, we may look as though we're running away! But we're running towards our future, and Ya-chan..... If Ya-chan doesn't mind, I want Ya-chan to be together with us as well! I've always wanted this, but I never thought that Ya-chan would run away..... And to think that we're the ones who wanted to run away from home..... but now....."

Taiga, who was running to escape from her home, now stood in front of Ryuuji, looking lost. In the face of an unexpected situation, she lowered her eyes fearfully,

"What, what should we do.....!?"

Perhaps she only now understood the real consequences of what she was going to do.

"What do you intend to do?"

Ryuuji held Taiga's hand in his. Would this voice scare Taiga? Taiga looked questioningly at Ryuuji. Her face had uneasiness written all over it, as though she was thinking: If I answer wrongly, would I be left here?

"There's no right or wrong answer. I just want to know what you think."

"Well--Well, of course I want to be together with Ryuuji! I want to be happy together with Ryuuji! But I don't Ya-chan to be unhappy! I know that I'm saying something stupid, but, but....."

"I understand what you're trying to say, and I'm thinking the same thing. I am unable to let go of our life together, nor am I able to let go of Yasuko. Which is why there is something that I have to do, and a place I have to go, but that place isn't Kawashima's summer house. Are you willing to go with me?"

Taiga nodded unhesitantly,

"Of course! Since you have to go, I believe you, and I'll go with you!"

Chapter 4

This was the third time.

Every time Ryuuji stood before this door, he was never alone.

The first time.

That time, Ryuuji was still covered in darkness, unable to see anything. Surrounded by a warm heartbeat, and not yet knowing how to think, he simply floated about, and so it was impossible for him to have any impression of that time whatsoever. It was a late hour of 2 a.m. in a night 18 years ago, just when summer had moved into autumn. It was the darkest hour. Ryuuji was then still just a lifeform without a name, an amalgamation of cells that was only a few centimeters long. And running away from this door towards the outside world was Yasuko, who was still a 16 year old girl.

The second time.

He did not walk through this door, but merely stayed in the park just outside, and simply gazed at the door with Yasuko for a long time. Ryuuji had gotten bored and tired with riding on the swing for so long, so he called out for his mother, wanting to reach out to her hand. It was only then that Yasuko moved her eyes away from the door.

And this would be the third time.

Standing beside Ryuuji this time was Taiga.

"... We're here."

"... Yup."

They both held their breath at the same time.

They took a few detours before arriving at their destination. Anticipating that the teachers would track them, they had purposely avoided the major stations, and took a rather convoluted route, along the way they had taken the wrong trains by mistake (Taiga's fault for running into any train that arrived at the platform) as well as riding on the express lines (nobody's fault here). In the end, it took them much longer than expected for them to arrive.

From the beginning, Ryuuji did not intend to rely on his blurry memory, and simply followed the address that was given to him. It seemed this choice was completely correct. Looking at the

surroundings which hardly resembled anything from his memories, Ryuuji felt unease like a lost traveller in an exotic dungeon.

The park which was supposed to act as a landmark was now a high-rise condominium. Within rows of detached houses, the unrecognizable one-way roads criss-crossed like lines on a chessboard, while the street numbers on the streetlamps were hardly consecutive. They wandered in a maze of white walls and deep green bushes. The short winter daylight started to tilt westward, and it was nearly dusk when they arrived here.

"It's here right? Should be here, right? ... It says Takasu on the nameplate."

The bushes growing out of the fence had covered half of the nameplate on the gate. Taiga looked at it timidly and then turned her head around. Upon the simple realization that his surname was not paternal, Ryuuji went silent, as even he had been shocked by this surprise.

He had a feeling... No, perhaps he had guessed it for some time. "Ryu-chan's father and Ya-chan loved each other, as though we're together. But he's gone now, what a pity!" The story that Yasuko told him was not true. If it was, then he would have followed his father's surname. If Yasuko had ran away from home, then there was no reason for her to continue using her surname, neither would she resume her surname just because her husband had gone missing. That left the possibility that she's either divorced, or she's never married to begin with. Turned out the father that was looking forward to Ryuuji being born and having a happy life with him never existed since the beginning.

Though he had realized this for some time, still it felt...

"What's wrong? Why aren't you saying anything?"

"It's nothing... So many things had happened, it just felt as though my life has passed me..."

"Now's not the time to talk about such morbid stuff!"

In response to Ryuuji's easily pessimistic way of thinking...

"How can anything even pass you by when your life has hardly even begun!?"

Taiga whacked Ryuuji on the head to get him back to reality. "Yeah, you're right." Ryuuji was compelled to agree... *Really?* Though he still tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Forget about that! Now's not the time to be lost in thought! You want to make up with Ya-chan, right? You want to rebuild the bonds that were broken, right? Isn't that why you came here? Ever since you fought with her, you've been running away instead of resolving it, I can't forgive you for..."

(TL note: The above few lines actually contained a pun that is too hard for me to translate. Ryuuji says he sees a "running horse lantern" (走馬灯 - soumatou), a lantern that reflects images on a wall to makes it seem like the horse is moving - an ancient form of animation. The term 走馬灯 is often used in the context for "life passing by" before one's death.

As Taiga whacks him back to his senses, she decides to cheer him up by saying "Horses aren't meant for running, they are meant to be eaten!" Afterwards, she dismissed Ryuuji's doubts by saying, "Let's forget about this horse meat business for now!")

Standing in an unfamiliar neighborhood, Taiga paused for a while...

"... No, it's me. I can't forgive myself for allowing this to happen."

She looked up at Ryuuji's face and spoke in a soft but powerful voice. Ryuuji understood as well, that his resolve to stand before this door with her was real.

"Go ring the bell."

"I know... I was about to... I'm preparing to ring it."

It's just that he was still too hopelessly nervous. Ryuuji knew Yasuko's determination for him to come here was genuine, as well as understanding how heavy was her 18-year long resolve never to return here.

Ryuuji had wanted to push the doorbell beneath the nameplate, but he couldn't help but stopped his fingers. He didn't even have the courage to touch the bell. He held his breath many times, and after repeating the same action many times...

"Sigh, I guess you do need some time to prepare yourself."

Taiga made a very forgiving smile, like a Buddha, and nodded at Ryuuji, as well as looking at Ryuuji's face, which was so nervous he resembled a cursed demon. Exerting a soft force, she gently held onto Ryuuji's nervous and sweaty hand.

"Taiga..."

Nobody would have thought that after going through so many things, Taiga could have become this understanding. This genuine expression of compassion had really moved him. Ryuuji felt like crying and holding onto Taiga's hand, but he never expected that...

"Hmph!"

"OWWWW!"

Crack! His left hand gave a sound of bones crushing.

"You've done too much warm-ups already, you trash! Hurry up and push the damn doorbell!!"

Veins popped out of Taiga's forehead, and they had ended up doing arm wrestling in the air. Taiga used all her force in an attempt to push Ryuuji's hand towards the Takasu doorbell. Ryuuji gritted his teeth as well, both giving out very scary expressions as their clasped hands pushed to-and-fro while their fingers and joints made cracking noises.

"Don't rush me! I, I need to get my timing right!"

"My timing is now!"

"It's not... mine yet!"

"I'm you fee-on-, fay-an, fiance! So we should be united in this!"

"Ahhh! Stop it, you idiot!"

Ryuuji had miraculously blocked Taiga's other hand, which slithered out like a snake. With both their hands clasped together, Ryuuji used his entire weight to push Taiga off.

"You won't be going anywhere if you just stand here and procrastinate!"

A shout unfitting for this quiet residential area rang out.

"You may be right! But I still have many things to think about!"

"You can't resolve anything by just standing here and thinking, can you!?"

"I can't! But just let me organize my thoughts for a while!"

"Ahhhh...!" Taiga's mouth opened and closed quickly. "Huh?" "It's coming--!" "I don't know what you're talking about!" "I... ahhhh...!!!"

"Say something!"

"... !! Need! To use! The bathroom--!!!"

Whack! Hearing her voice her biological needs, Ryuuji's left hand lost its strength, and the knuckles of his fist ended up hitting the concrete wall besides the doorbell.

"OWWW! That hurts...!"

"...Ah... ohhh..."

Ryuuji wasn't the only one moaning. For some reason, Taiga gave a very desperate expression and puffed her cheeks while letting go of her hands, and knelt down in a strange-looking way. Her arms pointed diagonally forward like a doll, and gently moved her body up and down, as though making it even clearer what she had just said. Taiga gave a wry and stiff smile and said,

"... Right now all I want, is to stop having to hold my pee back..."

"C, could... you already have...?"

"... Well, that..."

Taiga's voice became softer and softer. *"Farewell, my social life. I'm very grateful for all your support."* "Enough! To hell with it!" Seeing as Taiga was getting increasingly detached from reality, Ryuuji decided to resign himself and pushed the doorbell hard with his finger. *What should I say? How should I introduce myself? What are Yasuko's parent's like? Can I really achieve what I came here for? By the way, will they believe me? Besides, is this "Takasu" really Yasuko's home?* A flurry of thoughts went through his head, as well as many unpleasant scenarios. At this moment, his fingers had gone cold from all the anxiousness. Perhaps pushing the doorbell due to a bathroom emergency was a blessing in disguise.

However...

"Hey, heeeey, no way! ... What the heck..."

"You gotta be kidding me."

They pushed the doorbell twice, three times, but still there was no response. "Stop kidding me! Stop kidding me!" Taiga cursed non-stop. It didn't look like there was anyone inside. Ryuuji looked at Taiga's face, for some time her curses had turned into "Stop killing me!", though Taiga hadn't realized and continued cursing away. "Killing, killing, killing..." *I should've known. It is three in a working day afternoon. People would normally still be at work in such an hour. Why haven't we thought of this before?*

"... What should we do? There doesn't seem to be anyone inside."

"WAH..."

Taiga had returned from her killing spree.

"W, w, w, what should we do... I'm serious, hey, do you have any ideas!?"

"Whoa! Please don't touch me!"

Taiga's personality had changed.

"Hahaha, I might leak if you touch me. I might leak if you touch me, hahaha."

"Let's go back, back to killing... Sorry, back to the station! No, there's a convenience store along the way, let's head back there!"

"I c, c, c, can't move anymore."

"I'll carry you! It won't be far! Don't give up yet!"

"A--haha, please don't touch me, ahaha..."

Under the cold slanted winter sunlight, two shadows elongated in the quiet residential area. One belonged to an increasingly berserk and giggling girl who was wandering aimlessly, the other belonged to a murderous-looking demon in a gakuran uniform that was chasing her. - People would have fled at first sight of such a scene.

"..."

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

A lady had purposely walked around them and towards the front entrance of the Takasu house. Ryuuji reflexively bowed and apologized to her.

She took a quick glance at them, it was no hard to imagine there was a bit of fear within her suspicious gaze. It couldn't be helped, as they both looked too strange. Ryuuji, being self-aware, pushed Taiga to the side of the road as she muttered "Killing~~ Hahaha~" He was prepared for the worst. If anything were to happen to Taiga, only he could help her, since he was her fiance that went through everything with her. But then...

"... OH!"

"... Killing!"

Both yelled at the same time. The lady was startled and shuddered her shoulders, and frantically walked into the front door of the Takasu house, preparing to close it.

"P... please wait! Excuse me!"

Ryuuji suddenly shouted. He took a quick glance at Taiga, who also looked back at him. *That's her, alright.*

The lady wore a pair of dark gray woolen trousers, a skin-coloured fleece jacket and held a plastic bag from a pharmacy in her hand, which contained all sorts of generic goods. Only her clothing gave people the impression of a lady in her 40s to 50s, though her short hair, firm skin and moist lips resembled that a young girl more. Her face still looked bouncy, containing a bit of baby-fat - The word "genetic" quickly popped up in Ryuuji's mind.

This person is definitely Yasuko's mother. Upon thinking that, images of the two overlapped each other in his head. From the shape of their eyes to the spacing between both eyes was uncannily similar. It was just as he had expected.

Though he had spoken first, Ryuuji froze on the spot. The lady looked at his face, her feet which had intended to run away had stopped. *I had better say something...* He breathed in deeply and said,

"May I please borrow your bathroom?"

"He's Ya-chan's son! Eh!? You're mentioning that first!?"

"Ehhh...!? But aren't you in a hurry...!?"

They both yelled something different, and looked at each other. Though in this situation, Taiga was the more desperate one, so Ryuuji decided to ask firmly again,

"I know this is a bit sudden! But can you please lend her your bathroom?"

Ryuuji stood firmly on his near shivering legs,

"M, my name is, Ta..."

Ryuuji was instantly at a loss for words, though he knew Taiga was patting his back and encouraging him. Feeling the warmth of Taiga's hand, Ryuuji once again breathed out before breathing in deeply and said,

"... My name, is Takasu, Ryuuji! I'm Takasu Yasuko's son!"

He took out the watch and photo from his pocket, and his hands shivered in a hilarious way while he handed them to the lady behind the door. *Oh god...* At this moment he just felt like praying.

Will this turn out well? Can my wish be fulfilled?

The lady first looked at the watch, and then at the photo. Upon confirming that it was indeed a pregnant Yasuko in the photo standing next to Ryuuji's father, dressed as a lowlife and made a breast-grabbing gesture, she dropped her bag in a dramatic way often seen in soap operas, its contents spilling out to her feet. Ryuuji knew her hand had lost its strength.

"Where..."

Ryuuji saw her lips quivering with a sad voice,

"Where... did you... find this..."

"... This fellow here is my... girlfriend! Because of some reason we had to come here, and..."

"W... Where's Yasuko!?"

Ryuuji shoved Taiga, who was at her limit, before the lady, who was close to tears,

"I have many things to tell you! Really! ... But firstly, can you please lend her your bathroom?"

"Those are con-men! Don't let them in! What!?! They're already inside!?! You idiot!" Shouting so loud from the other side of the phone that even Ryuuji could hear him was none other than the head of the Takasu residence - Yasuko's father, as well as Ryuuji's grandfather. By the time he's reached home in just five minutes, Taiga had just emerged from the bathroom with both a relaxed and apologetic expression.

"Just what's going on!? Just who on earth would bring home such... WHOA!?"

"OWW..."

"Ugh..."

The man that came rushing in opened the door so suddenly that it banged on the back of both Ryuuji and Taiga's heads, who were still standing bashfully at the entrance. As you might expect from two people who were linked in heart and soul, they both moaned and knelt at the same time.

"... Honey, well, these two kids... how should I explain this..."

"H, how do you explain this!?"

"... The boy said he's Yasuko's son..."

"W, w, w, w..."

This was a pretty normal detached house.

The cupboard, walls and floor tiles in the entrance hall were made of shiny wood. A shoehorn was hung on the side with a black rope. It seemed to have snowed the day before, as there were two umbrellas outside. The wall was decorated with flowers, while a few postcards were plastered under the calendar. At the end of the corridor hung a deep blue door curtain, and sunlight can be seen seeping through from the living room - a most normal looking family. Ryuuji can even imagine seeing Yasuko dressed in a sailor uniform running out from the door curtain in her slippers.

Here lived a mother, a father, and a daughter. Time would flow normally every morning, afternoon and evening. Though this normalcy was now a thing of the past, and Ryuuji understood how surreal this scene was before him.

"... My... my name is Takasu Ryuuji... Taiga, can you stand up?"

Ryuuji held onto Taiga, who nodded her hand, and the two of them stood up slowly. The man dressed in a business suit looked middle aged. Ryuuji didn't know what he should say. He had just heard he worked in an office nearby as a tax auditor.

"... This is Aisaka Taiga. Due to some circumstance, she's coming with me today."

Ryuuji could only come up with that when pointing at Taiga, who meekly lowered her head. Just doing this action required her to use her entire strength.

"This watch. The boy brought this. It's Yasuko's, right?"

Yasuko's mother handed the watch and photo which Ryuuji brought to the man - Yasuko's father. He looked a bit dumbfounded as he stood there and looked at those two objects. He looked at them for some time before finally lifting his head. Both husband and wife were speechless.

Ryuuji then took out the short memo from his pocket and handed it to them. It contained Yasuko's handwriting, with the address and telephone for this place written on it.

"This horrendously squiggly handwriting... It must be Yasuko's, right?"

"... It is Yasuko's... Even though she's born here, she still misspells the address here... No doubt about it, Yasuko did write this. So this child must really be, Yasuko's..."

Ryuuji handed over his student ID that contained his name. This was the only official piece of identification document he had with him. That way, things can only become clearer.

"Yasuko... I mean, mom had run away from home yesterday! She's abandoned me!"

The couple dropped the photo, memo, and ID at the same time. "Phew, safe..." Only the watch was miraculously grabbed by Taiga just before it fell onto the floor.

"I don't approve what she's done, that's why I came here! Mom's already an adult, so she can't continue to run away from home, and she must be brought back. Back here, her home. Thanks to me, Yasuko isn't able to return home. I... I can't forgive myself for causing Yasuko not being able to come back here. I hated myself, sometimes I even wished I was never born. I used to think that way, but, but..."

Ryuuji didn't know whether they understood, for now he was just trying to speak out his thoughts. He wanted to correctly convey what it means to come to this home, as well as his determination to do so.

"... And now, deciding to live on, I've found someone I love, and who loves me in return. To be able to be born and live till now, I really feel... happy."

Ryuuji's trembled hand grabbed onto Taiga's, who also clutched onto Ryuuji's fingers. He was not alone in standing at the entrance where Yasuko had run away from.

"Which is why, for me to suddenly appear, and to suddenly say such... stuff, you probably think I'm an idiot... or a strange person. But I'm doing this for the present which I'm proud of! I don't

want to be a burden to Yasuko anymore! I'm doing this for this person here who loves me as well... For Taiga, for my friends, and for my mother, I wish to feel thankful for the fact that I'm alive in this world! I do not want to see anybody who has to pay a price for loving me! I want to believe that this is the right thing to do! Not having to make anymore sacrifices! I want to believe that everything should exist the way they are! That's why I've come here... to lead Yasuko back home!"

"We're not some weird religious cult!"

Standing beside Ryuuji shouting incoherently, Taiga also spoke,

"He really means what he says. Maybe he looks a bit dangerous, but... but it can't be helped, because he's Ya-chan's son. Really..."

He really, really, really is full of love... Taiga understood Ryuuji's pain, and shed a drop of tear. If it wasn't for Taiga knocking Ryuuji off recklessly, leading him, and walking by his side, Ryuuji would not have come here.

"... Will you be able to tell Yasuko to come home?"

Yasuko's mother looked at Ryuuji's uniform button and took the courage to ask. Ryuuji nodded.

"Yasuko wanted to give birth to you, she wanted to see you. But we scolded her because we were against it, and she cried many times because of it... In the end she was gone without a trace. Will you help us bring Yasuko back this time?"

As Ryuuji nodded, there was a constant ticking sound as the watch on Taiga's hand continued to tick away. Yasuko had left this place with it, and now Ryuuji had brought it back. And still this watch ticked.

The time in this home will return to its normal course. After the impact caused by a heavy kick, everyone would be able to return to their normal times. Just a little longer, a little longer. Ryuuji breathed deeply, and looked at this new world with his vigilant gaze, spreading all the dark clouds that obscured it.

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The message they chose to send was option 2.

"Wonder if we'll go to hell for this?"

Yasuko's mother was still sighing worryingly right now. Takasu Sonoko, still having a youthful looking face at age 55, and thus a bit inappropriate to be addressed as "grandma", paced slowly around the kitchen. While Takasu Seiji, aged 57, similarly a bit inappropriate to be addressed as "grandpa", and from whom Ryuuji's surname comes from, sat casually besides the stainless steel kitchen sink.

"All we can do is wait now. Calm down, the message's already been sent, so it can't be called back."

"... If somebody has to go to hell, it'll have to be me. Since it was me who sent the message after all."

Without any hesitation, Taiga shamelessly picked the centre spot in the Takasu residence's warm kotatsu, placed right in front of the TV, and tucked herself neatly inside. She held a cell phone in her hand, ready to answer it anytime, while placing her chin on the table top like a feline.

"If things become true just by saying them, then I'm the one most vulnerable right now."

Ryuuji sat behind Taiga like a servant or salesperson, ready to respond to any sudden movements. It was he who had thought of this idea, so he thought he should take responsibility for it. An hour had hardly passed since the message was sent out, and already everyone was paying attention to the entrance hall.

"Ryuuji has got into an accident and is seriously hurt. Please come back at once."

Taiga used her cell phone to send this what should be quite a sinful false message to Yasuko. Option 1 was more mild in tone: "That address you gave is now an empty lot." While option 3 was: "I'm at the police station right now. If you don't come, I won't be able to leave." Option 1 was immediately vetoed, while Sonoko had reservations about Option 3, "We might really have to go to the police station that way." And so was vetoed as well. Left with no other option, they decide to adopt the rather radical Option 2. However...

"... This is just fraud. Surely anybody would suspect this?"

"I've left a contact number in the message. So I think she'll believe it."

"What if she asked around the hospitals nearby?"

"... Ah... maybe she would."

Even he thought this whole idea was poorly executed, but there was no point crying over spoiled milk. *Besides, the two grown-ups here have also agreed to it...* Though they seem to regret a bit right now.

With the TV off, the silence of four people fell upon the living room. Ryuuji stood up and squeamishly flicked his cell phone open,

"Um, this is Yasu... I mean mom last week. We were having hot pot..."

Sonoko and Seiji both anxiously extended their necks and looked at Ryuuji's cell phone. They remained silent for a while, and only stared at Yasuko's photo.

In the screen on Ryuuji's phone was Yasuko without her makeup, her hair was tied into a shooting tail on her head, while wearing casual Uniqlo clothing. Under the heat generated by the hot pot, she energetically gave V-signs with both her hands. *Maybe this photo's a bit too dumb.* Just when Ryuuji thought so...

"Yasuko... she's hardly changed..."

"Yeah, she hasn't changed a bit..."

They both seem very thoughtful, while placing their faces closer to the screen in order to have a better look.

"I have other, better photos."

Ryuuji went through his unsorted folders, trying to find some smarter photos. *This one with her walking in the very bright sunlight looks good.* Ryuuji then expanded the photo so that it filled the whole screen. He could no longer remember why he took such a photo. It had Yasuko carrying an ice box while going to a barbecue party with her colleagues from Bishamonten Kuni. She wore a large straw hat, a T-shirt and jeans, and smiled very happily. Walking in front of her was Taiga smiling in her one-piece dress, which fluttered against the wind. The tilted photo looked a bit blurry, Ryuuji was probably smiling as well when he took this photo.

"Ah, she looked quite cheerful and happy."

Sonoko said to herself, revealing a soft smile for the first time.

"If she's this happy... then it's good, right, Dear?"

"How so?"

"How can it not be? I think it's good. I've always been worrying about her, and have thought about it a lot. It's over 18 years already... Even our neighbors say they've seen Yasuko pass by before."

She smiled while rubbing the tip of her eyes with her fingertips.

"They said they saw her there, in that park ahead. Yasuko was standing there with a small boy next to her. They even said Yasuko looked quite thin, and quite pitiable."

"Such a small world...", Ryuuji muttered softly, though no one seemed to have heard him.

"They thought they must have seen the wrong person... No matter what, I was angry at them for not calling out to her! But in fact, it's all my fault. I was waiting for Yasuko to come back everyday, but I had to go out that day for some errand at the bank. I had always stayed at home before then, but I just *had* to pick that day to go out. I felt really, really, really anguished about it... I constantly feared bad things might happen to Yasuko, like she would be dead or be murdered... I often get nightmares. *Mom, save me, why aren't you here anymore...* I constantly dreamed of Yasuko being chased by some killer while carrying that boy, running with all her life to the park nearby and sobbing... Ah... I don't want to recall this anymore. I'm content with just seeing her looking happy like this already."

Sonoko used her arms to push her youthful body up from her seat, and said towards Taiga buried in the warm kotatsu, "Would you like something to eat? Or perhaps you want to use the bathroom again?" Still wearing her uniform, Taiga climbed out of the Tatami and came to the kitchen, she then looked around Sonoko and said,

"I wanna eat something... like rice..."

Ryuuji quickly tugged her sleeve,

"Words alone are not enough to describe your lack of decency!"

"Well, I'm hungry already. And we didn't have lunch. Besides, since last night and this morning, I didn't eat anything since my stomach was feeling unwell... Your stomach's probably feeling terrible as well... Isn't that so? Since we're linked together by heart and soul."

"For your information, I've already eaten! After being abandoned by Yasuko, I was all alone at home, so I took out everything that was left behind and had a good meal yesterday! Including your chocolate!"

"No way!? You inconsiderate idiot!"

"I've also eaten this morning! In order to get her, I have to replenish myself! You're the one who's strange. How can you not eat in such an important day!? You can't even hold your own pee. Aren't you the one being inconsiderate here!?"

"How dare you...!?"

"You see your grandson saying such stuff? That's his real self.", Taiga purposely whispered besides Sonoko's ear. "Go make something for her.", Seiji said and stood up. Sonoko smiled and opened the refrigerator.

"Ah, yes we do have rice, and eggs, ham, onions..."

"And pickled cabbage! Ryuuji, you know how to make fried rice out of those, right?"

Standing behind Sonoko, Taiga turned her head happily. *Getting all excited at what's inside other people's refrigerators. Isn't she getting a bit too acquainted?* Ryuuji lowered his head embarrassingly, since he was the one who brought her over and introduced her as his girlfriend, so he felt responsible for it.

"Why you...! Don't act like you're so familiar with things... Don't you know what manners are!?"

"Well, they're Ya-chan's parents, and Ryuuji's grandparents, after all. After marrying you next year, they'll be my grandparents as well!"

Taiga gave a broad smile and raised her arms up high. Seeing Taiga's movements, Sonoko smiled softly,

"... So you want fried rice, huh? Shall I make it?"

"Yay!"

With the speed of a battle submarine, Taiga then sat in front of the dining table before Ryuuji could even blink. *Seriously!* Ryuuji covered his face with his hand and said,

"Let me help... I insist. Or I would feel really bad about it..."

Ryuuji walked towards the kitchen table beside Sonoko, who pulled a rope to open the curtain and let the sunlight in.

"Ryuuji is re--ally good at cooking!"

"Now that I've got to see."

Encouraged by Taiga's confident voice, Sonoko decided to have a look at how Ryuuji sliced the onions. "Oooh!", and exclaimed with her eyes wide open,

"I would never have thought you are Yasuko's son. She's so hopelessly clumsy, and could never remember the right instructions. But if she puts in some effort, she could actually make something good..."

"I know."

Ryuuji sliced the onions efficiently on the chopping board and replied,

"I grew up eating her cooking. I only took over once I learned how to cook myself, but before that we made our meals together."

"I see."

... Ryuuji was worried whether Sonoko was crying, and looked at her with concern. But all he saw was her staring straight ahead in silence, as though thinking of something.

"Such a silly girl."

She said while looking at the dimming sunlight outside the window. Ryuuji could not confirm whether she meant Yasuko was being silly for cooking together with her son in the absence of a husband, or her being silly for choosing to leave her home, when a while ago she was still thinking of what lay ahead of her.

It took place on the dining table where Ryuuji and Taiga gobbled their dishes of fried rice...

"... Yeah, I'll show you."

Seiji ran up the stairs and fetched Yasuko's photo album. Seeing records of his mother growing up for the first time, from kindergarten, grade school, junior high and high school, Ryuuji and even Taiga had lost sense of time. By the time they realized, it was already dark outside.

"Wow... she's carrying a schoolbag... Oooh... she's playing a flute...!"

"Hey, Ryuuji."

"By the way, she still looks the same as she did back then."

Watching the photos while sitting opposite Ryuuji, Taiga poked at the back of Ryuuji's palm with her finger. She didn't withdraw her finger after that, but instead pointed it towards the Takasus, who had been looking outside the living room window all this time.

Sonoko and Seiji couldn't bring themselves to calm down. All they could was stare at the pitch black garden outside, awaiting Yasuko's return.

"... What if Ya-chan doesn't come back...?", Taiga leaned her face towards Ryuuji and whispered.

"... We'll keep waiting till she does. If she still doesn't come, we'll go look for her, until we find her.", Ryuuji whispered back in response. Taiga wasn't sure whether to accept this reply as she scratched her slightly itchy ear while looking at the album. Yasuko had plenty of photos of her in PE uniform and casual wear during her junior high days, but hardly any as she entered high school, which deeply bothered Ryuuji.

The answer I gave to Taiga just now wasn't correct.

Ryuuji knew very well. If Yasuko doesn't come back, then he must keep waiting here with Taiga, until they had to go out to look for her-- But if they do that, then his wish wouldn't be granted, as there won't be enough people to fill up "Taiga's world".

By sending a fake message that goes against his moral fibre... he did something he shouldn't have. He too had wished he had used a more virtuous method of doing this, so that nobody will have to blame themselves for it.

The problem was there simply wasn't enough time for him to do that.

The watch that was placed on the dining table indicated that it was way past dinner time. Time was moving way too quickly. His body was growing rapidly, yet the world he sought after still felt so far. Ryuuji felt anxious about it. Even though he had hoped everything would go well, as well as hoped that he could move forward steadily with his feet on the ground, in the end, all he could do was feel nervous and speculate at what the future held.

And after doing that, would he be able to live a life where things flowed at the pace that he could accept and handle?

"... Anxious?"

"... Why'd you ask? Of course not."

Taiga deliberately supported her cheeks with her hands, concealing her mouth. For some time she had been staring at Ryuuji's face. Ryuuji merely replied, "It'll be alright."

"... Yeah..."

Taiga closed her her eyes and slowly wobbled her neck while sighing deeply.

"Smooch!"

And then gave a flying kiss.

Ryuuji quickly dodged it. Taiga then fired more flying kisses, which Ryuuji also skillfully dodged.

"Dammit--- the first shot went there, the second shot here, the third there, the last one there."

Taiga pointed to the ceiling, the wall, the table and the kotatsu respectively, while chuckling,

"Perhaps it was wise for you to dodge them after all. Since these aren't free, as one kiss costs 3000 yen."

"You actually charge money for that? And aren't they rather expensive!?"

"However! If you collect them all, you'll get a 10,000 yen reward!"

"Can I win that?"

"Though that includes extra charges..."

"So there's more!"

"All provided by Japanet Takasu!"

"Ah, so it's all paid for by Japa... Hey! I still gotta pay in the end!"

Ryuuji raised his right hand, preparing to whack Taiga at the back of her head. Taiga responded by pointing her head towards him provocatively, as though saying *C'mon, I dare you!* It was at this moment.

Ryuuji reflexively turned his head towards the entrance.

He remembered hearing this faint sound somewhere before and slowly stood up. Taiga looked puzzlingly at him.

"It's Yasuko."

Sonoko and Seiji both turned astounded towards Ryuuji. "Did you hear something?" "No, I..." Ryuuji could hear it, he was certain that the familiar sound was getting closer and closer.

It was the sound of high heel shoes clicking on asphalt while running quickly. All this time, whether he was in kindergarten, nursery, or at home, as long as he heard this sound, he would move off from his toys and books and run outside. At this moment, he felt like kicking the chair and running towards the entrance... *No, I mustn't.* Ryuuji sat back down and said,

"That's Yasuko's footsteps. I think you can go meet her at the entrance."

"Dear...!"

Sonoko gave a wailing sound and looked towards Ryuuji. Seiji too was momentarily petrified, as the couple looked at each other, they even forgot to breath. When they heard that the person whose footsteps they were hearing had opened the door without hesitation, they quickly ran outside towards the corridor.

"You should go as well!"

"No, let's wait and see. Besides, they've waited for eighteen years. It wouldn't be good to interrupt their reunion.", Ryuuji explained to Taiga, while his throat felt hot as though he had just swallowed a flame. He genuinely meant what he said, though another reason was because he was afraid of seeing Yasuko.

The words that he said towards the person who had raised him all these years still reverberated in his ears. *If only you hadn't given birth to me!* Yasuko gave up her life for him, that wasn't right. *If you're a failure, then my existence would be a failure...* Ryuuji had denied everything, as Yasuko had unilaterally decided his future, forcing him to do what she could not do, in other words, to make him obey his parents. Yasuko was attempting to conceal the sin she committed for defying her parents by being a parent herself. Yasuko believed that the sin must be eliminated, a price must be paid, and only then could she live a happy life with Ryuuji.

Wouldn't that prove that she believed it was a sin to give birth to him? Wouldn't that prove she'd actually regretted it? Ryuuji had wanted to shout, "Stop trying to selfishly control my life" Or retort to her, "Everyone has a right to do what they want when they reach seventeen." Yet he ended up hurting her.

And now he has different thoughts about it.

Would I be able to mend those wounds?

Would my existence - everything that had happened for the past eighteen years up till now - be recognized?

"Ryuuji..."

Will I be able to love her unreservedly together with Taiga?

"This isn't good..."

"... Whether it's good or not, I'm still gonna do this. I'm gonna have them all. Who's gonna say things won't work out as expected? I'm gonna get them all without having to sacrifice or destroy anything..."

"This is bad, Ya-chan..."

"I'm gonna... huh?"

"Ya-chan didn't come in from the front door!"

Ryuuji turned around to look at the direction which Taiga was pointing at with a confounded expression. The window in the living room had been so forcefully opened that even the glass

was shaking. "Huh!?" "She's not here!" He could hear the couple exclaiming from the house entrance outside.

Yasuko had entered the living room of her own house and took off her high heels.

Her widened eyes were shaking together with her body due to her catching her breath, as she looked at Ryuuji with a face that went red and white.

She didn't reek of booze, and neither was she wearing an afro - she probably didn't bother to use a hairdryer after taking a shower. Strands of her long blonde hair - damaged by the perming, lay on her pale cheeks. Yasuko took another step forward, the high heels she held had dropped onto the concrete floor, creating a noise. Wearing Ryuuji's junior high green PE uniform, which hardly matched her high heels, while donning a black feathered jacket outside, she slowly approached.

"Y, Yasuko! Yasuko...!"

"Yasuko!"

The Takasu couple came in from the entrance and attempted to climb through the kotatsu, wanting to embrace Yasuko.

"R, R, Ryuu, Ryuu-chan... w, w, w, where're, you, hurt...?"

But they couldn't bring themselves to hold her hand, and could only stand there. Yasuko was trembling as if she were freezing to death.

It was obvious that Yasuko's joints and teeth were shaking violently. She looked at Ryuuji and struggled to speak. She covered her quivering mouth, and could only make huffing sounds as though she just suffered a stroke.

Ryuuji could see both her eyes were wet.

Before those eyes, Ryuuji stood still. Even when Taiga attempted to speak for him, all he could do was listen with his ears, which felt as though they had been stuffed with wood.

"Ya-chan... we're sorry..."

What have I done?

"... We're sorry, we didn't mean to lie to you... Sorry..."

"Yasuko!"

Not even noticing Sonoko was slowly reaching out her hand to her, Yasuko jumped over the kotatsu, nearly knocking it over, and came before Ryuuji. She then raised her right hand. Ryuuji thought he was about to be slapped, and awaited for the impact.

Yet that hand landed gently his cheek.

It then began caressing his face.

"I..."

The hand felt his chin, the fingers warmed his ears. Ignoring his opened jaw, Yasuko just wanted to confirm that it was Ryuuji's face she was touching. Her hand then went down to Ryuuji's shoulder and around it to his back.

"... I don't know what I should do anymore."

Yasuko wanted to embrace Ryuuji but didn't have any strength to. Looking at her, Ryuuji's mind went blank, all he could say was,

"... Sorry..."

He couldn't even hold on firmly to his mother, who was kneeling weakly down on the floor.

Yasuko sat on the living room floor and cried like a newborn baby, she wailed like a beast about to be killed with her mouth wide open, unable to wipe off the tears flowing down her cheeks. She then yelled like a maniac, "Thank goodness... Thank goodness..."

Seiji walked towards Yasuko,

"Get a hold of yourself!"

And gave her a slap which brought her back to her senses.

"You're his mother!"

"I, I, I...", Yasuko said terrifyingly while looking up towards Ryuuji,

"H, have no right, to be, your mother."

As she gazed into Ryuuji's round eyes, more tears came down her cheeks,

"It's all Ya-chan's fault that Ryuu-chan might think like that. I had no right to be your mother. I only wished... you could be happy, but, I couldn't do it... I never thought that way... T, then..."

Yasuko shook her head, trying to find the right words,

"... If Ryuu-chan hadn't been born, then Ya-chan will have nothing! Ryuu-chan is, everything, to Ya-chan's happiness! That's why... I'm afraid...!"

Sonoko and Seiji both seemed to know what she was trying to say, and listened quietly as she tried her best to convey her message amidst the tears,

"Ya-chan was afraid that Ryuu-chan might leave one day. Ever since when you were a baby, Ya-chan's been afraid when you might disappear, and was at a lost on what to do! Ya-chan knew she'll be punished for deserting her parents! It wasn't until Ryuu-chan was born that I realized what a horrible and tragic thing I've done... So when Ryuu-chan says he wanted to leave, Ya-chan couldn't stop it from happening. I couldn't face it, I didn't know how to face it, I couldn't bear it... So Ya-chan ran away...! That was the only thing... Ya-chan could think of..."

Ryuuji too silently listened.

Yasuko's words had enveloped this home, and every corner in this room with sadness. *No. I can't allow this.* Ryuuji bit his lip and stared at that sadness.

I'm through with all this sadness.

"But Ya-chan remembered she must ask the landlord to take care of Ryuu-chan until he leaves. Then I heard the landlord says Ryuu-chan was crying yesterday... Ya-chan's done it again! ...I've done something just as horrible once again... Something just as cruel. It was then that Ya-chan understood... So when I received the phone message, I really thought that everything was all over...! Because I was too stupid, so the gods have decided to take everything from me... That everything will end like that... That's what I really thought..."

"I'M STILL ALIVE!"

Ryuuji said forcefully in order to prevent himself from being infected by Yasuko's crying. He held on to Yasuko's shoulders tightly, to prevent her sadness from creeping around her. *No one has to leave their home ever again. No one needs to do that anymore.*

"You gave birth to me! And I'm still alive! What more could you ask for!? Is there anything more you can ask from that!?"

Yasuko widened her eyes as though she had seen Ryuuji for the first time, and said quiveringly with tears still filling her eyes,

"Anything more...?"

She repeated what Ryuuji just said, and felt something incredible about that question being asked.

"... I gave birth to Ryuu-chan, and he's still alive. So Ya-chan will be happy... And then... The rest... This happiness... It... It'll continue on..."

"Then, then let it continue on."

Ryuuji nodded to Yasuko while holding Taiga's hand,



"But this time she'll be with us... always, for the rest of our lives."

"Taiga-chan..."

Yasuko continued to tremble as she held her breath, she then turned to Taiga, who was kneeling besides her, and embraced her head roughly. And as expected, she held on to Ryuuji's arm and began sobbing again. No matter how much she cried, the tears just won't stop. But if any sadness were to creep in now, Ryuuji was determined to crush it the moment it appears.

"... Ya-chan too thought about Taiga-chan."

Yasuko buried her tearful face into Taiga's hair and caressed it,

"Taiga-chan has also been to places where Ya-chan couldn't reach, right? You must have been through many pain and suffering, right? If I had known I wouldn't have treated you so dearly, since I couldn't bring myself to send you away! I just couldn't do it! But, when Ryuu-chan is to leave Ya-chan, as long as you two are together... then even without Ya-chan, you two will both receive salvation, and you'll never be abandoned."

"Don't worry. Ryuuji will be saved, so will I, and of course so will Ya-chan. All of us will be redeemed... That's what Ryuuji says, and I think so too."

They both exchanged words which only they could understand. Yasuko then repeated the same words to Taiga, "Thank you."

"... Huh? Why are you thanking me?"

"For everything. For you coming to me, to our place, for loving Ryuu-chan and meeting me. Ya-chan also wants to thank Taiga-chan's parents... as well as everyone."

"What about your own parents?"

Upon Ryuuji's witty remark, Yasuko finally realized this, and took a look at where she was. She sniffed and rubbed her sore eyes and finally saw Sonoko and Seiji.

"... Huh?"

SIGH--- Both Sonoko and Ryuuji made a sigh as loud as a tornado. *What's there to be surprised about?* They both made the same thoughts.

Still,

"Well... it doesn't matter anymore. Everything's fine now."

Sonoko relaxed her stiffened back and said,

"So you've always been living with Ryuuji together all this time?"

Yasuko hesitated for a while, and then nodded vigorously. Sonoko, Seiji and Ryuuji didn't ask any further.

It was all settled.

As long as your love is free, then it doesn't matter if it couldn't get conveyed at once. This includes places that it has not been conveyed to, as way as truths that have not yet been conveyed. (TL note - This sentence is too philosophical. Can someone else with raws please double check to see if it's translated properly?)

"... It's amazing you managed to come back. You've finally come home... It's been a long trip, isn't it? Thank goodness. As long as you're back safely, then I'm glad."

"Anyway, let's get her something to eat." Though she had just had a plate of fried rice, upon hearing Seiji say that, Taiga's eyes flashed again.

Chapter 5

Sensing the door beside the staircase was ajar, Ryuuji crawled out of his quilt and quietly opened it, and bowed forward to take a peek towards the cold and dark corridor.

Taiga too sat kneeling while looking at Ryuuji, as though expecting him to open the door as well.

"... Brrr, I can't sleep."

She said softly while covering her mouth with her hands.

"... Did you turn on the heater? We use electric heating here."

"It's already on... but I'm feeling cold because of this."

Taiga shrugged and held onto her long hair - Ryuuji knew right away that her hair was still a bit damp. *She probably didn't dry her hair properly after her bath.*

"Though I've borrowed a hairdryer, but it's quite a hassle to dry all of my hair, and I don't feel so good occupying the bathroom for so long, so my hair's only half dry."

"... How considerate for someone who didn't even hesitate on eating three bowls of rice."

"Of course, because I'm a good girl..."

Taiga crossed her arms while holding her damp hair while lowering her eyelids and sitting upright like a saint from a portrait. Ryuuji pretended he didn't see that and listened intently at what's going on downstairs. Yasuko, Sonoko and Seiji were still in the living room, their voices during the late night were as faint as a marble dripping into a pond, and hardly anything could be heard from their conversations.

"... What're they talking about?"

Taiga remained silent for a while before gazing down the stairs as well.

"They probably have a lot to talk. They've not seen each other for eighteen years, after all."

"Did you see the look on Yasuko's face when we said we were calling it a day?"

"... Pft!" Upon hearing Ryuuji mention that, Taiga snickered, while Ryuuji's lips was also quivering.

Ehhh... You're sleeping already!? ... Let Ya-chan come along... I just have a feeling I'll get scolded badly... Uwaa~ Dad looks as though he's prepared something terrible... As Yasuko was feeling terrified, Seiji was holding a 5 iron golf club as he stood behind her. I will now smack my

daughter to her senses using this! No, of course he didn't say that. He just happened to be picking up his golf club, which he left lying in the living room, at that very moment.

"By the way, I've noticed that you resembled Ya-chan a lot, and now I realize gramps look just like you as well. So you'll grow up to be like him right? Thank goodness... I mean the hairline of course."

Taiga said and pointed towards his thick head of hair.

"I hope so as well... Huh, you think so? I never thought I resemble Yasuko at all."

"That's why I said it was a surprise. Though your face still resembled *him*..."

Taiga suddenly stopped, and shut her mouth, which had relaxed due to her gentle smile. She observed Ryuuji's expression for a while, wondering whether she should continue. *Go on* Ryuuji blinked and motioned for her to continue, and so she suppressed her voice and said,

"... In the end we still couldn't find out much about your dad."

"Yeah."

"Are you fine with that...? Don't you want to know?"

"I was just curious."

Dressed in borrowed pajamas, Ryuuji sat at the corner besides the door while embracing his knees. Lowering his voice to avoid anyone downstairs from hearing, he said,

"I was curious why the two of them would separate after leaving their homes. But then I felt... could it be that my dad's absence was actually a result of Yasuko's choice? It would be another thing if she were to constantly search for him, but the fact is she didn't."

Ryuuji believed that if he waited for a few years more, he might be able to ask Yasuko why that person was never by their side. He wasn't able to ask now as he was embarking on a new phase in his life. Taiga sat in the same way Ryuuji in the other corner of the dark corridor and stared at her toes, while Ryuuji rested his icy chin on the back of his hands.

He believed that as he was still learning to walk, he was unable to understand his parents' choices, and could only accept them in their entirety.

In truth, in his ideal world - Ryuuji has imagined his father sitting in their imaginary banquet, though he could only envision the image of him eighteen years ago, but he was there. He couldn't pretend his father never existed, for it was thanks to him that he was born. And that was enough to prove to the world that his father existed.

I am his best evidence. So Ryuuji thought. *I accept everything in my world. And that is me - Takasu Ryuuji.* He lifted his face to look at Taiga's pale cheeks.

With her hair lying on the ground, Taiga shriveled her body while hugging her face to her knees. Her eyes glittered while looking at Ryuuji,

"... So you don't hate your dad or Ya-chan at all?"

Her voice was soft, but it was enough to reach Ryuuji's ears before they gently faded into the darkness.

The sound of their breathing overlapped in the cold air.

"I've been thinking a lot."

Ryuuji had constantly been unconsciously counting the wounds that he had to bear himself - be it money, his career, or even further into the future. When he was young, he had to endure the pain of others unknowingly shunning him due to him looking different, or looking alarmed upon learning of his origin and Yasuko's occupation, knowing this is how other people look upon him, not wanting to forgive these rumors... Ryuuji has been thinking about these, as though trying to confirm his wounds.

Some wounds have been healed, while others haven't. Some were still bleeding, some were inflicted unreasonably, and others he gave up tending to since he couldn't do anything about them, and some didn't even have anything to do with his parents or birth. Some open wounds came from misunderstandings which no one wanted to happen, or difference in values and feelings. Due to these facts, Ryuuji had bore numerous wounds of differing sizes while living in this world.

Even if one could decide where one's soul stands, they still would not affect the souls of others. Some people willingly get themselves hurt, while others will unavoidably get hurt. This is the truth, this is what being human is all about. Ryuuji too was one of them, and so no matter how careful he was, he would still invariably hurt someone. Ryuuji wouldn't even dare say that the thought of wanting to injure someone with a knife had never occurred to him.

He once again realized the magnitude of coming to terms with one's self - By accepting everything that has happened, including the pains of his wound as well as the ugliness of himself hurting others, and then feel grateful about it. *It's no easy task after all.*

"But, sigh... I'm glad I have you."

"Me...? Really?"

Ryuuji nodded silently. Taiga looked at his face, which was buried into his knees, his expression looked as though he were either crying or smiling, it was incredible. She placed her fingertip over her soft cheery lips,

"Is that what you expect of me?"

Ryuuji thought, *Yeah.*

No matter how hard or distant it is, there is one thing that I must do no matter what.

The moving of one's soul involves having the body and mind go through hurdles in reality, and deep within one's soul, there is one thing that no force could reach, and could never be destroyed. Besides Ryuuji, no one else could touch it. That thing involved gazing at his loved one and being gazed back, and then bowing his head, vowing never to betray each other. *The eyes would look at my being, my actions, my thoughts forming a foundation within my heart, until I realize the purpose of my existence and how I choose to continue living.*

I guess what my eyes can see would constitute what my world is.

Ryuuji believed Taiga too had something she could create a foundation out of within her heart. He hoped she would understand this as well.

And so Ryuuji wanted to show Taiga that thing within the foundation of his heart, and what he would choose to do from now on to make that thing exist.

Sitting on the dimly lit corridor, Taiga didn't ask any further, but merely gazed at the shadows formed from Ryuuji's feet.

"... What about you? Don't you hate your old man anymore? He single-handedly messed up your life. And then there's your real mom, your step-mom, your real mom's new husband, and your step-siblings. Your situation is far more complicated than mine, what do you make of all this anyway?"

"I..."

As though praying, Ryuuji stared at her pale cherry lips which had gone silent. Yet Taiga didn't speak any further, and Taiga gently brushed away Ryuuji's prayers, anticipations, and expectations and moved her eyes towards something else distant.

Taiga was looking at somewhere on her own.

Lifting her sharp chin, her eyes shone as she faced this wide world with her provocative eyes.

Just what is she looking at? How wide is the world she's looking at? What kind of stars glittered in her world? What kind of seasons were there? What kind of wind was blowing? Ryuuji wanted to

know, he wanted to see them, he wanted to stand with her in the same place, he wanted to be by her side.

Each confined to their own body, how could two souls that could not be merged no matter what get to the place where they are the closest to each other? How could their worlds merge?

"... Can I come over to your side? The heater seems warmer that side."

Taiga returned her gaze towards Ryuuji, as though answering Ryuuji's question. Rubbing her hands, she shivered while sighing a breath and said, "It's freezing."

"Right, I'm turning on the heater."

Taiga said and headed towards the dimly lit room. *Beep!* Ryuuji could hear the faint switch of the electric heater being turned on. Perhaps it was too cold to walk on the icy floor tiles with her bare feet, Taiga walked quietly into the room, which was prepared for Ryuuji and Yasuko, while huddling her arms and legs as close to herself as possible.

"Phew, this room is warmer after all..."

Taiga finally relaxed her shoulders.

The room was only lit by the orange glow of the heater, and Taiga breathed a sigh of relief from the warmth given off by it.

"... Stop looking over here."

Taiga suddenly thought of something and placed her hand over her chest in her borrowed pajamas. Her arms were crossed together, her waist was slightly bent, while her head was looking slightly upwards... *Are you a maidservant or something?* Ryuuji decided not to convey that thought, and instead asked, "Why not?"

"The size of this pajama's too big. I'm quite bothered by how spacious the chest area is."

"Oh... You poor thing. Hurry up and lift your spirits by drying your hair with the heater."

"For some reason I feel really pissed with you saying that, but as they'll hear us downstairs, I'll let you off this time. But don't you forget what I said, don't ever!"

Taiga glared menacingly at Ryuuji and walked across the room with her hands tightly over her chest, and sat down before the heater, which was two futons away from Ryuuji, before extending her hands towards the heat source. The deep orange glow dimly illuminated the dark room. "Ah, I've been revived... Like I said, don't you forget!" She turned to glare at Ryuuji again.

"Yeah, whatever," Ryuuji stretched his legs on his futon and stared at his slightly hideous looking toenails while sighing his anxiety away. *I must not get close to her again tonight.* Just this

distance, being alone together in this room and staring at each other is scary enough, since this was what he had wanted all along.

Honestly... Ryuuji thought, just feeling the breath reach his ears was enough to melt his brain and drive him insane.

Because the girl he loves was sitting right before him.

His heart felt like going through a roller coaster ride before arriving in the "present". Just looking at Taiga, every single strand of her fluttering hair, her petite shoulders, and her small and pale white bony hands was enough to trigger every sense within him. Ryuuji's every gaze was fixated on her, he could feel as though he could smell her fragrance, he could even sense warmth coming from Taiga... though that had more to do with her being beside the heater.

Have I ever wanted to embrace the touch of someone this badly before? His thoughts were simple - He wanted to get closer to Taiga, understand her more, tell her more about his thoughts. He never thought just these desires alone was enough to trigger such a reaction within him.

But Ryuuji knew that if he reached out his hand now, it would all be over. He didn't know where he'll fall if he makes his move, as though standing by the edge of a cliff. *I stood somewhere similar last time. If I were to fall off the bridge again, would I fall into water so cold that even my heart would freeze?*

Ryuuji covered his ears nonchalantly and shook his head with an unknown expression as he relaxed his stiff neck. It was in fact quite hard to move his gaze away. He could feel his spine tingling, and even had an urge to whistle... He was never like that while he was with Taiga. *How did I spend each day back then?* Right now Ryuuji couldn't even remember. *Back then... when exactly?* Right now he wasn't even sure of the answer.

His eyesight moved towards Taiga, who had placed her long hair before her as she combed it. Under the caress of her pale fingers, Ryuuji felt her hair was as soft as dissolving honey. Under her bangs, her face reflected the illumination from the heater. *Gramps and Grandma are currently downstairs.* Ryuuji took a look around, and realized this used to be Yasuko's room - The furniture, the uniform that still hung there, the casual clothing, everything there revealed that his mother used to live there.

Even if our hearts are linked, taboo would still be taboo. It's just that the more it's forbidden, the more one wants to find out.

"Ryuuji."

"Huh!? Y, Yes!?"

"... You're breathing too loud... Help me turn up the heater, I don't know how to adjust this."

Taiga was faced towards the heater and didn't turn around to look at him.

Ryuuji didn't reply, and merely approached the heater, as well as approached Taiga.

What should a person turning up the heater do? ... If it's just shaking hands, would she accept?

Can we embrace?

Don't friends normally do that already?

Right, I'll worry about it if she says no. I just hope she doesn't think I'm some bastard who doesn't know his limits.

... That is if I really want to feel her touch.

Just feeling curious about what it's like to be in physical contact with each other, I'll be satisfied with that alone... Ryuuji proceeded to reach out his hand.

"... I think it's this button."

... And pushed the button with a triangle symbol facing upwards. *Beep, beep* Sounds were made as the button was pushed, and the heating tubes glowed brighter as a result, turning into a fiery red color. The warmth reaching the skin quickly became stronger.

"... Is it too strong?"

"Just right. Ahh, so warm..."

"Make sure you don't burn your hair."

"No matter how stupid I am, I'm not that stupid as to... sniff,"

Taiga grabbed the tip of her long hair and smelled it,

"... I'm not that stupid as to get my hair burned."

She puffed her chest proudly and moved her face towards Ryuuji.

"... Don't come too close to me."

Ryuuji frowned and recoiled his face, revealing an alien-like face... or rather, a threatening face. He moved his body back in the same angle from Taiga, keeping a foot away from her.

"What's this about? Why are you saying that?"

Because just physically touching each other is not enough to please me... It's not like I could say that. Neither could I say it's because we have grown-ups downstairs. Anyway, it's just not enough. My desire for Taiga is bottomless.

Not enough.

None of it is enough. Just as I thought.

Even if he knew everything about her, and loved all of it, he still did not have enough time, as well as his own effort. There're only 24 hours in one day, 365 days in a year, and probably only around 80 years in one's lifetime. This night is only going to last for a few more hours. Ryuuji was just a normal kid who did not have enough of everything, and could only feel anxious and struggle in pain. That's all there was to it.

"... Anyway, no matter what, this line represents our boundary between ourselves."

He was now running out of ideas.

Using his finger, he drew an invisible line between where they were sitting, just cutting across the carpet intersection in the middle. "Don't ever cross this!" Ryuuji even changed gender and gave an expression of an old hag.

"... What happens if I do?"

"Invisible guards will blow your brains off with a shotgun."

"That's not what I meant... what happens then?"

Taiga sat before the heater in her borrowed pajamas, and stared at the hair which she was combing. Just her eyelashes were enough to create an impact on Ryuuji's heart. *How could you stay so calm!?* He even began to feel resentful. In the end, Taiga didn't understand anything. She could simply sleep whenever she feels like it, just like back in his double-room plus kitchen apartment.

If that's the case...

"Well... it's not like I want to cross it."

If I really cross it, what are you going to do to me?

"If I really cross that line, if I've already made up my mind... then no matter how you cry or beg, I won't be letting you go."

"... You..."

... Bastard! No... you devil! No... you Palmtop Tiger!

"But it'll really be a bother if I get my brains blown off by invisible guards. Besides, it'll be too sad to have you clean up my brains lying all over... right?"

"..."

Ryuuji was speechless.

Taiga's provocative gaze and warmth was triggering the pure and complicated heart of a man. This felt just like dancing on a cooking grill with his bare feet. With Ryuuji dancing while Taiga fanned the flames beneath it. Ryuuji glared back at her...

"What? You wanna say something with that expression?"

Taiga crossed her legs brazenly, having her feet face each other, and swung back and forth like a Daruma doll. She purposely widened her eyes and pouted, "If I don't even understand what you're trying to say, I won't be qualified to be your fay-an, fay-on, fiancé!" And curled her head inwards. Ryuuji thought, *Not that I find any pity in it.*

Seeing as he couldn't beat her in words, Ryuuji utilized a long-distance assault weapon - He covered his lips in a manly way with one hand, and then from the gaps of his teeth, blow out a dart filled with the toxin of a black mamba snake straight towards Taiga's eye... Of course he didn't do that. He decided to mimic what Taiga did a while ago and gave her a flying kiss while looking completely hideous. *I don't care who's downstairs, this at least I could do! C'mon! One kiss costs 5000 yen!* Ryuuji clenched his fist and thought...

"Your kind of kiss has hardly even flown over for me!"

Taiga nonchalantly slapped down his flying kisses as though they were mosquitoes.

"Wha! T, that's mean...!"

"Wha! T, that's mean...!"

"... My chin's not that long."

"You really are getting carried away..."

Taiga stuck out her chin in a malicious way and waved her hands while shaking her head.

"What did you say!?"

"You can't even mimic the sound of a flying kiss. Sigh... I can't believe you would be so shameless as to mimic me..."

"Arrgh! You! It was you who first...! Forget it!"

Ryuuji tried to retort but was lost for words, and so turned his head away from Taiga, and merely said, "I'm going to sleep." He then crawled into his futon and closed his eyes.

"Ooooh, he's mad. I was just joking, and you end up pouting."

"..."

"Ryuuji. Ryuuujiiii--"

"..."

"Ryuu-chan."

"... Don't call me that."

"Um... It's great Ya-chan's issue's been resolved."

"..."

"Same for you... thank goodness."

Ryuuji kept his eyes shut, he could sense Taiga's breath by his feet, and so he cuddled himself more.

"... Same for myself as well... I feel really great, that's all I could think about. For Ya-chan to thank a person like me... and then I too am really thankful for you, for Ryuuji..."

Taiga's voice went coarse, her silhouette suddenly shivered and became blurry in his eyes.

"... Are you really asleep?"

Ryuuji replied that question with silence.

"If you're asleep, then forget it. My hair's dry and warm anyway now... so it doesn't matter."

He felt Taiga standing up and moved away from the edge of his futon. Hearing her footsteps, he opened his eyes and raised his head, trying to get up to chase after her.

"Whoa!?"

Thud! A sudden whack caused him to stop breathing.

"... Sleeping people are not supposed to move."

"Not supposed to move? You... I, I can't breathe...!"

"They're also not supposed to talk."

Ryuuji continued to struggle while being suffocated.

Though he was completely pressed down by his futon, Ryuuji still barely managed to grasp the situation - Taiga had rushed and jumped onto him, then sat down on him and tried to suffocate him with his futon.

Taiga spoke softly with a coarse voice that was mixed with her breathing,

"... How could you escape? You're sleeping."

... Indeed, he couldn't even move.

Taiga only weighed about 40kg, and yet she has leaped over and held onto him, refusing to let go. This determination did not allow him to move either.

"You know, Ryuuji... I really, really, really, really, really, really..."

Two bodies that exist separately.

Two souls that can never be merged no matter what.

"... Love you."

And even so, they still wished to be as close as possible.

The futon that covered his face was pulled down, Ryuuji felt soft hair touching his face before his forehead touched another forehead, and his eyebrows came into contact with another pair, as though confirming the curvature of his face. His nose touched another nose, sensing his breathing overlapping with another. And finally, within the smell of shampoo, his fiery lips came into contact with another pair of lips. Taiga sat on Ryuuji with all her weight as she came down on Ryuuji's lips. This felt even hotter than the first time, more passionate, as though they could get immersed in it even more. In the nick of time, Ryuuji managed to steady his body, which was fast dissolving by the warmth of love, and frantically opened his eyes.

Taiga, I love you as well He repeated within his head.

The same thoughts has allowed two people to twist their bodies and leap towards the vast expanse, wanting to merge into a quadrupedal creature, sharing the same life. Yet these two bodies could merely be close to each other, touching each other, and they were anxious because of that. Their anxiety turned into frustration, and they could only cry and go crazy and would feel like destroying everything. This was the easiest method they could choose. Yet by standing so close to each other like this, they felt they could see something.

By bringing their respective worlds together, the two independent life forms are able to live once again in this new world, and this time they would be reborn in the same place.

Both Ryuuji and Taiga wanted to reach there.

That was all there is to it. By embracing everything, their "present moment" was here.

As they were both independent, since they could not combine into one, they were able to be strongly attracted to each other. They would dance, struggle, cry and get hurt together in the air, and then embrace each other with their powerful force. They desired to go to the world that they wished for, and opened their eyes many times.

As time and life is short and limited, by placing one's hopes too far, one could easily get anxious. However...

"... We really should be going to sleep."

They were slowly becoming grown-ups.

Marching ever forward, the time which they left as a trail behind them never comes back, slowly becoming the past.

Taiga caressed Ryuuji's eyelids with her fingertips, and he could feel her continuously quavering heart. As she was quavering, she closed his eyes and said,

"I'll be going to sleep as well... good night."

As if he could.

... As if he could even possibly.



He didn't open his eyes.

The sun hadn't completely risen, and it was very cold. This should be the last morning of the deep winter.

Sleeping sideways, Ryuuji cuddled his legs inside the blanket warmed by his body heat and covered his eyes with his hands. He reckoned the person sleeping in the futon next to him should be Yasuko.

Listening to the sound and breathing, Ryuuji knew that Taiga has gently opened the door and was standing there. He could also tell that the soft sound of metals clattering together came from the metallic zips of her bag.

Ryuuji. Taiga called out softly.

Ryuuji didn't move.

The call came once again, *Ryuuji*. He waited for a while before clearing the call once again. Three times she had called out his name, it seemed she wanted to make sure he was asleep.

"Then, I'll be gone for a while."

The floorboards gave out a faint creaking noise followed by the door being closed silently. She walked down the stairs gently, placed her shoes on the bricked floor of the entrance hall, had them put on and opened the door.

The door's being opened.

This is fine.

This town sure is quiet.

For a while Ryuuji could hear footsteps slowly fading into the distance under a freezing cold sky.

The footsteps were initially hesitant, but step by step it became more assured, and started running at their normal pace. The firm sounds of the shoes stepping on the asphalt slowly faded away.

The sound's gone.

Ryuuji didn't move inside his blanket.

He kept his eyes closed.

"I, is this..."

The first person to jump out from the futon was Yasuko.

"... Ryu-chan! Is this really fine...!?"

This is fine.

Ryuuji wanted to reply as such.

But he couldn't say it. Even though he knew it's fine, he couldn't even open his eyes.

Taiga must return to her parents' side.

Because she loves them.

She didn't have to run away anymore.

Taiga had tried to abandon her parents. She was afraid that she would destroy everything if she showed them her love, which was why she never desired for anything before. The love she gave

was not in proportion with the love she received, and she even went into tears because of it. She hated herself for not being able to get her love reciprocated, and not being able to get her feelings appreciated, and so she did not allow someone as insignificant as herself to have ambitious dreams. Taiga has always been restrained, restrained by the fear that if she sought out love that was forbidden, she would only receive retribution, end up losing everything and get hurt by it.

But now things are different.

Taiga has broken her bondage, she has finally been set free, and is able to go wherever she desires.

She should understand by now that even if she wanted to love someone or something, she no longer had anything to lose anymore. With a free mind, she whole-heartedly loves the world she lives in. She should understand that above loving anyone or anything, she should love herself, she should realize that she can have them all, and that there really was no such thing as give or take when it comes to love, and should be able to embrace everything, including her wounds...

That's why...

"Ryuu-chan..."

This is fine. She already understands.

Feeling he was now able to give his reply to a now sobbing Yasuko, Ryuuji opened his eyes and climbed out of his futon, took a deep breath and looked up towards this world.

Towards this "present state" where Taiga was no longer around.

Towards the centre of this reality where he sat in the wintry morning. Even if he wanted to say this was fine, or wanted to tell himself that this was for the best...

"Tai..."

He realized he was now alone in this world.

Ryuuji was now living all alone on his own.

Taiga's not here.

He couldn't say anything, no matter how he tried. He felt himself being torn apart and exploding. A spark burst from the whiteness of his eyes as a whole flurry of thoughts came rushing to his head so fast it felt as though his heart might blow up. "Ahhh..." He moaned. *Everything's gone. No, this, this, this...*

"Ryuu-chan!"

Ryuuji felt someone grabbing his shoulder hardly. He turned and looked at Yasuko, and saw tears were flowing like a fountain on her reddened face, sniffing with a painful expression. The fragments of a shattered world came crashing down everywhere, and here he stood in the midst of it as he shivered with his hair standing on his skin. The thoughts that came rushing felt like they were about to explode - Ryuuji believed that this would be his facial expression right now.

No.

He kicked off the blanket and ran off.

Still wearing his pajamas, he virtually slid down the stairs and came to the entrance in his bare feet. Opening the door which Taiga had departed from, he ran straight out towards the world outside, running towards a new solitude on his own.

There was no one else on the road, just Ryuuji covering his mouth with his shivering hand. He must hold back that name which he nearly shouted out, and did his utmost to bite his lips to keep them shut. Though he could not stop his body, even when his skin felt like cracking up under this chilly wind. The winter sun had not completely risen and the gloomy sky still gave a sense of solemn desolation.

His mind, body and soul was being torn apart. At this rate it will end up in shreds.

His mind was on the run, so was his body, while his soul urged them not to. His body wanted to stop, but his mind couldn't. *It probably won't stop.* Thought Ryuuji as he continued to run in the wind.

I know, I really know, but my bleeding heart is still fanatically calling out to Taiga, in the hope that our worlds could come together. Could our hearts be together no matter how far apart we are? If my heart which was taken away doesn't return, then by seeking you out and calling out to you in a force which is incomprehensible, would you still want to leave, Taiga?

Even with such a powerful force, are you still choosing to leave?

Even when I run to the far corners of the world, would there be a day when our worlds would finally come together and we would spend our future together?

Will I even be able to acquire such a power?

Ryuuji ran aimlessly, trying hard to wipe off the tears flowing down his face. He knew there was no way he could catch up, he also knew Taiga would be running with all her might. *This is fine...* He said to himself, though his stolen heart was crying, he still continued to move his feet. *Taiga is no longer in this town, there's no way I can catch up.*

This is fine.

This body should contain a power similar to hers. I should be able to also possess the strength to love Taiga, be loved by her, as well as happily embrace everything in this world.

Ryuuji's white steamy breath puffed rapidly in the cold winter morning of the silent town.

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Probably having received the phone message Ryuuji had sent from the train, they waited for Ryuuji and Yasuko, who were separated by a small distance, to emerge from the empty Saturday station ticketing hall.

"... Kushieda..."

He had used the time spent on the trip home to calm his anguished heart.

Amidst the sparse crowd of passengers, covering her out-of-bed messy hair with a baseball cap, Minori stood there in her coat and jeans,

"I don't get it."

Upon seeing Ryuuji, she said only that sentence. Biting her lips until they were devoid of blood, she stared at him with her eyes wide open. But Ryuuji could find no way to explain it suitably.

How should he properly explain the reason Taiga left, why he let her go, and why this was for the better? The more he thought about it the more scared he got. Though he knew Minori would understand, yet it was times like these that he became incapable of articulating his thoughts properly.

Standing some distance away from Minori was Ami. It seemed she had hardly slept, and stood slouching her shoulders with her hands inside her coat pockets, her naturally beautiful face now looking completely pale. Kitamura approached from a spot slightly further than them, he had no intention of condemning anyone, yet his eyes were filled with questions, looking at Ryuuji, who was the only one wearing a school uniform.

Ryuuji's message simply read: "Taiga has returned to his mother's side." There may have been a better way to convey that, but Ryuuji did not know what it was. It was natural that everyone was confused, because he and Taiga had promised that they would not abandon everyone who was precious to them, and so they will run away and return here together. They had been waiting all this time, believing that Ryuuji would come back with Taiga.

Ryuuji must now explain why he had returned alone.

"... You're all good friends, right?"

Yasuko, who recognized everyone there, said softly. She took out her key purse from her tracksuit jacket, and took off the key to Taiga's apartment which was entrusted to her and gave it to Ryuuji.

"Let's go look for Taiga-chan together. If there's anything you don't understand, then try to confirm it with your own eyes. Ya-chan must now fetch Inko-chan home."

"... Where did you put him anyway?"

"With the landlord~"

I see, so we'll be going the same way then... Just as Ryuuji was about to say that, Yasuko waved her hand and smiled, "I gotta go now." Perhaps she had guessed the situation - that Ryuuji had to be the one to tell everyone that Taiga is no longer with them - and so gave her son some space.

After receiving the key, Ryuuji lifted his head.

No matter who makes the first step, it's a big step we're all gonna take.

From the familiar station, they walked along the road which they would walk on everyday, and in the end they began to run. Even Ryuuji, who already knew Taiga wouldn't be there, ran with all his might. He passed by the corner of the Takasu residence, entered the condominium block entrance, and entered the password for the automatic door. *Taiga had said this place was no longer Aisaka property, so could the password have already been changed? Could the creditors have already come to collect the place?*

Ryuuji feared the key would no longer fit in the keyhole, but unexpectedly it smoothly fitted in. The door leading into Taiga's apartment opened with a creaking sound that was different from the opening sound of the large gate downstairs.

He pushed the door open and turned on the entrance lights as everyone struggled to remove their shoes as they entered. "Taiga! We're coming in!" Minori shouted, hoping Taiga to still be inside.

"Aisaka!"

"Taiga, are you there!?"

Kitamura and Ami also shouted.

"It's me! I'm here! We're coming in! Taiga! Tai..."

Opening the glass door leading towards the living room, Ryuuji stopped in his tracks. Behind him, Minori and the rest also stopped their shouting. It was because they knew what kind of mess the apartment would look like had Taiga been in, which was why they all went silent.

Because they were shocked.

With the heater off, the wide living room felt icy cold.

Under the chandelier, the armchair sofa, glass coffee table and white cupboard remained, gently covered with sheets. The European-style kitchen, furry floor mat and long pillow which Taiga constantly held onto was devoid of dust. Every corner was sparkling clean.

Minori slowly walked to the centre of the living room and shook her head, as though deciding to throw all her emotions aside right here and then, and to forget everything. Like a robot receiving a command, she opened the cupboard, and pulled open one of the drawers,

"The little bag carrying all her personal belongings is gone,"

She looked up to everyone and explained,

"It's a small, flattened bag with deep blue and pink red stripes. She would always place her bankbook, signature chop, health insurance card and passport and stuff in there. She said it would be convenient for her to grab it at once in case she needs to escape during a fire. But now it's gone."

Solemnly closing the drawer, she opened the stained glass door and entered the bedroom, pulling the sheet to reveal the pillows, and discovering there was hardly a wrinkle on the bed. A closed notebook computer was left on the desk, while the normally tangled wires and cables which would have given Ryuuji an excited urge to sort them out were now removed, and neatly tied up with a hair band and placed on the desk.

Minori opened the dress cabinet, and for a moment couldn't say anything.

"... Her uniform's... still here."

She was trembling.

"Taiga, are you just gonna disappear like that...?"

Standing by the room entrance, Ami looked quite lost as she murmured. Her voice sadly echoed across the wide room.

Minori turned to look at Ryuuji, breathing deeply. Ryuuji merely looked as her shoulders rose and fell to her breathing.

"T, this... this, Takasu-kun, is this..."

I must give them an answer..." Ryuuji had made up his mind.

"Is this fine...!?"

"This is fine."

"HOW SO!?"

"THIS IS FINE!"

This is fine! This wasn't a shouting contest, yet Ryuuji still yelled in a sad voice that was no less louder than Minori's as well as his own heart's, yelling with all his might,

"I think it's fine for Taiga to leave like this!"

"Won't you feel sad with that!?"

Who couldn't be sad with that?

"No, I won't!"

I'm feeling absolutely miserable.

"That's impossible!"

"Kushieda, calm down!"

Kitamura held on to Minori's trembling shoulders from behind her and said softly,

"Aisaka may still not be far from us, we might still be able to catch up with her."

"Y... yeah. Maybe she's nearby. Perhaps she's wandering around as though nothing's happened!"

Hearing Kitamura and Ami say that, Minori and Ryuuji turned their heads around.

"You're right. If the place is still this clean, it means she's probably only finished cleaning and had just left not long ago. Maybe we could still make it... right? We could still catch her, right!? Takasu-kun!"

"..."

"Takasu-kun! Let's move!"

Minori, Ami and Kitamura ran out the corridor they came in front towards the entrance, followed quickly by Ryuuji.

Exiting the condominium block entrance and emerging outside, they ran along the road planted with beech trees on both sides. Ryuuji panted as the cold air entered his lungs.

We may still be able to catch her...

If he could catch up with that silhouette, that long wavy hair, that fluttering one-piece dress, Ryuuji would stretch his hand and grab on her shoulder, telling her, "Don't leave me. Stay with me always."

If he could still catch up with Taiga with his thoughts right now, and embrace her tightly.

"... Kitamura."

If he could still hold onto her.

"Kawashima."

If she could choose to not leave.

"Kushieda... Kushieda!"

"Let go! Takasu-kun! We gotta move! We have to get her!"

"No, Kushieda! We can't! This... this is fine!"

"Why!?"

Ryuuji barely managed to grab onto Minori's wool jacket sleeve and pulled her towards him, using his weight to restrain her. Minori continued to struggle, wriggling her arms trying to break free. His left hand held onto Kitamura's arm and the tip of Ami's scarf, of course, he couldn't allow his right hand to let Minori go, and so used his entire strength to hold onto Minori's small yet incredibly strong wrist.

"Why is this fine!? That way we won't know where Taiga has gone! How is this fine at all!? Didn't you say you love Taiga!? Wasn't it you who told me where you have decided to go!? Weren't you the one that said you two would live together for the rest of your lives!? Didn't you say you want to achieve happiness... Why does it have to turn into this!? Why!?"

"Taiga's not gonna run away from her family! She won't abandon anyone! So this is fine!"

The pedestrians on the road turned their heads due to Ryuuji's shouting. Even so, he refused to release Minori's wrist. *I can't let her go.* Tears were flowing down her cheek as Ryuuji's words became blurrier to her as she trembled more and more. Still Ryuuji continued, "This is fine."

Closing his eyes, Ryuuji yelled loudly to Taiga, who probably couldn't hear him anyway,

"GO, TAIGA! Hurry up! Go on!"

If I can catch up to you, it means you would have to run even faster and go even further. No matter where you go, even to the edges of the world, go forward and grab on to everything which you are entitled to have!

"GO---!!!"

Ryuuji yelled with all his might in lieu of his tears.

He pushed aside his heart, which was trembling from calling out to Taiga, and opened and closed his eyes continuously.

The wide sky looks far and bright.

Really, this is fine.

Taiga is no longer here. So it's good.

Kitamura removed his glasses and covered his face, his twisted mouth emitting whimpers which he couldn't hide. Ami glanced at Kitamura and bit her lip. Her cheeks, nose and throat were all red as tears flowed from her under her eyelashes down to her chin.

Minori had lost all her strength and sat in the middle of the pedestrian road,

"... Does this mean.. Taiga has abandoned us?"

"No."

Ryuuji said to his friend, who faced her back to him,

"She definitely won't. Taiga won't give up, she's not the weak sort of girl. She would certainly come back. And when she does, we've gotta be here for her!"

"No matter what you say... it's still sad. I'm sad that Taiga's not here. How should I deal with this sadness? How would you deal with your sadness?"

Minori's sadness was undeniable, no matter how unnecessary it was, even though she had wanted to shatter it when it appeared, she still felt miserable.

Yet Ryuuji didn't look away, but stood firmly and faced forward, even wanting to take on this sadness.

"It's fine to feel sad as well."

The sadness from being apart - that was the relationship for him and Taiga right now.

Yet our hearts are filled with love.

It doesn't matter even if we're sad.

Ryuuji thought slowly.

He had met Taiga under chaotic conditions just when the cherry blossom season had ended. The days of fighting and commotion all started from there. In the end they were invariably attracted to each other, and began loving each other from one moment, when they fell badly and even thought they were going to die. After managing to get on their feet, their hearts had at last melded. And now, Takasu Ryuuji still loved Aisaka Taiga.

As long as there was love, the bond linking the two of them will never be broken. *As long as there's a link, I believe everything will be fine. A day will come when this love will pour out, converting into a yell that cannot be suppressed. Maybe we would call out each other's names, and nothing can stop the force that draws us together, and eventually, our minds, bodies and souls would meet again in someplace in this world.* In that way, just like finding the way home, Ryuuji and Taiga would live on while heading in the same direction. If he could live with Taiga, and walk by her side, then it didn't matter whether there was no end in sight, it didn't matter if they had to continuously walk on. Ryuuji even believed it didn't even matter if they had to walk on forever, because this was love.

This was a long and winding road home, and therefore it should be treated with happiness. No matter how hard and arduous the road may be, it will all end in happiness, that is why they must keep moving on.

The days that he has gone through, the days he is now going through, and the days that he will go through, Ryuuji would love them all. And so would Taiga. As well as Yasuko, Minori, Ami and Kitamura. Everyone would do their utmost to love their life they're living.

We'll definitely meet again -- Having walked in their own worlds with their individual bodies, Ryuuji and Taiga would one day combine the two worlds with force and precision. Because their worlds are constantly attracting each other, calling out to each other, longing for each other.

We will not give up, but we will face it together.

"... Will Taiga still want to see me...?"

Ami asked while crying, her voice was so faint it was hardly audible. Ryuuji replied in a voice that called her back,

"If you believe that you'll definitely see her again, if you think that this is important for you, then convey it well with your actions. Only you could make it happen... do this for yourself as well, Kawashima!"

"I..."

Tears continued to roll down Ami's cheek as she said,

"I want to see Taiga again! I hope that when she returns, I would still be here! I want to be better friends with Minori-chan! I want to make up with Takasu-kun! I don't want to break off anymore relations anymore! I want to be friends forever! It was fun being together with everyone! I want to be with everyone! I love you guys...!"

"W, what about me!?"

"Who cares about you, Yuusaku!?"

"Amin...!"

Minori went and hugged Ami on the head, who in turn hugged back. "Minori-chan!" And buried her face in Minori's shoulder as she sobbed. Two proud girls who refused to give way to each other were now warmly embracing each other. Thinking about their friend who was no longer here, they wailed loudly, ignoring the glances of the passers-by.

Being their friend and knowing how they thought, Kitamura also joined in. Ryuuji embraced their shoulders and lowered his head. The four of them huddled together, holding onto each others' shoulders and cried like kids in the middle of the pedestrian road.

Yet Ryuuji felt lucky. *It is good that we have our own individual bodies, so that we can warm each others' wounded hearts. Because we were born and grew up separately, we could then meet each other, fall in love with each other, quarrel with each other... and then huddle each other and cry together like right now. It's a miraculous sight.*

Right now when his heart was awash with sadness, everything that existed right now within this world Ryuuji loved it with preciousness. No amount of yelling could compare to the love that was flowing out from within.

Ryuuji believed that making a head start, Taiga's journey was also filled with love. It's just that not all love would guarantee return. Maybe she could be betrayed, hurt and become disillusioned again.

But she must still go on, just like everyone else must, on their own path of life.

No matter how far the distance, how long the roads, Ryuuji and Taiga will certainly find each other once again, so it was fine. Because they were heading towards the same destination.

--- Flying in the endless skies above, Ryuuji could see the beautiful world beneath the clouds. In this beautiful yet cruel colorful world, a strong beast shoved aside the sands of time and strode forward, using her four limbs, and ran unhindered along the land which she is proud to grow up on.

I am the Dragon.

I am the Tiger.

Together we would become human, calling out to each other. No matter where we go, or where we are, our howls would be able to reach each other.

At last, the sky where the Dragon soared cleared of clouds, and there was no longer anything to block the sound between it and the land where the Tiger roared.



No matter how everybody else blames Takasu-kun, Sensei will defend you all the way! Because I understand what Takasu-kun is doing...

"Ohhh! It's done, it's done!"

"..."

"I have received all ten pages of them. You see? The file is now this thick! I'll return it to you once you graduate. Your mother... um... T, Takasu-kun? Why are you looking at Sensei with such a vengeful look...?"

How is this vengeful?

"Oh, perhaps you're feeling unwell?"

Nope.

"... Well, a lot has happened. You must have been through a lot..."

I'm just feeling a bit tired.

I will protect you. -- That's what his homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri (single, aged 30) said to him as she held the stunningly thick file in her hand. The label on the side of the file read "Class 2-C, Takasu Ryuuji, Repentance Statements"

"But you sure do write a lot, submitting ten pages worth of Repentance Statements every weekend. And how many times have you done that? This is the sixth time already, not to mention the Cleaning Reports you submit every Monday, Wednesday and Friday... I think you've written too much for those. I've already said you only need to write one page for those, yet you still end up submitting five to six pages."

"Well, I can't help getting myself excited whenever I write those."

Thanks to Koigakubo Yuri's vigorous defence of Ryuuji before the school's principal and disciplinary dean, Ryuuji managed to come out of this major escapade largely unscathed. Ryuuji did not conjecture this himself, but he had actually overheard the principal say that from within his office. Ryuuji's punishment was commuted to writing ten pages worth of Repentance Statements once every weekend alone in the dean's room, as well as being put in charge of cleaning the staff restroom three times a week.

All these Ryuuji had diligently done. At the same time, he had achieved his best ever grades since enrolling in this school in the term-end exams a few days ago. He even overtook Kitamura in math, his strongest subject, to take first place in his grade, while his overall grade ranking improved by ten places, placing him amongst the highest ranked students. Ryuuji believed this would help somewhat in keeping Koigakubo Yuri's reputation intact. However...

"In fact, some teachers are not too happy with your Cleaning Reports... They all question just how many hours do you have to spend cleaning in there. And your reports even go into detail as to how many strands of hair you've found on the ground, how there're recyclable cans in the rubbish bin, how this and that is so filthy that you suspect it's done by some teacher... et cetera, et cetera. You sound like a mean old hag, you know... There's now a sense of dread and trepidation every time we use the bathroom."

"Do we have old hags teaching us?"

"... Um, I was just saying that as a figure of speech... You know... as a description..."

"Hohoho." Koigakubo laughed sorrowfully. She sorted out Ryuuji's Repentance Statement and placed it in her folder, so that she could go through them slowly and adding comments with her red markers, like "How about this?" "Think carefully!" "You're right." That was part of the job of a homeroom teacher as well. She would then return the statement to Ryuuji to see what he thought of her comments before placing it back in the folder.

It was after school on a Saturday.

Koigakubo flicked through the pages of the Repentance Statements with her finger. There was silence in the dean's room where the two of them were. The yells of girls from the sports clubs on the track field outside could be heard. *Probably the Softball Team*. Ryuuji could hear a rough and sharp voice yelling, "Hold~ GO~ Yeah! How's that? UWAH!" He once asked Minori just what this actually meant, her reply went like this, "It simply means that: 'Hold~ GO~ Yeah! How's that? UWAH!'" There were still many mysteries left unsolved in the world.

After this week, the third semester would come to an end.

"Right, your Repentance Statements have now all been received. Thanks for the hard work, Takasu-kun."

"... No, this was my fault. I should be thanking you for all the hard work, Sensei. Sorry for causing you this much trouble."

"Don't mention it."

His second year of high school life would end without Taiga around.

"Sensei."

"Hmm?" Koigakubo turned her head around as she was about to leave. Ryuuji handed a piece of paper over to her. As he has folded the paper in half, there was a clear fold mark on it. The part which Ryuuji was holding was pointing downwards.

Before Koigakubo could see what was in it, Ryuuji said,

"A while ago I handed you one of these in this room after writing something on it. Please discard that. I'm sorry, but I've now gotten around to actually writing something on it... I'll see ya later!"

As Koigakubo started reading the paper he handed over, Ryuuji took the chance to quickly leave the room.

"Eh... Eh? Ehhhhh~~!?"

"Those are my genuine feelings."

The homeroom teacher followed him out of the room, Ryuuji turned to face her while walking backwards, pointing to her, "I'm serious." He then turned back and walked in great strides, turning his head to look at his homeroom teacher's troubled expression. *Funny she would have such an expression...* Ryuuji couldn't help but smile.

"It's good that you genuinely feel that way! But you're not supposed to write that on your career survey! Couldn't you write anything else besides 'a more bright, dazzling and cheerful future!'?"

"I expect my future to be dazzling and cheerful. By the way, 'everyone' in there includes you as well, Sensei!"

"Eh~~ Then allow me to give my... t, thanks..."

After a perplexed look, Koigakubo couldn't resist laughing out loud, "Wahaha~~!" Hearing her laugh, Ryuuji walked joyfully down the stairs. Koigakubo looked at his back and said in a relaxed way, "Your future is indeed dazzling, because..." But she then composed herself like a grown-up and withheld what she was about to say.

Bright, dazzling and cheerful, the future that Ryuuji has decided on contained only the sentence "To make everyone happy!"

Ryuuji had only completed the survey upon writing the exclamation mark and handed it straight away.

He proceeded towards his classroom to get his bag. He understood why Koigakubo had exclaimed "Ehhhhh~~!?" But the truth was, he still couldn't exactly tell her which university he intended to go to, or what major he would take, or what career he would be preparing for.

There's still one year to go, so does it matter?

Would that be too naive? Would that be too easygoing? Would I be falling behind everyone else? Yet Ryuuji had only managed to realize how huge the world was, and so he could not yet decide how he should live in such a world. It had nothing to do with money, nor did it have anything to do with being bound by Yasuko, neither did it have anything to do with Yasuko making up with her parents, and it has absolutely nothing to do with a lack of choices or whatever. It's just that Ryuuji was still carefully observing his surroundings, and taking things easier than his friends, he has finally made his move forward.

The future, being further away from the present, was way wider and larger, and Ryuuji felt afraid. Yet it was also bright and dazzling at the same time - and just thinking about that was enough to make him feel happy. He would achieve what he wanted no matter how he did it. Ryuuji believed that the dream he has decided on would surely come true.

As long as he thought that way, then he believed he would have no problem readying himself for the world.

Once the decision is made and the plan is executed, all that's left is the to accomplish the mission. That's why I would like to continue being a kid for now. There's not much time left where one can be idle, right? This is the last time in one's life where one can afford to be idle, right? So let me happily be idle for a bit longer.

It is only in moments like now where one can enjoy it to the fullest.

"Hey hey~~! I'm starvin already~ Let's eat~~!"

"So you actually submitted your survey just like that!? 'To make everyone happy!'?"

Haruta and Noto waited in the classroom for Ryuuji while munching on their snacks. "Yup, I did.", Ryuuji nodded and put a potato chip in his mouth.

"You actually did it~~! Way to go, Taka-chan~~! So what did Yuri-chan say?"

"She only went 'Ehhhhh~~!'"

"Aha!", Noto laughed. At the same time, other classmates that were still inside the classroom happened to be laughing about something else, filling the classroom with laughter.

"Well, it's to be expected for her to respond like that. Since this was actually submitted by a top student."

"That's what's great about Taka-chan! Though I wish you would open a restaurant~"

"That sounds like a hard way to earn a living... By the way, what're we having for lunch? Isn't Kitamura ready yet?"

Ryuuji looked towards the corridor, wondering if Kitamura was still in the Student Council office...

"Testing, testing-- Ahem, umm... Hey! You! You're not related to the broadcast! Can you please not push me out of the way?"

Ryuuji nearly fell off his chair when he heard Kitamura's voice appeared over the announcement speaker.

Noto helped to explain the situation to him,

"It seems the Student Council and the Drama Club have gotten into a bit of dispute in the allocation of their broadcasting timeslots. The Broadcast Club says they're neutral in this affair and would want this to be settled in a calm manner, but..."

"... Ugh...! Like... hell... I'm... letting go!"

"Hey! Let you, you idiot!"

"Ahhh! It's falling down! Can you guys please stop!? Those are delicate equipment over there!"

"Settle this calmly...? But it doesn't sound like it... Will they be alright?"

Swish! Wham! Sounds of stuff crashing could be heard.

"Enough! Gimme... that... Let... go! Ha! Got it! W, we'll still be broadcasting 'The Patron God of Broken Hearts' next semester every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at noon, so stay tuned in support of your love life! Ugh... I'm not giving way! Music! Can somebody play some music? Now here's a tune... Huh!? WHOA!"

They could next hear something falling to the ground, followed by the sound of the broadcast transmission being cut off. "Ehhh..." Ryuuji looked up at the speaker with a perplexed expression,

"Hey~! I heard of this song in a TV commercial before!"

"Hmm, hmm, hmm." Haruta began humming to the tune. *Sounds like the song was played to prevent the Drama Club from getting any chance near the mic.* Ryuuji felt the song sounded familiar and exchanged glances with Haruta, they then gently shook their heads. At this moment,

"... I haven't gone to the karaoke for ages, who wants to go?"

Noto made a great suggestion.

"Good idea~! Let's go, right now!"

"Alrighty then. It's the 'My Voice' branch right behind the station, right?"

"That's the only choice! I gotta send a message to the Master right away, and tell him to join us later."

Noto quickly took out his cell phone from his bag and quickly typed a message with his thumb, "... We're going together, come join us!" And sent the message to Kitamura. Ryuuji followed him and Haruta out of the classroom, and as he was about to don their scarves...

"Taka-chan, it's quite warm today, you know~? So I don't think you'd need a scarf. It's so warm I even feel like taking off my hooded T-shirt inside."

"You're right... Really, is it spring already?"

Ryuuji looked outside the window, and saw the cherry blossom trees lined up along the school's entrance pathway was dressed in a sea of pink. Though they've yet to blossom, the buds on the trees were already growing pink in color.

"Oh yeah~ The season that matches my name has finally arrived! My flower, the Cherry Brocken, Jr is now coloured in a rain of azure and pink..."

"It's cherry BLOSSOM..."

"Hey~! What a coincidence! It's Ami-chan and her friends~~ Hee hee hee! You guys just been to the bathroom?"

"Eww! Eww! Eww!"

Upon seeing Haruta after just coming out from the ladies room, Ami, Maya and Nanako all placed their arms around their shoulders and shuddered while looking at each other.

"How come you guys are still at school?"

"By the way, you guys sure look ridiculous." Ryuuji pointed at their equally long and curly hair. He clearly remembered their hair wasn't like that during homeroom session not long ago.

"We were practicing how to curl our hair~~<3"

Ami twirled the hair near her chest with her fingers in a seemingly good mood, even her opened mouth appeared to be heart-shaped. She blinked her eyelashes and said to Ryuuji,

"Well? What'd you think? Hoho~~ Don't you think this light and curly hair fits Ami-chan very well? It fits so nicely that it's scary~~! It even feels fatal~~! This explosiveness, this potential, this decisiveness! We~~!!?? Even I feel a bit scared of myself. Kyaa! How can this be~~??"

"What are you getting so excited for? Come to think of it, it's because of people like you toying with their hair all the time that there's always strands of hair littered all over the wash basin. Did you even bother to pick up those pieces of curly hair which you dropped?"

"... OK, you can get lost!"

"Go, go, go!", Ami waved Ryuuji off while looking peeved. Perhaps due to Ami's reaction, Maya and Nanako both giggled. Upon seeing Nanako's hair, Haruta commented,

"Personally, I think Nanako-sama's curls look cute~~"

"Really? Thanks. Actually I wasn't too satisfied with it myself."

"Nah~~ You don't need to curl it too much, it's better if you leave it loose like that."

Upon hearing Haruta's praises, Nanako relaxed her pouting expression and looked meaningfully towards Noto,

"What about Noto-kun? Which kind of curl do you think is cute? Loose hair like mine? Or flashy like Ami-chan? Or perhaps just slightly curled like Maya-chan? Which do you like?"

"Eh!? Me!? Hair!? I, I..."

Suddenly finding himself being the topic of discussion, Noto looked at the Pretty Girl Trio of Class 2-C one by one and then stammered,

"... Wanna join us for karaoke!?"

He decided to change the subject while facing towards the ladies room door,

"We're heading there right now... Um, if you guys are free, you can join us... But, if you wanna go somewhere else... then, if then... Um, we can go grab a bite at the Mos Burger opposite the karaoke, drinks are free. Um, though we don't really mind, so that's it."

He slightly turned his head, and said softly without directing it at a particular someone,

"Kitamura's coming as well."

Unexpectedly,

"Really!?"

Maya suddenly exclaimed excitedly, as though wanting to eclipse Noto's voice.

"We were just thinking about going to the karaoke as well! In that case let's go together! We can go with them, right, Nanako-chan?"

"Of course we can! It's more fun that way. Right, Ami-chan?"

"Ahh~~ Well, you guys are lucky you get to hear Ami-chan's beautiful voice~!"

The group then walked towards the shoe locker to change into their outdoor shoes. The girls then walked in front, while Noto stayed at the back and muttered, "So she's really just coming for Kitamura?" *Don't look at me.* Ryuuji smiled bitterly at him, and casually shoved his head towards Haruta.

The group continued walking under the yet to blossom row of cherry blossoms. Ami looked towards the track field and said, "Just in time!", and suddenly ran towards the fence there.

"Hey~~! Minori-chan!"

"Huh? What's up, Amin? Ehhh, why's everyone all gathered together? You guys all going home?"

Ami waved towards Minori, who was running along the track. Wearing her dust-filled softball team uniform, her fingers were wrapped in finger wrapping, she revealed her usual smile upon removing her cap. "Yo!" She waved towards Ryuuji as well. "Hey!" And he waved back in response.



"You look scary today... Are you still having club activities? And will you be working part-time later?"

"I just finished with my activities. And I'm free from work today!"

"Really? We're heading to the karaoke right now, why don't you get changed and join us?"

"Kara--oke! Whooooa! It's been a while since I done that! Count me in! Listen up guys~~ I'm gonna swamp you with loads of anime songs!"

"Yeah, yeah, we got it. Just hurry up!"

"OK! Sounds great!"

"Sounds great... what sounds great...?" Both Nanako and Maya tilted their heads, puzzled. At this moment, Kitamura came rushing down the stairs, having received his message.

"Hey--!" Ryuuji instinctively waved to his good friend and urged him to hurry up. Kitamura waved proudly in response with his bespectacled smile. Minori hurriedly wrapped up her club activities and dismissed her team members in Sengoku-era Samurai style. The girls continued leading the group, while Noto, Haruta and Ryuuji stopped to wait for Kitamura to catch up.

Everyone's here.

All that remains is you. Ryuuji said within his heart.

We're all here, so hurry up and join us.

Hurry up and return to my side.

Taiga.

I want to see you.

Epilogue

There is something in this world which no one has ever seen.

"... Ooh, ooh, ooh..."

"Yin! Yin, Yin, Yin Yin Yin... Yin... Yiiiiin~~!"

"That's good, that's the way... It's very cute... Hey hey, stop it Inko-chan, that tickles."

"LING!"

Bathed in sunlight, the hideous looking bird bit on Ryuuji's thumb. Ryuuji pulled Inko-chan's beak away from his thumb, which had been bitten many times.

"OF JOY--"

"TOY!!!"

"Very good!"

Ryuuji blinked his eyes movingly, and patted the head of the ugly bird perched on his finger. Perhaps it felt good for him that way: Inko-chan drooled white foam from his beak, rolled his eyes upwards and shuddered all over. "Yes, yes, good boy...", Ryuuji couldn't resist kissing him on the head. He could actually swallow Inko-chan in one gulp. But since Inko-chan was so cute, he probably wouldn't deem himself human if he did that. *That's it for today's chatting.* Ryuuji thought and then gently placed Inko-chan back into his cage.

Right-- Ryuuji looked at the time. It was seven forty-five.

"... Damn!"

Time had passed so quickly. Ryuuji thought it was only seven thirty. How could he afford to be late for the school opening ceremony on his first day as a third year student?

"By the way, my hair!"

Ryuuji rushed into the bathroom and looked into the mirror. "Eeek--!" His hair had to be in such a weird shape today of all days. *Maybe if I wear a baseball cap... No, I think I'll wear a wig! Hey, how come the hair at the back of my head is so fluffy!?* He frantically combed his hair, trying to smooth it with his wet fingers.

"Dammit dammit dammit...!"

Wearing his socks, he came to the living room, pulling out Yasuko's hair accessories basket from the cupboard, he searched for a hairspray, mousse or wax that could help smooth out his messy hair. *Anything will do, just think of something.*

"Ryuu-chan, what'cha looking for?"

"My hair! I need to sort it out! Or I won't be able to go out like this!"

"Ah~~ that! Ryuu-chan, you're holding a special wax made for bed hair! Here, let Ya-chan put it on for you~~"

Yasuko, having woken up and changed after having breakfast with Ryuuji, went behind him and smeared a few doses of wax on his hair, she then combed a few wet strands before squeezing them tightly. Ryuuji looked anxiously at the clock,

"Oh man... I'm so gonna be late. What about you? When you leaving?"

"Ya-chan will be fine~~ It'll be okay long as I'm in the store before ten~~ Alright, now just blow the wet parts with a hair dryer and you're done."

Ryuuji quickly returned to the bathroom and hurriedly took out the hair dryer and plugged in the electric cord. "You okay?", said Yasuko, who had to cut her hair short since it was badly damaged before. She now resembled her mother Sonoko. Though she didn't seem to like it very much, and declared loudly that she's going to grow it long again.

Since that day, Sonoko had come to visit three times already, while Seiji had come once. Ryuuji and Yasuko also returned to visit them once. The days since that tearful reunion turned out to be rough, as there were occasionally some friction between the parents and the child that had run away from home for so long. Though Yasuko had been retired from Bishamonten Kuni since March, not because of her parents, but because of her boss, who had arranged for the second most popular hostess Shizuyo to take over as the new Mama-san, while Yasuko would be put in charge of their new store branch.

The branch was named "Okonomiyaki Benzaiten Kuni". Ryuuji heard there would be interviews for new recruits today.

"You done?"

"... I give up!"

Ryuuji pressed down his Inko-chan-like hair and stared at himself in the mirror. *I'll be a third year high schooler from today*, He tried to wrinkle his brow, and decided this look would do. *I've done what I could do, it's better than being late anyway.*

He then rushed into his room, in which the curtains were closed, and tore off the laundry wrapping on top of his uniform and threw it in the bin, and put on his gakuran uniform.

A young couple whom he'd never met before had moved into the apartment opposite from his window. As they didn't like the idea of having their neighbors looking at them all day, their

Venetian blinds were always closed, hence Ryuuji too never bothered to open his curtains. *No matter, since there's hardly any sunlight even if I do open it.*

Ryuuji grabbed his cellphone, and then took his bag and ran out,

"I'm off!"

"Take care~~! Don't worry~~! Ryuuji's the most handsome man in the whole world!"

"..."

Is this what they call doting?

Ryuuji nearly tripped at his mother's affection, but he still managed to quickly put on his shiny shoes. He grabbed the door knob and opened it wide.

He was soon basking under the bright spring sunlight.

The light was blindingly dazzling, carrying the fragrance of the flowers and warm winds. Ryuuji opened his mouth and breathed in the outside air.

Making footstep sounds as he ran down the stairs, he shouted, "Morning!" "Whoa! Don't suddenly shout like that!" ... And nearly gave the landlord, who was sweeping his entrance, a heart attack.

A new life was about to begin.

A new semester, a new class, a new homeroom teacher, new classmates, all would begin on this brand new day. Walking step by step full of energy, he moved ever forward.

"Taiga."

Walking in great strides with his chest up.

"How would you move forward?"

Right now I am moving with all my stride. I believe I'm heading to where you are, I believe I will meet you once again on this path.

So you must also...

"Ugh!?"

"Wah!"

There is something in this world which no one has ever seen.

It is soft and sweet.

If it is spotted, I'm sure everyone will want to have it,

Which is why no one has ever seen it.

For this world has hidden it quite well, so that it is difficult to obtain.

But, there will come a day when it is discovered by somebody,

And only those who should obtain it will be able to find it.

If he opened his eyes, Ryuuji would also find it, as long as he moved firmly forward.

And so too would Taiga.

That is all.

"... Owwww.....! YOU! You, you, you, you, you!"

His words became incoherent due to his tongue being numb from the collision.

"Why have you...", he managed to speak, not noticing that the bag he slung over his shoulder had fallen to the ground.

The shock had overwhelmed his vision like a very strong glitter, as though everything had been taken away from him.

"... Why!? When'd you return!? How'd you come back!?"

Taiga sat right before Ryuuji, who was clutching his chin. She wore what seemed to be her usual old uniform, but in fact was brand new. She sat moaning clutching her head, which had collided into Ryuuji's chin, unable to get up.

"Whoa, hey... you okay!?"

"... I feel a bit dizzy... By. The. Way--"

Glare! Taiga opened her eyes, which had been hidden behind her tiny hands, and gave Ryuuji a very murderous glare. Even when she is small enough to fit in someone's palm, a Tiger was still a Tiger. She leaped over fiercely,

"I've been wa~aiting here all this time for you! What took you so long!? You're late, you know!? And you didn't even notice my presence when he walked right into me! Why haven't you-"

Ryuuji tightly embraced Taiga's tiny figure with all his strength without any hesitation.

"-Embraced me right away!?"

So fierce, so strong, so tiny, so soft, so bashful, so cute-- this was Taiga.

"Sorry."

Taiga was always so sudden.

Suddenly appearing, suddenly bumping into Ryuuji, suddenly taking his heart away completely. She was always like that from the beginning. He knew it would turn out like this as they embraced each other, breathing deeply, and shouted, *You're back! You're back! I'm back! I'm back!* They were glad that she was able to come back, both of their worlds were filled with joy.

Their embrace was full of love, slowly opening their eyes, which were slightly tearful, they looked at each other and spoke of their respective loneliness all this time before now while smiling all the way.

"It's Taiga! Taiga! Taiga! It really is you! ... It really is Taiga!"

"Yes, it's me, Ryuuji! My dear Ryuuji!"

"... How is it that you could come back!?"

"Mom withdrew my application to drop out, and changed it to me taking a leave instead, which was why I could come back. Though it's not like the school could agree right away, not to mention after causing such a huge commotion, everything's in such a mess that she didn't tell me until not long ago."

"What about your apartment!? Where're you living now!? You... dammit! What were you doing all this time!? Where have you been all along!? You didn't even contact me!"

"Right there..."

Taiga moved her wet eyes and motioned to the white apartment block by the side, her voice still full of laughter,

"I can't go back there anymore. But I still live nearby, just over there. You can all come visit my house! It's very near!"

"...Of course I'll be coming! Definitely!"

"Mom and my new Dad will be there... as well as my little brother! He's cute! They've all rented a house nearby just for me! Though on the condition that I take care of my brother when she's at work. But we'll be moving out as soon as I graduate, you know?"

"I see."

"Thought so."

According to Ryuuji, on the road that led to his future, he would marry Taiga and begin his dream of living together with her. Taiga would no doubt be dreaming the same dream. Everyone would be in that dream as well. It was because such a beautiful dream awaited them that they were able to smile so happily and ecstatically.

"Everyone's gonna be so surprised when they see me, right? I haven't told anyone else yet... not even Minorin, Bakachi or Kitamura-kun."

"Then let's give them a good surprise. Let's go! Or we're really gonna be late!"

"Okay!"

Ryuuji gently picked up his bag on the ground and turned. The two of them began running along the usual beech-laden road. Each of them took the other's hand, and they looked at each other and smiled.

A brand new life was about to begin.

(The End)

Author's Note

Everytime when I talk about the James Bond movie *Tomorrow Never Dies*, I always mix it up with *The Day After Tomorrow*. Whenever my friends remind me that it's another movie all together, I would go red so much that I could glow. The heavens would take pity on me and arrange for me to become a star in the skies. Sigh, whenever I do become a star, I would think, "The Japanese language can be so difficult sometimes". But now that I think about it, it's hardly got anything to do with the Japanese language... If you could see a female-looking constellation that looks very embarrassed and would cover its face and wail, please wave. That would be, Takemiya Yuyuko, shining ever brightly...!

By the time I've noticed, I've already been involved in writing *Toradora!* for three whole years. I went from writing the overall story arc, to writing a draft, to taking a short break, to examining the first print, to writing another overall arc, to writing another draft... I did that repeatedly for three years. Perhaps due to having to meet deadlines, it felt as though it all went by in a blink of an eye, it's just the seasons that have changed. Much like the time within the novel itself, from spring to summer to autumn to winter and back again. But in reality time passes by relentlessly, and I find myself three years older.

Anyway, I've now completed a story using three years, and came up with ten volumes of *Toradora!* I give my gratitude to all those that have followed this story all the way from beginning to end! I wonder if you guys had fun reading this?

My current plans are to publish a few supplementary short stories, though the main arc has now come to its end. I'm very lucky to see this series last all the way here, from getting a place for it to get published and readers willing to read it. It feels really great! I'm so happy that I feel like writing some more! This would be my genuine thoughts after rationality is thrown out the window, though I also feel that the time has come to draw things to a conclusion.

Once again I give my thanks to all those who have been reading 'Toradora!!' Because you guys have always been waiting at the finishing line of my draft, allowing me to continue my writing, which would pat you on the shoulder in place of my hand and shout out for me. Writing 'Toradora!' is my way of keeping in touch with you guys.

If possible, I would really like to crawl out of this book... I wonder how everyone would feel when I said that? Sounds pretty scary, huh? For a thirty-something me to suddenly pop out. Looking extremely tired, with dark rings round my eyes with tiny hairs sticking out from my face. (After applying some nutritious but quite expensive facial lotion, I've been growing hair on my face. I also applied some on my hands, so they're kinda hairy as well. What am I gonna do?) ... That

won't do? In that case, how about I cosplay as a pretty girl drawn by Yasu-sensei instead? I would have silvery hair with golden eyes and sharp-looking cat-ears, shamelessly exposing my naked body which could easily be mistaken for that of a young boy, wearing nothing but a black hairy neck collar. If such a day comes, please take good care of me.

... Sigh, perhaps cosplaying naked with silver hair and cat-ears may be a bit difficult. Maybe just being naked with silver hair. But it may be a bad thing for some people here... Anyway, I still feel like writing something new, and would want to continue writing. To all those that have supporting 'Toradora!' all this time, if I could come up with a new series, please do come take a look. Even a peek would do. I would be most honoured if you could do so.

As for those who have sent me their letters and comments, your words have saved me from the brink of death. For many, many times when I seek assistance, I would go and read everyone's letters. As for those who have attended my autograph signing session, as it was my first ever session, I was naturally feeling very nervous, but it was fun, and I'll never forget that experience. And finally, to those that have come all the way to the end of 'Toradora!', I once again give you my most sincerest thanks! I hope to see you again in my next piece of work! Finally, to Yasu-sensei and everyone involved in getting 'Toradora!' complete, congratulations on a good job everyone!

I'll be taking a break for a while, but I intend to get back to work soon!

Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes

Ousmane Sankhon

Ousmane Sankhon is a Kenya-born reality TV and sitcom actor who works mainly in Japan. See IMDB for what few details are available in the west.

Kou Kou Kyoushi

High School Teacher, or <<高校教師>> was a television drama that has seen at least two incarnations, 1993 and 2003. It was centered on forbidden love.

Japanet

Taiga is referring to a TV sales channel called Japanet Takata, though she's twisted the name so that it became Japanet Takasu, Ryuuji's name.

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