
YUKI YAKU
Illustration by
Fly
Lv.11
Bottom-Tier
CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki



Lv.11

YUKI YAKU

Illustration by

Fly


"So I want to be like my sister."
Haruka Hinami


"Heh-heh-heh, aid hath come!"
代理生徒会長
Substitute Student Council President
ブレーン
Brain


"I-I'm Fumi-ya-kun's girlfriend, so."
"I've heard all about you. How cute."

Bottom-Tier

Character Tomozaki,

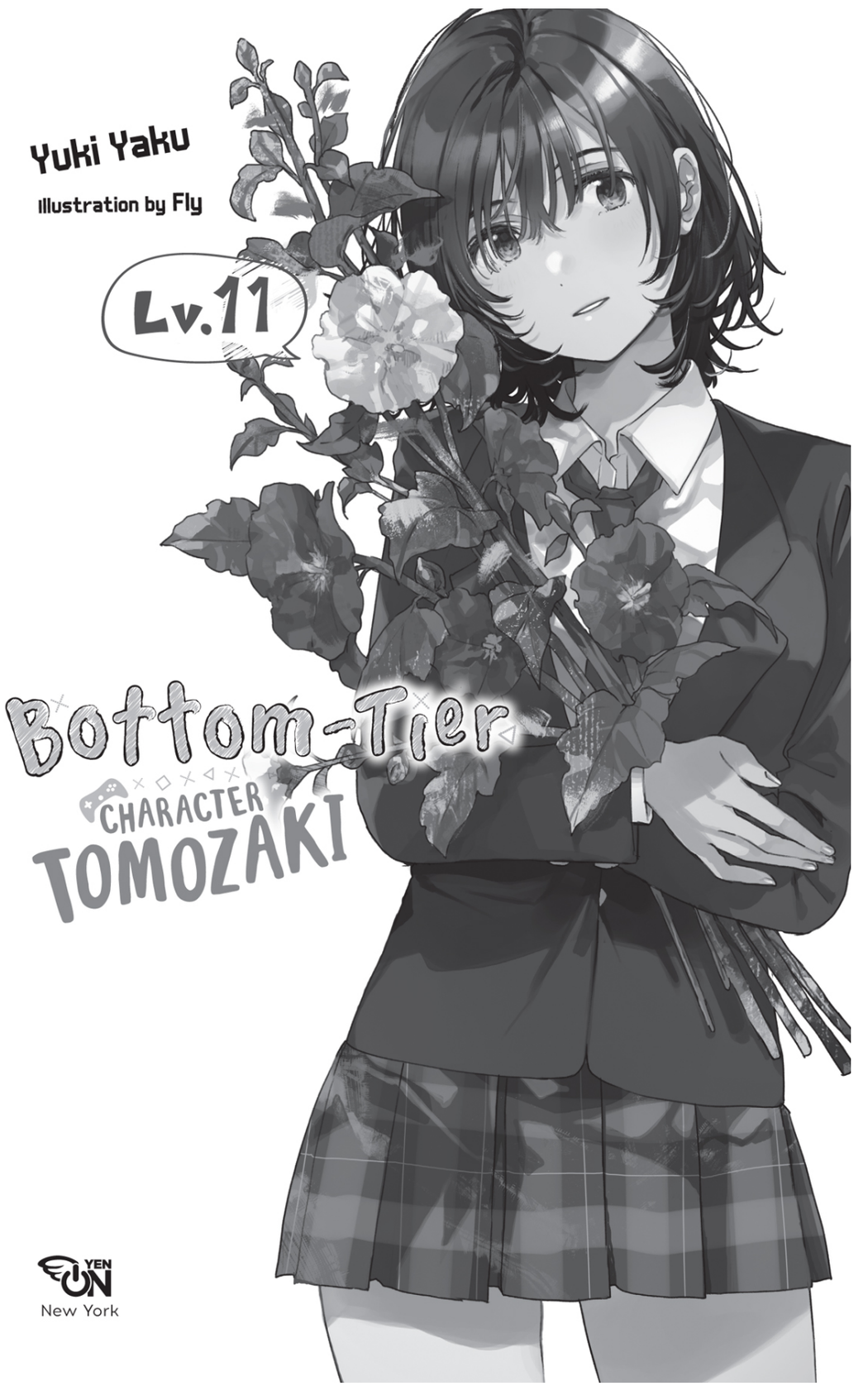
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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki

YEN ON
New York

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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki Lv.11

Yuki Yaku

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by Yuki YAKU
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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Characters

Common Honorifics

1: Put down the controller, and you'll never get anywhere in the story

2: If you're sent to a new world, your party members will often land in different spots

3: Casting a revival spell on you when you're cursed makes it instant death

4: No matter how leveled you are, it's game over if you get bad RNG

5: A magic mirror will always reflect the dark lord's true form

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki

Lv.11

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki
Third-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami
Third-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami
Third-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi
Third-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi
Third-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi
Third-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa
Third-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura
Third-year high school student. Class boss.

Takei
Third-year high school student. Built.

Tsugumi Narita
Second-year high school student. Easygoing.

Erika Konno
Third-year high school student. Queen of the class.

Rena
Twenty years old. Likes to drink.

Ashigaru-san
Pro *Atafami* player.

Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

No honorific: Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or reason, addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

-san: The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness, this is the fail-safe honorific.

-kun: Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

-chan: An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference to girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

-senpai: An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization. Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

-sensei: An honorific indicating respect for a master of some field of study. Perhaps most commonly known as the form of address for teachers in school.

Bottom-Tier
Character Tomozaki, Level 11

CONTENTS

1 Put down the controller, and you'll never get anywhere in the story

2 If you're sent to a new world, your party members will often land in different spots

3 Casting a revival spell on you when you're cursed makes it instant death

4 No matter how leveled you are, it's game over if you get bad RNG

5 A magic mirror will always reflect the dark lord's true form

1

Put down the controller, and you'll never get anywhere in the story

"—Happy birthday, Aoi."

Pop-pop, pa-pa-pop. Patter-patter-patter.

On the screen, the multicolored confetti fluttered downward. The celebratory ribbons tangled together, reflected in Hinami's dark, somber eyes. Her mother and her sister were both smiling, but Hinami's face was rapidly losing all expression.

"You really have grown up well these past seventeen years. I remember when you were participating in your elementary school marathon; you were knee-high to a grasshopper. And now you've gone on to run track at nationals. But now that I think about it, even back then, you were firmly on the path to run to your destiny and who you are now."

The woman who told that story looked a lot like Hinami. She was pretty as a bell, with a bright voice that drew you in and sounded somehow purer than Hinami's. Her smile was youthful, with an honesty that put you at ease.

"—Stop it!"

Hinami shrieked like a cornered animal. She sounded so freaked out, the celebratory atmosphere vanished like a candle going out.

There were noises of confusion, then a tense silence.

Mimimi, Tama-chan, Izumi, Kikuchi-san, Nakamura, and the

guys were all glancing at one another, confused. What had made her so upset? What about this image was taboo for her? Was it just that it involved her family, or was it—?

I was watching Hinami, with no idea what was going on.

“A-Aoi…?” Izumi said, clearly rattled. She was the one who had set up the video letter from the Hinami family, which was on-screen right now.

But the person even more frustrated than her was—

“Why would you do something like this? …Stop it.”

Hinami’s lips were trembling slightly, the controller fallen at her feet. She always kept a handle on things within her immediate vicinity, but she’d abandoned the controller carelessly on the floor, with the cord chaotically fallen around it.

Suddenly, I thought of—

—the final ride that same day. On the dinosaur-shaped car as it slowly moved along under the setting sun, I had asked about Hinami’s past. She’d told me that she would never understand the cause of her sister’s death and that she accepted it. Those feelings were rooted deep in her—I could tell.

This video must have been filmed in a bedroom—a traditional, Japanese-style room with a hanging scroll on the wall. The two smiling faces were very gentle. But Hinami’s expression was absolutely frozen.

“Oh, Aoi! I’m sorry!” Mimimi kept her voice bright, and all gazes went to her. Count on her to always break the tension. “Um, I guess we kinda upset you with this, but—”

“You’re not the one who set this up, are you?” Hinami sharply cut off Mimimi’s attempt to be considerate.

“!”

Was Hinami trying to shut her down, or was it an accident? Either way, she succeeded.

“Yuzu, Shuji. What is this?” she said, searching for the one responsible, which made it even harder to breathe.

Pressed for an answer, Izumi opened her mouth as if to reply, but she just closed it and opened it again wordlessly, inhaling like she wasn’t getting enough oxygen.

“…What’s the deal, Aoi?” Nakamura said. He wasn’t hiding his frustration as he took a step forward with hostility in his eyes. “Sure, yeah, we did this without asking, but is it that bad?”

“H-hey, Shuji…!”

“You don’t have to be such an ass about it.” He ignored Izumi’s attempt to stop him from protecting her and kept going.

They glared at each other.

“—The two of them can’t even begin to imagine this is something that I could be this openly hostile about.” Her words were not carefully chosen, and they were stinging. “So could you spare me the selfish BS?”

Hinami was swinging wildly right now. It reminded me of the time that she had punished Erika Konno, but unlike back then, when everything she said had been calculated for the sake of her goal, this time, she was just hitting wherever she could with full force.

“…Listen, Aoi. Yuzu went to the trouble of meeting with your family and filming that for you. And you—”

“If you think that’s okay just because it was ‘for me’—” Hinami cut off Nakamura with a withering glare. “Then that means that I can hit you as hard as I can right now. Otherwise, you’re gonna say something you shouldn’t—so really, I’m doing it ‘for you.’”

“What?”

All her words were empty. It was that frustrating kind of logic that was solely used to argue. It wasn’t for convincing anyone—just pure aggression against their feelings and good will. It was no surprise that Nakamura sounded so astounded.

“…Aoi…what the heck…?” Izumi said sadly. She must have been thinking about patching things up. But right now, Hinami was venting her feelings and daring any of us to help her.

“You don’t… You don’t know anything,” she repeated with an expression that could have been anger or sadness.

Yes, I wanted to know what was beneath Hinami’s mask.

But this battered mess was not what I wanted to see.

“We *don’t* know, so tell us. We won’t know if you don’t say anything,” Nakamura said, and he was entirely correct.

Even if you do say everything you have to say, it’s hard for people to understand each other 100 percent. But if you don’t say anything, you can’t even start.

Nakamura was showing that he was ready to meet her halfway. Even after all that rejection, when Hinami was trying to hurt us, Nakamura was still reaching out to her.

And yet—

“…I don’t think I have anything to say.”

“What?”

“Sorry. I don’t feel well, so I’m going back to my room.” Hinami turned her back to us.

“Hey, Aoi—”

“Are you okay? I’ll go with you!” Izumi said, trying to be considerate.

Hinami was obviously lying, and she’d chosen a strange time to flee the scene. She gave Izumi a glance and said, “I’m okay. I can get back on my own.” Her immediate refusal was accompanied by a perfect smile.

Her mask was so thick, and that only added to the sense that their friendship was breaking.

“See you.”

She cut straight through the room without even a glance at us, then opened the door to the hallway.

“W-wait, Aoi—”

Mimimi was cut off by the slam of the door, and then Hinami was gone. We didn’t even know what to say. We just looked at one another.

“…”

I was the first one to move, stepping toward the closed door.

“Fumiya-kun?!”

Even as Kikuchi-san called after me, I raced out of the room and after Hinami.

* * *

“Hinami!”

She was walking a little ways ahead, far enough that I couldn’t touch her even if I reached out. She should have been able to hear me, but she didn’t stop walking, passing by the evenly spaced rows of rooms. Even as harsh as her footfalls were, from behind, she was beautiful—that had to be the result of her training.

Finally, she reached the back door of the guesthouse.

She put her hand on the dully shining metal doorknob, and the

stiff hinges gave a strangled *creak*.

I got there at almost the same time as she went out and put my hand on the halfway-closed door. I opened it wide to indicate I meant to follow.

The outside air before me wafted in.

The wind stroked my cheeks, and the night leaped into view.

Stars sprawled over the dark sky.

It had to be because we were in a suburb, even though it was Osaka—the sky was a near-black indigo, twinkling with stars that couldn't be seen in the business district of Omiya. Their cold light fell over the chilly night.

The sounds of cars and the bustle of the city didn't reach the square, so the grainy sound of my rubber soles against the asphalt was particularly loud.

In the silence, Hinami was standing there, resigned.

"…"

I wordlessly came to stand beside her.

We probably couldn't speak for long. Soon enough, some concerned person would find this place and rush over. This top player in life, Aoi Hinami, had built that kind of trust with her friends.

"…What?" Hinami said brusquely, like an accusation. She didn't meet my eyes, but she didn't move from that spot, allowing me to be there.

It couldn't be my imagination.

As she gazed somewhere into the distance, her eyes revealed a penetrating gray sadness.

"What was it about that video letter—?"

"I'm not going to say any more about it." She cut off my question.

On the final ride at Yontendo World, she'd told me about her past. Whatever was wrong had something to do with that. The murky memories contained in that video letter had sunk deep into her, through the chinks in her melted armor, but she wasn't going to let me touch on them.



I knew that what I wanted to know lay deeper within.

That had to be what she had hidden away from everyone.

“I have…nothing to talk about.”

Right then, I felt like I got a slight little peek behind her mask. It seemed like everyone’s desire to celebrate her had melted her armor.

Now, she sounded frightened and young, like a lost girl left behind by the world.

Even after chasing her all the way here and reaching out to her, the iron door closed by her strong will was still locked. But now I knew how cold that door was, at least, so I just didn’t want to leave my place in front of it.

I didn’t know what she wanted me to say.

I wasn’t even certain if she wanted me to say anything in the first place.

But one thing was clear.

On the other side of that thick door, Aoi Hinami was all alone.

So I couldn’t possibly ask the reason she was so clearly acting strangely.

I decided to say this:

“…You can still go back.”

“Huh…?” Hinami’s exhausted eyes widened, looking at me.

“Of course you can. I know you can.” It was a sly tactic, but I went for it anyway. “After all you’ve accomplished, the trust you’ve won isn’t going to fall apart because of one screwup.”

I believed, more than anyone, in the value of what she’d spent all this time building.

She had colorfully decorated everything about her, inside and outside, with her bleak and self-serving calculations: remembering what people liked, even memorizing conversational topics, training her facial muscles to smile, and dressing herself so that everyone would like her.

It was a cold approach, one that might cause visceral disgust in some people. It might be downright nauseating to someone who thought purity of intention was a moral virtue.

But for me, I’d done all the same things as her in order to win

at the game of life, so I truly understood her coldness, and just how noble her effort was.

"Don't worry. You've got this," I declared baselessly. "Because you're Aoi Hinami."

I had no reason to be, but I was certain. That's how much I trusted her.

"Is that what you came to say?" She finally turned her head to me, looking me in the eye.

Her perfectly flattering hairstyle was all messed up, and her expression of put-on vulnerability that would charm anyone now appeared worn out. The supposedly flawless perfect heroine seemed to be made of glass, like she would break with light touch from your fingertips.

Her lips cracked open to let out an amused huff. "…Agh." She sighed in self-deprecation, and then she gazed up at the night sky as if she found it refreshing.

The light from the moon shone white on her neck. But the dim light was too weak to show what lay in her heart.

"It's like…I remembered lots of things."

This vulnerability seemed childlike. Real.

Her black eyes seemed to reflect a blurry past—what feelings or memories were they seeing right now? I quietly waited for her to continue.

"I think I had fun for the first time in a long time today."

"…Well, I'm glad," I said.

"There were lots of things I loved… I got to really feel the way the things I've done are coming back around to me."

She spoke like a little girl cherishing her dear treasures.

Or perhaps a hunter bragging about the prey she'd caught.

No—maybe those two things were the same to her.

"I didn't even plan it. It made me think, *Wow, Aoi Hinami sure is amazing.*"

As if she was speaking about someone else. Maybe that's how it felt to her. The Aoi Hinami who was standing here was surely a puppet—seemingly human, but not.

The real person was cold, logical, and outside the screen, holding the controller.

"…Maybe that's why. It was sad."

Her tone made her sound younger—what sort of past and

emotions was she expressing now? I silently waited for her to go on.

“I told you, didn’t I? …I just wanted to prove that I was right.” She crushed the simple, high-quality sleeve of her loungewear in her fingers. “The congratulations and smiles—to me, all of it…is just part of that proof.”

I’d thought I couldn’t be any more surprised.

The word *proof* was a term you’d normally never use to describe kindness from your friends.

Thinking that the goodwill and kindness toward her, their natural smiles and remarks, were all only premises for her predetermined conclusion—that was a terribly cold and lonely way of looking at it. And I’m sure most people would never want to live like that.

But…

“I told you.” I looked right at her. “It’s okay for you to be like that. For Aoi Hinami to be like that.”

I would not reject her.

Not when everything that she had so earnestly built up had saved me.

Because I didn’t want to believe that it was a mistake.

“It’s true; it might be a twisted way to live your life.”

I had no basis for saying this. But I was certain.

She was just so right—and also so clumsy about it.

“But your ‘proof’ is helping other people and making them grateful to you, and you’ve become important to them. You can see that in what they say to you and how they look at you, right?”

Her complete fastidiousness—

—and her viewpoint, almost cruelly distant and superior—

—and the overwhelming brilliance of the perfect image those things created—

—it was making the people in her life happy.

Her intentions didn’t matter. Even if she was calculated and deceitful, that didn’t matter here.

The resulting framework was an absolutely undeniable, objective fact. To me, that was the hard truth that went beyond her intentions, beyond the true nature of her behavior.

To me, this framework—was the one thing that nobody could deny, not even Aoi Hinami herself.

“So it can’t be wrong.”

Based on that framework, I affirmed the way Aoi Hinami was.

“So I’m not going to ask you to understand right away, either. But bit by bit, as we spend time together…”

Right then, for some reason, she—

“No. Even then.”

—she looked at me with frighteningly clear eyes.

“How can you say for sure that’s right?”

Her gaze was so direct, it was unnatural. She asked the question like a child, searching for the basis of my conviction with frightening purity.

I flinched slightly.

Her blunt question, and the way she was approaching all of this, clashed with the moment. I thought we’d been sharing our feelings of isolation and trying to communicate the truth hidden beneath.

“What’s the *reason* you can say it’s right?”

“The reason…?” Flustered, I just parroted her.

Hadn’t we gotten close? If we both reached out, we would connect, wouldn’t we? If Hinami just opened that thick door and reached out, I could pull her over past that deep rupture that had been carved between us. So I’d thought.

“Do you have any basis to say that nobody can argue against that?”

But.

“Can you prove it?” Hinami’s eyes were fixed on *something* that might have been lying beyond the darkness.

“…I told you. Everyone is thankful to you…to Aoi Hinami, and their feelings are no lie.” I was faltering.

Most likely, what she was asking for was an even more

fundamental basis to validate the existence of Aoi Hinami.

A simple answer: a reason that should accompany my forward attempt to validate her.

“You’ve made lots of important connections, friends… It’s a really beautiful thing…”

My words weren’t reaching her.

She’d just demanded proof from me, throwing the word in my face.

She didn’t want pretty words like *human connection*, *gratitude*, *love*, or anything else in that category.

“So then that makes it right…!”

Since most likely, her question was—

“Can you say that’s right in the *real sense*?”

She was inviting me to a more fundamental place, far from anything abstract like feelings or friendship.

“…”

I was speechless.

“Yes, in society’s view, it’s right to have close connections who are grateful to you. But that’s only what everyone believes. Nobody can prove if that’s right in the real sense. —Really, no one.”

It was like how questions from children expose what adults believe without evidence.

“Even then, can you say that’s right?” Hinami was just pointing out my own insincerity.

“I…”

Maybe it would have been easy for me to tell her she was playing word games with me.

Maybe that would have been enough to disregard her question and feel like I had won.

But when you’re a quibbler like me, you’ve heard that exact same line over and over again since you were small. So I knew it would be a form of surrender. The people who say that have given up on thinking it all the way through to the truth.

My words were just a wish.

I’m sure that there is no such thing as “right” in the true sense

of the word.

“I mean, that’s what ordinary people all want, even if they can never get it…!”

The words continued to pour out of me as if pushed out by a pressure I couldn’t fight, but on the inside, I hadn’t come to any answers.

What I needed right now in order to take Hinami’s hand—

—the words I had to say to get her to reach out to me—

“Only someone really needed by everyone will have that…!”

Fumbling along, I turned my feelings into words.

A probable basis. Masks and true feelings.

Scarcity and victory. Recognition and brilliance.

“And you were happy, weren’t you, Hinami?! It spoke to you!”

It wasn’t like I thought that was the answer. But if I put what I was feeling into words, then the words might connect organically, and I might be able to communicate something new. This feeling inside me told me I could believe in that—and it was the one thing that was absolutely real.

“And…if it spoke to you…then that’s enough…!”

I put my feelings into words, betting on that single thread of hope.

But bit by bit, simple impatience and the desire to just convince her were seeping into my words.

“That’s enough to prove you’re not wrong…!”

Even as I was saying it, I was certain that this time—

—her question demanded a deeper answer than I could give right now.

Hinami’s eyes were sad, far darker than the night around us.

“…I see,” she said with a sigh, breaking eye contact with me and looking up at the clear, serene night sky. You could reach out to it, but you would never be able to touch it.

Countless lights twinkled above.

I knew that there were two types there: fixed stars that shone with their own light, and the wanderers—planets that couldn’t shine unless they reflected light from elsewhere.

“So you can believe in something without a reason.”

I recalled what Ashigaru-san had said to me that day.

In order to act, in order to change—weak people need a reason to believe.

Being able to believe in myself without a reason made me strong.

Meanwhile, people who sought reasons for all their actions—

“Can you not believe in yourself without a reason? Can you not believe the way you are is right just because?”

Normally—

—for someone with common sensibilities, someone who would allow even a little compromise when it came to reasons or logic—if they received the smiles, words, and feelings from friends they’d spent years building relationships with, if they were shown through investment and effort that everything was sincere, then that time would be validating even without any reasons “in the real sense.”

At the very least, Hinami had felt it temporarily, so that normal sense of exhilaration would be the basis for believing in the way she was.

However.

“I couldn’t do it.”

The wind blew. The ends of her hair fluttered, stroking her cheeks.

“If I made first place, that would make me right. If I could excel more than anyone, if I could become the person everyone wanted, then that would validate me—that’s what I thought.”

Her words were almost like a prayer somehow.

“But…I remembered what I am.” She smiled gently. “I’m empty.” Her voice was quiet and peaceful, like the light of the moon. “Just being happy in the moment on its own… Just thinking that was good and feeling accomplished in the moment—no matter how right that is…it never validated anything about *me*.”

Despite her negativity, she looked somehow refreshed.

At the very least, I had never seen Aoi Hinami speak like this about defeat before.

“I think I was trying to force myself to believe.” Her lips twisted up awkwardly. “Even though I knew that being sought after didn’t make me personally valuable.”

I knew this expression. I’d experienced it multiple times myself.

“I wanted to forget my loneliness, so I lied to myself—I tried to believe.”

Times when I was really helpless and hopeless—

—when I suppressed my feelings to spinelessly go with what others wanted, I’d always had that expression—

“I tried to believe the lie that continuing to win is right.”

—it was the smile of defeat, of a person who had realized their own insincerity.

“Because I’m weak. I’m a bottom-tier character.”

I had to say something.

I had to find one more thing to help draw Hinami toward me. She’d finally come out this far. That was what I wanted to do—that was all I wanted to do.

Even after getting everything—even now that everyone envied her—she still didn’t think of herself as right. What could I say to validate who she really was, then?

If being right or being acknowledged wouldn’t do it, then what would fulfill Aoi Hinami’s emptiness?

The racing thread of my thoughts wasn’t leading me to any conclusions.

She spoke first. “If there’s anything right in this world, then it’s just one thing.”

As if she was resigned to it, as if she were revealing the secret of the world—

—it spilled out of her in plain, almost self-evident words:

“There’s nothing in the world that’s right in the real sense. That’s the one thing that is right.”

That was an obvious contradiction.

The logic was circular, like a snake eating its own tail.

But it had a ring of plausibility to it.

“…”

Slowly but surely, the silence was drawing the two of us apart.

No—maybe this was preferable to me disappointing her with something else insubstantial.

Hinami gazed at me, waiting a long time for my reply. In the end, I was unable to say a thing.

“__”

Then she said something softly with a sad smile.

The words she said were lost a few steps away from me, but I’m sure they weren’t for me anyway. But she must have been disappointed in me.

I couldn’t look at her sad expression—it was as if she was proving her own helplessness.

My gaze fell on the cold asphalt.

“…See you.”

Her voice was weak, as if letting the world abandon her.

The relaxed scrape of her feet on the ground was so slow, it wasn’t even half the tempo of my racing, impatient heart, but it was clearly moving away from me.

The hinges made a strained creaking noise, then the ill-fitting door closed flatly. And then Hinami and I were divided into separate spaces.

My heart was full of self-loathing.

Hinami had been waiting for me to say something.

I think we would have been able to exchange something true.

I knew how it felt to doubt the way you were and think you would suffer if you didn’t change. Maybe some desire to change that, the wish to change herself, had arisen within her. To me, it seemed she might have been considering it—leaping over the divide between us and stepping into a colorful world.

But she was just missing the reason to do it.

And if she didn’t have a reason, she couldn’t believe in herself.

And because she couldn’t believe in herself, she couldn’t get away from that indescribable loneliness.

So she had been hoping that the greatest gamer in Japan, nanashi, would be able to do something, anything for her.

And yet—I hadn’t been able to find the words.

If I’d said something, it might have reached her, but I hadn’t been able to.

Ever since the day I’d almost lost my friendship with her, when I’d sworn that I would teach her about how fun life could be, I’d been unable to change that one thing that I wanted to change more than anything, even more than myself.

What I really wanted to do had been right in front of me, and I had been helpless.

When I made myself face forward again, the closed door was barring my way.

I’d heard her footsteps so clearly, but there was basically no sign on the floor or on the door that Hinami had been there. Only the reddish-brown rust and the cold, blackened metal reflecting my lonely heart.

“…I…”

As I stood there alone, under the night sky—

The starlight was neither warm nor cold.

It just shone down on me as an unchanging reality.

2

If you’re sent to a new world, your party members will often land in different spots

Two weeks later.

After spring break was over, I was in front of the full-length mirror in my room, putting my blazer on.

Still thinking of that night in Osaka, I patted the ends of my hair, styling it the way I always did. I’d spent the rest of spring break mostly doing nothing, but I still hadn’t gotten anywhere with sorting out my feelings.

I left my room, went down the stairs, and squatted by the entrance. I slid my feet into my nicely worn-in loafers and sighed for no real reason.

“…Heading out,” I muttered at no one in particular, then set out into the morning.

From the Tobu Urban Park Line, I got off at Higashi-Iwatsuki Station and walked alone down the ridge between rice fields toward Sekitomo High School.

I really had changed a lot, and it hadn’t even been a full year.

If they’d known the guy walking along this path the day of the opening ceremony last year, some people wouldn’t even recognize me as the same person. My posture had improved, I’d done my hair, and I had confidence in my expressions. But those are really just the superficial aspects of the changes that happened in me.

What’s really changed is on the inside— No, more importantly, it’s the way I look at people.

Compared to back then, when I generalized people as normies and losers, now I looked at people as individuals. I’ve had people feeling for me in ways I’d never known before, and I returned those feelings—or was unable to return those feelings, even if I

wanted to. But I've responded to all their words and actions with sincerity to build irreplaceable relationships.

Those relationships have changed the way I think.

And this new way of thinking has changed the way I act.

And the new way I act has changed the situations around me, one by one.

The changes in my world have been enough to change the whole color of my life.

And—Hinami has always been there in the middle of it all.

After that exchange with Hinami under the night sky in Osaka, I'd returned to the party room to meet up with the others. Everyone had seemed confused by Hinami's outburst, and she was still nowhere to be seen. Eventually, the travel group's LINE chat got just one message:

[*Sorry. I'm not feeling very well, so I'm going to bed. I don't want to get anyone sick, so I'll see if I can get a separate room.*]

And so she left her suitemates, Izumi and Kikuchi-san, to sleep in her own room.

The next day, she had gotten a mask and worn it the whole day, and the whole way back on the Shinkansen, she hardly talked with anyone. That was the right thing to do if she was feeling sick, of course, but it just made me remember the very first assignment that Hinami had given me: to put on a mask and pretend to be sick, then talk to three girls. Well, specifically, what I recalled was the "guarantee" that had come along with that assignment:

"If people think you're sick, then they won't be suspicious, even if you can't really manage a conversation."

It was the perfect excuse to avoid any conversation you didn't want to have.

“…Going up a grade, huh,” I muttered, my voice swept away by the spring wind.

When I looked around, there were a number of students wearing the same uniform of Sekitomo High School.

They must’ve been going through changes on a daily basis, too—and not just that of the new school year.

Their friends, hobbies, perspectives, and goals would change, and eventually, who they used to be would be forgotten in turn.

But what sort of reasons did they have to feel satisfied with who they were now?

What sort of reasons did they have as a guarantee to believe in the way they were?

No—I actually knew the answer to that.

Most people just drift through life on the currents around them.

They don’t even consider whether they’re really right or not.

The rays of the sun shine down on their cheeks as they walk along with sleepy eyes.

Things like why we go to school, why we try to make friends, and why we’ll get jobs in the future—how we live, and how we should die—most people hardly ever think about any of it too seriously, myself included.

Everyone is just kind of doing it, because it’s common sense.

Because if you don’t, then you’ll stick out.

—Because even if you don’t think about it, as long as you’re having a good time, you’ll be fulfilled one way or another.

It’s easier to go along with the world and let the flow swallow you. You can still be fulfilled. You can live a stable life that way, so you don’t have to worry. Before you even know it, the value system known as “common sense” gets instilled into you, monitoring your behavior and moving your body as if a controller is connected to it.

Eventually, groups of people like that will create a single large trend. That’s what makes up the world.

But.

She’s the one person—Aoi Hinami is the one person—
—who sought a reason for everything.

She’s engraved the inevitable on the path she’s walked, as if to leave proof that she’s lived in those steps.

She finds her fulfillment in the sheer determination to turn all the results she’s earned into something right.

With that righteousness nourishing her, she’s believed in herself.

But then one day, Aoi Hinami—told me that she didn’t understand her own way of life.

“…I…”

Many times, I’d thought about that moment and regretted my failure to answer her. When she confided her loneliness in me, I think that wasn’t just a confession of her true feelings, but also a cry for help.

But once again, I felt the same despair I had during that summer farewell.

I hadn’t been able to take Aoi Hinami’s hand after all.

If you can’t connect, then you’re still alone.

That’s something important that I learned from my relationship with Kikuchi-san.

But then to what extent do we have to connect? To what extent do we have to be able to involve ourselves with each other in order for us to be together?

If you just have enough words, or an emotional connection, or even a physical one, does that mean you’re together?

At least to me, it felt like both of us were alone.

When I arrived at school, my eyes were drawn to a large piece of poster board on display. People crowded nearby, and faces both familiar and unfamiliar were all talking about one thing.

The poster was the class division sheet for the third-years.

“Fumiya-kun.”

From behind, I heard my given name in a voice like flower petals fluttering downward. There was only one person who would address me that way.

When I turned around, there was Kikuchi-san with a gentle smile on her face. Her kind expression was like a soft stroke on my cheek, and it was directed at me. So I had to accept it properly.

“Morning, Kikuchi-san.”

“Good morning.”

After exchanging heartfelt greetings, our eyes naturally went in the same direction. Eventually, both of us checked the poster, and while we were a bit shy about it, our eyes met again.

“I’m looking forward to being in the third year with you,” she said.

“Yeah… Me too.”

Our names were both written there together on the class list for arts. At Sekitomo High School, you were divided into a number of different course streams based on academic ability, with only two or three classes in a course, and our courses were divided into three types: arts classes, science classes, and advanced classes.

Neither of us were surprised, since we had told each other beforehand that we would be taking the regular course in arts. But it was a relief to actually see our names listed for the same classes, even if we expected the outcome. Still, that was only possible because we both originally wanted to go into arts, and even if we hadn’t, I wouldn’t have picked my course based on what Kikuchi-san wanted.

I think that was my karma—neither wrong nor right.

As I was thinking, Kikuchi-san spoke up as if she’d summoned the courage to say something. “Oh, yes… Um! Do you have a little time after school today?”

“I do… What’s up?”

“Actually…there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“What is it?” I nodded, although I couldn’t imagine what it was about.

A soft smile came naturally to her face. “Umm, essentially—”

“Heya, Fumiya. Morning, Fuka-chan.”

“Whoa!”

Right as we were having a fairly private sort of conversation, Mizusawa the playboy cut in. He even used different greetings for me and Kikuchi-san and casually called her by her given name. The way he broke into my thoughts startled me, too.

Kikuchi-san must have been getting accustomed to Mizusawa’s familiarity, as she replied, “Good morning,” without any bewilderment. I wish she wasn’t so used to that, though. Really, it was Mizusawa’s fault for becoming so familiar.

“…So you’re in arts, too, Mizusawa?”

“Yup. Shuji and Takei went to sciences, though,” he said nonchalantly.

The members of the Osaka trip had been in the same class so far, but we weren’t necessarily going to be all buddy-buddy in the same class forever. The class change was when we would each take our first step down different paths toward our various futures. *So you can do math, huh, Takei?*

“Well, everyone’s got their own plans for the future,” I said.

Mizusawa nodded. “Mm.”

Meanwhile, I had decided that I would aim to be a pro gamer, which wasn’t part of either course. If I had to say which it was, it would be more sciencey.

Our environment was slowly transforming. I’m sure that many things would change without us even realizing it, and they would never go back to how they were before. Even those who had gone on the Osaka trip together would be in different classes in their third year and live different lives going forward. In their new classes, they would build new relationships and make new memories.

“And then Mimimi is also in the arts class—,” I said, and Mizusawa finished for me.

“And Tama and Yuzu are sciences, huh.”

In other words, Kikuchi-san, Mizusawa, Mimimi, and I were in arts.

Sciences would be Nakamura, Izumi, Tama-chan, and Takei.

And—the one name that had not come up…

“…Hinami-san is in the advanced class, isn’t she?” Kikuchi-san murmured.

“…Yeah,” I said gloomily. That one fact had brought down my mood.

Generally, you would go into whichever course stream you had selected, but there was one exception to that rule.

That was the advanced class.

It was a serious, university-oriented course at Sekitomo High School, and only the top twenty applicants with the best grades could participate. Just wanting to take it wasn’t a guarantee that you would get in. Generally speaking, it’s fair to say that the brilliant passing grades (for entrance exams) at this school are produced by this class, and Sekitomo’s future is in the hands of these twenty elites.

They had a different school building and a different schedule, a sanctuary far away from it all— Okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration, but since they had a different building, that meant they entered by a different gate, and so the route they took to school was also distinct. The advanced class was in a unique position, and the appearance of special treatment didn’t do them any favors with the other classes.

“…You haven’t been able to get in touch with her since then, have you?” Kikuchi-san took a step closer to ask.

Mizusawa dipped his head. “No. I haven’t, and Shuji and Takei said the same thing, too.”

“Me neither… Not even once.”

Yeah.

During the two weeks of spring break, not a single one of us had managed to get in contact with Hinami.

This was a clear irregularity when she had managed such perfection before. The others also had to understand how big this was. But I doubted they understood the details—like how we got here or what state of mind Hinami had been in when she’d chosen that answer. It was fair to say they would have no idea.

“Was that video letter such a bad idea?” Mizusawa asked.

“…I don’t know. There was nothing odd about what was in it, though.” Kikuchi-san tilted her head.

I considered the question, too, but even I didn’t know the truth.

“Maybe she didn’t like us getting her family involved,” I murmured, and Mizusawa and Kikuchi-san looked at me silently.

“Well, when it comes to family, people tend to either tell you everything or nothing at all,” said Mizusawa.

“…Maybe she has some reasons for that,” Kikuchi commented. She had to be thinking the same thing as me.

As we’d been gathering information for the play, we’d learned about her other sister. I was aware of what had really happened there, but even without understanding the whole truth, you could basically imagine what might’ve happened, just knowing she’d had a little sister who was now gone.

“Reasons…huh,” I said, fumbling for the truth, and I headed for the classroom with the other two.

* * *

“Hey, you’re all together.”

I was with Mizusawa and Kikuchi-san in the back of the classroom before homeroom started, talking about Hinami, when Mimimi arrived.

“’Sup,” she said.

“Morning.”

“G-good morning!”

As we greeted her back, Mimimi dived in with her usual light footwork. “What were you talking about?” she asked innocently.

“Ahh…”

When I gave her an awkward nonanswer, Mimimi immediately figured it out. “Ah, of course! …It’s about Aoi, huh,” she said without missing a beat. She kept her tone light so that the mood wouldn’t get too heavy.

Mizusawa nodded. “Fumiya and Fuka-chan haven’t been able to get in touch.”

“…So you couldn’t reach her?” Mimimi followed up with a wry smile. “I haven’t been able to, either.”



Though I'd anticipated that was the case, the confirmation from Mimimi made me feel a little low again.

"I never imagined it'd be this sudden." Mizusawa furrowed his brow.

"…Oh?" Mimimi tilted her head with a blank look.

"Hmm? I mean, she's always been perfect and gotten first place in everything. Even if something doesn't go exactly the way she planned, she's easily in the green overall."

Mimimi gave Mizusawa a look in return. "Hmm, I feel like it's the opposite," she said quietly.

"…How so?"

"Most likely, this is *because* she's always been at the top."

All eyes went to Mimimi.

"Your mental state isn't a math problem; it doesn't work like addition and subtraction. It's a seesaw."

"A seesaw?" Kikuchi-san stared at Mimimi.

"Yeah. It's like…when something's wrong, it's generally when you're alone, right?"

"Ah, well… I understand that," Kikuchi-san said, as if it reminded her of something. She seemed to be speaking from the heart—I suppose she must have experienced this seesaw herself. Or wait, could it be that time I really worried her? If that's the case, then I really am sorry about that.

But it's true—even I could understand that you can't imagine someone feeling so down when they're with a group.

"I guess you'd put it like…your mental seesaw becomes really off-balance? If you're extra happy when you're with a crowd, it's a big drop when you're alone."

Then Mimimi put both hands on my shoulders. "Ba-thunk!" she said, putting all her weight on me.

"Whoa!" I was totally not expecting it, so I almost fell over.

"…And it swings really hard up and down, just like that."

"Hey, don't do it on me," I said, glancing over at Kikuchi-san. How would what just happened look to her…? But I was relieved to see that she was giggling.

"—Whoops, sorry! So anyway!" Mimimi must have noticed my gaze, as she hastily drew her hands away from my shoulders. Yeah, that would have been a bad idea if Kikuchi-san had seemed sad. There are way too many minievents like this in life that get

tricky in the details.

“And then when you go from being sad to being happy again, it goes *thunk* the other way, and you get punted upward into a good mood. When you keep going *thunk, thunk*, up and down, over and over…you start getting flung around from the top to the bottom over the littlest things.”

“Oh yeah. The proverbial emotional roller coaster, right?” said Mizusawa.

“Uh-huh! That’s the perfect way to put it.”

“This feels less like you’ve experienced it and more like you’ve caused that for someone else before, Mizusawa…”

Mizusawa grinned wordlessly. *What’s that smile supposed to mean, hmm?*

“And after a while, you start, like, bracing yourself for the next *thunk* even before it happens.”

“Yes…that’s right…! That’s how it is…!” said Kikuchi-san.

“You understand?!”

Kikuchi-san nodded quite vigorously, and the guilt was eating me alive now. *Sorry, I’m sorry…*

“I don’t totally lack confidence in myself… I think I’m actually pretty cute, and my figure’s not so bad, and I’m good athletically and academically, and I’m also pretty good at talking to people… huh?” Mimimi exaggeratedly counted down on her fingers, and then she widened her eyes like she’d suddenly noticed. “Wait, does this mean I’m the best…?!”

“Come on,” I jabbed back at her, and Mimimi cracked a smile and faced forward.

“But like.”

Suddenly…

…she sighed like the gesture was familiar to her.

“Maybe it’s because I always wind up going along with what everyone else does?” Mimimi held her hand up to the fluorescent lights as if to look through the blood flowing inside her. “I’m not confident in myself as a person.”

It was a negative thing to say, but she sounded somehow invigorated. Was that because she’d accepted her own weakness or because she was resigned to it? I couldn’t tell.

But I did understand what Mimimi was saying.

I think I’m pretty emotionally stable, and I live my life

according to my own standards. But during that summertime farewell with Hinami and that time I hit a wall with Kikuchi-san, I'd been at rock bottom emotionally. The things people said to me helped dramatically, and those experiences left a deep impression on me. I know how overwhelming the light can be when you're in a dark place.

And if that happened enough times, then it made sense that my future choices would be affected by that.

"Yourself as a person…," Kikuchi-san mused.

What Mimimi was saying fit with my mental image of Hinami.

Having everything, like she does. But in fact, none of it is herself; it's manufactured based on what the world thinks is right. It's papier-mâche armor, built purely on the good opinion of others.

This showy armor was not Hinami as a person.

"You mean…your self-esteem, right?"

When Kikuchi-san rephrased what Mimimi had said, Mizusawa nodded as well. People talk about it a lot online, so I got it, too.

"Well, it's a really important issue in life," said Mizusawa.

"Yeah. It really is—the most important thing!" Mimimi said forcefully, and then she seemed to reflect. "I think Aoi also wants to believe that she's valuable when she's producing results that anyone can recognize. That's how she gets herself to put on a smile every day." She smiled to herself sympathetically. "She wants a reason to believe in herself."

I was surprised.

"A reason to believe in yourself."

Those words closely matched both the conclusion I had come to myself and the conversation I'd had with Hinami.

Eventually, Mimimi looked around the classroom, where social atmosphere reigned supreme, and narrowed her eyes. "But you know, there's one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" Mizusawa asked.

Mimimi lowered her head.

"—If I were in Aoi's position, I think I would've been saved a long time ago."

“Saved…?”

Kikuchi-san was looking closely at Mimimi’s lips.

“I mean, she’s amazing. She’s at the top of everything she does, she gets all the results and the numbers, and everyone’s celebrated her. I’d definitely get carried away with myself and start thinking I’m the center of the world!”

“Well, if you’re not satisfied with that, then you couldn’t be satisfied unless you dominated the major leagues in both pitching and fielding,” Mizusawa said jokingly.

It’s true that Hinami had plenty of results. If her motive was purely to prove that she was right, then she should have fully achieved that goal.

But despite that, Aoi Hinami went beyond herself as an individual, even switching her controller over to another character—me—to prove she was right.

It was just so extreme.

“It’s…not enough for her.” Mimimi squinted a little, as if she was looking into the distance.

Even Hinami’s incredible achievements for years on end.

Even the dazzling smiles and sincere gratitude from everyone around her.

And—even her proof she was right, in reproducing it through me.

Even the massive acknowledgments she’d constantly received had not been enough to fulfill her emptiness.

“It *is* difficult,” Mimimi said, furrowing her brow.

“If someone can’t be satisfied even if they have everything, how do you save them?”

I found myself thinking:

—I’m sure that’s Aoi Hinami’s karma.

Suddenly, Mizusawa crisply addressed me. “Hey, Fumiya.”

“Hmm?”

“What did you talk about with Aoi before?”

He said it like it was nothing, but that remark struck right to the core of the matter. Kikuchi-san’s head twitched, too.

I didn’t have to ask to confirm just when he meant by “before.”

“…Oh yeah.”

Under the night sky in Osaka.

Hinami had only revealed what she had because she’d been talking to me, and she would have expected it to stay with me.

But.

“—She said she tried to force herself to believe.”

I told them the most substantive part frankly and briefly.

“She tried to force herself to believe that being what everyone wanted and continuing to win was right…but it was a mistake.”

I believed…that it was okay to share with these three.

“She wound up believing in a fake story.”

“A fake story…,” Kikuchi-san repeated thoughtfully.

Mimimi tilted her head. “Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“…I don’t really understand very well, either,” I said.

Unexpectedly, Mizusawa interjected. “—I kind of do.”

“You do?” I asked.

“I think I’m the same type of person,” he said. He was being serious but somehow nonchalant, too, acting like it was obvious. “Look, I talk about how I want to be a beautician, but I actually never meant to pursue it.”

“Really?!” Mimimi reacted dramatically, but I’d heard that before, so I gave a little nod to blend in.

“So does that mean you didn’t really want to be one…?” Kikuchi-san probed a little.

Mizusawa’s lips curled up as he answered, “Not that I wasn’t interested… But there was no reason for me to go out of my way to pursue it as a dream. Actually, to be honest, there’s nothing I really want to be.”

Nothing he wanted to be.

That was similar to what Hinami had said after the summertime fireworks festival.

“I think I’ll get good enough grades and get into Waseda or Keio or something, and I can handle myself okay, so I’ll do fine in university.”

He was painting a very realistic picture, though he sounded uninterested about it.

“I’ll get a job somewhere decent, successfully marry some decently pretty girl, enjoy myself moderately, live out an average

lifespan, and then I'll die decently satisfied. I believe that living the 'right' life like that will make me happy."

"Ah-ha-ha. You seem like the type, Takahiro," I said.

"I think with a life like that, everyone would say they're jealous of the life you have…" And then he said something that I felt like I'd heard somewhere: "But it's the same as not choosing anything…isn't it, Fumiya?"

"…Yeah."

It was the obvious gesture, but I was able to nod right away. It was the same complaint that Mizusawa had once levied at me.

If you were just watching as the grains of sand spilled from your palm, then it was no different from choosing nothing.

Had those words been directed at me?

"So none of that is *real* at all. I have nothing I can be truly passionate about, so I could never seriously believe in a life like that. But I think I've always ignored my failure to believe."

"…Something real, huh."

"…Hey, guess that got a little serious, didn't it? Ha-ha," Mizusawa said, trying to mask his shyness a little.

"Takahiro…" Mimimi was looking at him with surprise.

"Anyway, I thought Aoi might be like that, too." I could hear the passion in his voice, and I knew what he was saying. "It's like you're making a choice, but you haven't chosen anything. You think you believed, but you were just drifting with the current."

Mizusawa grinned as he came to his conclusion. "—A fake story. I don't really know, but I feel like what she wanted to say was something like that."

* * *

"So she's not here…," Izumi said as Mimimi *hmm*ed in response.

It was after school that day. We'd reunited with the science-track crew in the lunchroom, and we were exchanging information.

The arts crew—Mizusawa, Kikuchi-san, Mimimi, and I—were sitting on the big sofa seats at the back of the cafeteria, while the science people sat across from us—Nakamura, Izumi, Takei, and Tama-chan.

In other words, all the members of the Osaka group except for Hinami were there.

“Plus…I hear she hasn’t done anything with the student council,” Izumi continued.

“That’s…not like her.” The bad news made Mizusawa frown, too.

“Look, our school does that thing where they invite professionals from lots of career paths to talk about their jobs, right?” said Izumi.

“Oh yeah! The career-path seminar, right?” Mimimi said.

“That’s right!” Izumi replied.

Every year at Sekitomo, they have this useless event where we hear some “appreciated” talks from adult guests, supposedly to deepen our understanding of working life. Usually, nobody really cares to listen to what they have to say, but it’s par for the course at university-oriented schools.

“I think last year, it was…,” Mimimi said.

“An *enka* singer who grew up around here,” Tama-chan answered, which was met with dampened enthusiasm. Maybe that was because they recalled the extremely warm and mild-mannered air that had been in the gym during that event.

I seemed to remember it’d been fairly tough to sit through—she’d talked about the attitude of a professional, then had sung a song about her hometown. The bpm was way too slow for a high school, and I think there was too much vocal gymnastics.

Izumi raised her eyebrows in concern. “So I hear the student council is running that event…but now that Aoi suddenly can’t come to meetings, they’re struggling a lot.”

“That’s not good!” Takei commented.

I could imagine what was happening with them.

“They say Aoi was the one leading the group originally, so there’s no way to move forward until she takes over…”

So not only was she absent from school, but she also wasn’t even taking care of her work. That was a fairly big problem. The student council would also be trying to get in contact with Hinami, so if they couldn’t do that, then Hinami was ignoring everyone, not just us.

That would have been unthinkable for her before.

“So I was wondering if we couldn’t do something,” Izumi

suggested earnestly.

Without even a pause, Nakamura answered, “Sorry, I’m out.” He’d been indignant ever since this discussion had begun.

“You’re out…? What do you mean, Shuji?” Izumi implored.

“There’s no need for us to go that far.”

“Why?” Izumi asked.

Nakamura wasn’t even trying to hide his annoyance. “After everything she said to us, she’s ignoring contact from us, too. We don’t need to make more concessions for her—that’s all.”

“…Well…”

When he put it that way, Izumi must not have known how to reply.

They didn’t understand the situation, and Hinami wasn’t explaining, either. It’s true that we had been the ones prying into her personal life, but her retaliation had been excessive. It was no surprise that Nakamura wouldn’t agree with Izumi when Hinami had been so sharp with him.

Izumi wilted, hanging her head, and clasped the hem of her skirt.

“Hey now, let’s think about it, Shuji.” Mizusawa cut in as smoothly as a willow tree fluttering in the wind. “It’s unusual for Aoi to act that way… Actually, it’s the first time. She’s got to have some reason, right?”

“Yeah, Nakamoo! Our friendship can’t be broken over something like this!” Mimimi added.

“It’s invulnerable, right?!” Takei joined the other two in staring at Nakamura.

“Well, that’s true. I don’t think it would break over something like this, either.”

“Nakamoo!”

“But…” Nakamura lowered his gaze a moment and let out a dissatisfied sigh. “This only means she would try to destroy her friendships just because we made a video letter without permission.”

“But, Shuji, when you get right down to it, this is my fault—,” Izumi began.

“Your fault, huh?” A wrinkle formed in Nakamura’s brow, and his voice darkened. “This is why I said I’m out.” He gave Izumi a fierce look. “If she’s making you feel that way, I don’t want to be a

part of this," he said flatly, then took the tray from his finished meal and stood from his seat.

"Hey! You'll wait for me, right?!" Takei hurried after him.

Izumi watched the two of them go, her gaze wavering. "… Sorry, guys." Eventually, she seemed to brace herself. "I've got to follow Shuji… See you!"

With that, she hurried after Nakamura.

Once the three of them had left, we wound up feeling kind of abandoned.

Even Mizusawa, who was usually cool and collected, was scratching his cheek uneasily. "Hmm, things aren't going very well, are they?"

"…No."

It wasn't just our choices between course streams—even our feelings were divided. We looked at one another, and no one was able to smile for real.

"Well, anyway…guess we'll call that it for the day."

With that remark from Mizusawa, we all went our separate ways.

* * *

Less than an hour later, I was sitting at a café in Omiya opposite Kikuchi-san.

"So…what did you want to tell me?"

I'd been wondering since this morning what she wanted to talk about. I was drinking lemon tea, a little cheery and a little nervous as I waited to hear what she had to say.

She seemed to be struggling a bit, but she reached into her pocket. "Um…actually, it's about this."

She offered me her phone, with a single e-mail displayed on it.

I accepted it from her, and I read a few lines in. "Huh…?"

The sender of the e-mail was a publisher calling themselves "Shobunsha."

"'I apologize for the sudden e-mail, but my name is Hanemoto, from Shobunsha'…"

Feeling Kikuchi-san's gaze as she waited, I read the whole thing. They explained politely that they had read the novel that

she'd uploaded on a submission site a little while ago, *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*. Eventually, it said:

"…'And so—if we could discuss together the possibility of our company publishing the work in question'… Wait, huh?!" I cried out loud. "The e-mail's domain is… Yeah, it's legit."

As a terminally online person, I did a quick and dirty check to determine that the e-mail address came from somewhere official as I digested this message.

When I checked the home page of the domain in the browser, I found it was a new publishing house that couldn't be called large. They put out a few books a month, and they weren't some dubious company. Fact-checking, done.

"Ohhh, they actually publish books every month," I said.

"O-oh, they do…?"

A part of my mind had been restless ever since the Hinami incident, but now this was pulling at my heartstrings.

"You did it!" I cried, and I was as glad as if the accomplishment was mine. "This is great! You might be able to become a pro!"

"Ah, umm, er…but…" Kikuchi-san seemed humble about it for some reason, fumbling with her words.

I wanted to give her confidence. "No buts! Like, this means…!

"It means your dream will come true!"

She had put in her account bio that she wanted to be a novelist, and she'd been writing novels to that end. The dream that she'd been pursuing was now about to come true.

Her face relaxed into a smile as if reality was hitting her at long last.

"Y-yes…you're right!"

It was as if she had finally managed to validate herself.



“That’s great! Wow, a novelist in high school.”

“W-well, it’s not like they’ve decided to publish it yet…”

As we were talking, the feeling sank in. Not that I was the one who needed to feel that.

But for some reason, Kikuchi-san’s expression was somehow glum.

“…Is something wrong?” I asked.

She nodded. “When I saw this e-mail, I was happy, but…” As if thinking back, she said, “If I’m going to get it properly published, then I’ll have to improve the quality of my work, won’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“And for that…I’ll have to think more about the characters…”

“…Do you mean…?” Now I figured out what Kikuchi-san was trying to say.

Before, Kikuchi-san had explained the reason she had written the novel *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*:

“Because in the play script, I wasn’t able to fully depict the characters, aside from Kris.”

Saying “aside from Kris” was a roundabout way of putting it, but there was no need to read deeply into what she meant.

It was about who Alucia really was.

She’d wanted to flesh out the other character that she hadn’t been able to fully depict in *On the Wings of the Unknown*, so she had made a story starring Alucia, a character by the same name. That was *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*.

Without that story, maybe I still wouldn’t have understood why Hinami had helped me try to master the game of life.

In it, a “bloodless” girl gains the knowledge absorbed from purebloods by the Pureblood Hybrid boy to make her way through life at the Royal Academy, and through that success, she proves that her way of thinking is right.

The psychology of Alucia, who filled the void within her with her proof, helped me understand Hinami’s fixation on “character change,” and I was able to figure out why I was mastering the game of life, too.

In that sense, *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream* was like a magic

mirror, reflecting the characters of the world of reality better than I knew it myself.

"The truth is that lots of people are involved in the publication process, so if I'm going to write, it has to be up to par. I can't leave it unfinished," said Kikuchi-san.

"…Guess so, huh."

"But…though I don't know the specifics, I feel like the situation Hinami-san is in right now really is deeply worrying…"

"Yeah, I agree."

Kikuchi-san shared her doubts, putting them into words. "I don't want to repeat the same thing over again."

During the play at the cultural festival, Kikuchi-san had directed Alucia—no, Aoi Hinami—to say certain things.

"I gathered material on Hinami-san's past, and then…I took what I thought were the core parts and made them into her actual lines to recite…"

Alucia's lines had hit me as if Aoi Hinami had been actually speaking them herself.

"But despite that, I was only able to cast light on it with a simplistic conclusion," she said, lamenting her mistakes. "Back then, I was too inexperienced as a person and as a writer…"

She frowned, unusual for her, and I didn't know if it was regret or general sadness. "I hurt someone with my story. But I was unable to create the plot, the ideas, the reasons—the *words* to resolve the darkness I had depicted. I unfolded these issues, and then I couldn't fold them up again."

She seemed more embarrassed about her abilities rather than about anything immoral she might have done. I suppose that's the remorse of a creator.

"…Writing that story, there was just one thing I didn't understand."

"…What was that?" I asked.

She nodded. "—Motivation."

I knew immediately what she was referring to. Ever since she wrote both *On the Wings of the Unknown* and also *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*—

No, since even before that—

—she had been very concerned about it, insistently so.

"You mean…Hinami's motivation."

Kikuchi-san nodded. “When I write stories, all I think about is character motivation,” she said. I could hear her experience in the way she spoke.

It was true that from what I’d seen and read thus far, she’d always stuck to that aesthetic in the worlds she depicted.

Ever since Mimimi and Hinami competed in the student council election, Kikuchi-san had been interested in the motivations behind their efforts. During the sports competition, when we were trying to get Erika Konno more involved, she had put Konno’s and Kamimae’s motivations behind their behavior into words and explained them to me.

And when Tama-chan was being harassed by the class and worrying about how to deal with it, Kikuchi-san had compared the class to a story for Tama-chan, who wasn’t interested in people. Motivation had been a theme then, too.

Kikuchi-san observed the story of the world we lived in, thinking through the motivations of the characters in it and putting those into words, and then she reflected those thoughts in her own stories. She moved the characters—us—in the stories in her head and analyzed their structure.

Her perspective was that of a novelist with a bird’s-eye view of the world.

It was her devotion to thorough analysis and putting that into words that had made the culture festival play resonate with everyone, and that was why she’d gotten sudden interest from a publisher for a novel she had posted online for the first time.

But even she hadn’t completed a full portrait of Hinami.

“It’s always been on my mind… Hinami’s motivation especially.”

The one character in our real-life story whose motivation had yet to be revealed:

That was Aoi Hinami.

“…She’s the one person I still don’t know about.”

And you could think and think, but you wouldn’t be able to figure it out.

She was a black box who didn’t open her heart to anyone; the

doors were stubbornly shut.

In order to complete the story—in order to take responsibility for this story that was linked with the real world—in the future, she would have to face the dark lord.

"So that's why…"

Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream was like a magic mirror.

And now that we could no longer be involved with Hinami, its magical nature was backfiring in a sense.

Since Alucia—Hinami—was the main character of that story.

"…You don't have any other stories that you've actually written? The editor might like that, too." But even as I said that, I was immediately aware that my suggestion was completely inadequate.

On the Wings of the Unknown and *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream* shone as narratives precisely because Kikuchi-san, who already reflected the world around her in her stories, drew out things about Aoi Hinami and me, or herself. She even did interviews and turned the answers into flesh and blood for her characters.

If you replaced them with some other story, then you would never get the same brilliance.

Kikuchi-san eventually seemed to have come to a decision. "… I'm going to try asking if they'll wait just a little."

"The editor?"

She nodded. "If I don't make it in time, then—I'll write another story." She put on a smile.

"But then…this opportunity…"

Her first full-length novel, basically, had caught the eye of a professional editor, and they would likely talk about publication soon. This stuff didn't happen every day. Of course, Kikuchi-san's skills were a prerequisite, but luck would also be a part of it—fate and timing happened to be on her side, too.

At the very least, I knew that the game of life wouldn't afford her the same opportunity again so easily.

There was no more tea left in Kikuchi-san's cup as she brought it to her lips to cover her discomfort. "So then…that will be a test of my abilities!"

Her smile as she said those optimistic words was somehow fragile.

3

Casting a revival spell on you when you're cursed makes it instant death

Evening, a few days later.

I was standing alone in the alley of a residential district. I looked at the building looming in front of me—the house where Aoi Hinami lived.

To put it very simply, I was going to ambush her.

"…All right."

There was Kikuchi-san's dream, then Hinami's strange behavior. I needed to talk to her to resolve either one of these. But even saying that, I was surprised myself that I was doing something so primitive, unrefined, and frankly rude. I mean, if she had been a stranger, then I could get arrested—in fact, this was still unauthorized behavior, and even if it was Hinami I was waiting for, she could treat it as a crime if she wanted to. But I knew that I had chosen this because, at the very least, she wasn't a stranger to me.

You might think, *Don't go lying in wait for her—just go ring the doorbell*, but then she probably wouldn't come out at all. In fact, it would let her know that I was here, which was a bad plan. Only an unexpected attack would work on NO NAME.

And so I was braced to do this. Whenever the neighbors gave curious looks at the boy hanging around in the fading light, I got through it by pretending to pick a drink from a nearby vending machine as I simply waited for what I had come to do.

"…Ugh."

I had some dramatic notion that black coffee was the thing to drink on a stakeout, so I'd decided to live it out. Unfortunately, I'm not actually used to black coffee, and my muttered verdict disappeared unheard into the evening.

The bitter time melted away without anything happening.

The last red light shining from the west finally vanished, and night fell. I must have been standing there for just under an hour. Though it was a spring night, I'd gotten rather chilly. I didn't even know whether Hinami was in the building or had gone out, and that uncertainty was making the time feel even longer than it was. I tossed my empty can out, and it landed perfectly into the round shadow of the trash bin. It made a clanging sound as it fell to the bottom.

The sun had completely set. It was dark enough that it was difficult to see the faces of passersby. I wound up staring at every single person who went by, but I wasn't sure what to do when I made eye contact with a stranger, so I just looked away. I was doing a lot of very suspicious things, and I started to wonder with a bit of despair if I was just a weirdo. If you think about it, I didn't have Hinami's permission for this, so it was possible I really was a weirdo. I hadn't thought of what I would say when I did run into her. But there were things that we could discuss because it was me and Hinami, because it was nanashi and NO NAME.

Still, I was wondering if I might get arrested, if my legs were getting too tired for this, as I leaned my weight on a nearby cement wall—and then.

"—!"

The familiar expression that I had been looking for passed right by.

The silhouette of a black-haired girl walking along down the dark path, even beyond the dim shadows, was shaped just like Aoi Hinami.

"H-hey…!" I raced out without thinking, calling out to her.

The expression that looked at me blankly was the one I'd been waiting for—

No, it was just very similar. And smaller.

"A-are you…?"

In other words, I had seen this person before, who resembled the one I was looking for.

"Are you—Aoi Hinami's little sister?"

* * *

“Um, hello. I’m Aoi-san’s friend, Tomozaki.”

“O-oh, thank you for being friends with my sister…!” she said with a little bow. She was Aoi Hinami’s little sister, otherwise known as—

“S-sorry I didn’t introduce myself…! I’m her sister, Haruka! I’m in my third year of middle school…and my favorite food is chee __”

“Um, Haruka-chan, right?” Haruka-chan seemed quite flustered as she gave that odd self-introduction. I took the lead, pushing myself to nonchalantly use *chan* with her given name. Also, I cut her off, but it seemed that she liked the same thing as her sister.

Oh yeah. For some reason, I hadn’t considered the possibility, but I was in front of the Hinami family house, so of course I would get random encounters with Hinami family members. In fact, if you considered the number of people in her family, that was more likely. As a gamer, I was ashamed of myself for not having managed such simple math.

“Th-that’s right! Nice to meet you…!”

I watched out the corner of my eye as Haruka-chan nervously but cheerily made an exaggerated bow, and I thought to myself.

I had seen her face twice before.

The first time was when I had been with Kikuchi-san at an Italian restaurant in Kitayono, when we had run into the Hinami family by chance.

And the one other time—

“It’s nice to meet you, too… Also, thank you for the video letter.”

The video letter was most likely the trigger that had brought about these major changes in Hinami.

And Haruka-chan had been in it.

“Oh, no, thank you! Thanks for celebrating my sister’s birthday!”

“No, no, she’s always helping me out…”

“Oh, no, but still…”

Once we were done exchanging the stock phrases of “sister’s

friend" meeting "friend's little sister," silence fell for just a moment. Haruka-chan gave me a really awkward, questioning look, and my heart began to burn with a sense of duty. As the older one, I had to take the lead.

"Umm…"

However, the only new relationships I'd ever built with people outside my class were Gumi-chan from my job and people at *Atafami* meetups, so I didn't know the right topic to bring up at a time like this. I was getting flustered.

What's wrong? You're not as awkward when you first meet someone; people shouldn't be immediately assuming you're a loser, I encouraged myself as I tried to figure out my wording, when suddenly, Haruka-chan gave me a suspicious look.

"Umm…Tomozaki-san."

"Y-yes?"

Then she furrowed her brow in an expression that was reminiscent of her sister. "…Why are you in front of our house?" she asked in a skeptical tone.

"Yeah, that is the question, huh."

Obviously. Even if she knew Hinami and I were close enough to celebrate her birthday on a trip—finding a classmate of the opposite sex loitering in front of your house would make you wary. It was probably common knowledge that Aoi Hinami was super popular at school.

"…Hmm?"

Then I suddenly noticed that Haruka-chan was casually holding a gray, rectangular phone charm–looking thing with rounded corners that was attached to her schoolbag. As I examined the familiar object, it hit me. A keychain alarm.

"Um, okay, so…"

"Y-yes?"

When I began my excuse, Haruka-chan took a step back, her hand clenching around the alarm. So basically, if she pulls it hard, it'll scream to everyone nearby that I'm doing something criminal. I absolutely couldn't let that happen. My initial remark here would be an important turning point in deciding whether I was a friend in Aoi Hinami's class or some weirdo who was claiming to be in her class.

Even as I was hesitating to answer, I felt my normal points

dropping rapidly. It was like a certain courtroom game—if I continued shouting *Objection!* to the wrong things and lost all my credibility, the defendant would be found guilty. And unfortunately, in this case, the defendant was me. I put my brain into full gear, but when you think about it, I hadn't had enough experience talking with a middle schooler to run detailed simulations—so in the end, I arrived at a simple answer.

"Um, about your sister."

"…Yes."

"She hasn't been…strange lately?"

I figured there was no need to look for weird excuses. After all, I hadn't actually come here with dubious motives.

Haruka-chan looked momentarily surprised, and she relaxed her grip on the alarm a bit. First, I wanted to get her suspicion level down low enough that she'd let go completely.

"…Yeah," she said somberly and nodded.

That answer put me at ease in a sense.

When we bumped into her at the Italian restaurant in Kitayono, Hinami had seemed to act like the perfect heroine around her own family, rather than as herself. It had left a deep impression on me.

If that was the case, then she might be making sure not to let her family notice this change. That was what I'd been worried about.

If she was wearing a mask, her ideal self, even with her family—then it would mean that her own house wasn't somewhere she could expose who she really was.

Trying not to startle Haruka-chan as she hung her head with a somber expression, and trying to avoid the alarm, I spoke as gently as I could.

"Right? She hasn't been responding to messages, so I got a little worried. I thought I would just wait for her and then lecture her once I found her. Ha-ha-ha." I babbled on lightly, with fake laughter like Mizusawa, and Haruka-chan laughed along with me.

Thanks, Mizusawa. Whether it was fake or real, if it would help this relationship and smooth out our communication until we could eventually speak honestly with each other, then that fakeness was a part of being real.

Haruka-chan seemed like she had relaxed a bit. “I’m worried, too.” She nodded and then glanced over to the Hinami family house. “Lately, she’s been cooped up in her room all the time, doing nothing but playing video games…”

“Nothing but video games…” I repeated. I wasn’t sure if I should say it, but there was only one thing that came to mind. “Could it be…*Atafami*?”

I had the feeling this wasn’t the time, but my instinct as a gamer made me say it anyway. I couldn’t help it.

“…”

“Ah, um…”

I prayed that she wouldn’t be like, *What is wrong with him? Why’s he saying weird stuff? Maybe I should call for help.* In fact, I was about to begin apologizing for being a weird nerd at her when Haruka-chan giggled and nodded.

“…Yes, that’s right.”

“I—I knew it!” I said with relief, a little too loudly, and Haruka-chan twitched a bit. *Please watch what you do with your hand.*

“So you know that my sister likes *Atafami*,” Haruka-chan said, and I could tell she’d let her guard down a little.

I started to feel rather proud. *If it’s about* Atafami*, then leave it to me.* “Of course. Since I’m her rival.”

“Really?! Who’s the better player?!”

She was getting more interested now. The way it was looking, maybe Hinami played *Atafami* with her family, too. We’d only just met, and we were already having a fun conversation. *Atafami* really is one of the best games there is.

“Of course I’m better.”

“Huh?! Is anyone better?!”

Haruka-chan was startled, as if this was the biggest thing she’d learned that day. Well, when you think about it, it makes sense. I don’t think Hinami would ever slack off when it comes to *Atafami*, so she wouldn’t go easy on her sister. Of course Haruka-chan would think her sister was the very best there was. Since Hinami is an ultra-high-level player, ranked number two in Japan online. I’m just number one.

“We’ve gone to some *Atafami* meetups together. I’m really good even there, too.”

“O-oh…is that right…?!”

When I babbled on, proudly asserting my *Atafami* dominance, Haruka-chan looked a little put off. *Oops—when I'm in my wheelhouse, my nerdy bad habits come out.* I glanced over at what Haruka-chan's right hand was doing, but it didn't seem like she was squeezing the alarm any harder, so that hadn't made me sketchier in her eyes at least. Phew.

Haruka-chan looked up at me curiously. "I'm sorry," she said a little apologetically, "until we talked, I thought you were pretty suspicious…"

"Oh, you did?" I commented with a wry smile.

"…But I guess you really are her friend!" she said as she let go of the keychain alarm.

"I'm glad I could clear your suspicions."

I was sincerely glad—mainly that I was no longer dreading the moment a small mistake would get me branded a criminal. *Atafami* really does bring people together.

"…I wonder what's the matter with her?" Haruka-chan murmured. "She won't tell me anything."

The wariness on her face was slowly easing.

"…I see." I carefully digested what she had said.

Hinami wasn't hiding from her family that something was wrong, but she wouldn't even tell her sister. Haruka-chan adored her older sister, so I'm sure that was sad for her. As someone who was also concerned about Hinami, I could understand her feelings, too.

But Haruka-chan was her family, growing up in the same house—plus, she was a middle schooler.

While it would hurt to have the older sister she loved so clearly draw a line between them, it was an allowable amount of hurt for a middle schooler.

"I'm worried, too, but she won't tell me anything… Actually, she won't even give me the time to talk," I said.

"Oh…I see," Haruka-chan said, her gaze going to the window of her own house. If my memory was correct, that was Hinami's room.

Though Hinami couldn't go to school, she wouldn't tell the reason why to me or even to her sister. Aoi Hinami was the same as me—she was still alone, after all.

She'd told me of her past before—that her sister had passed

away, and that she didn't know the real reason for it.

Of course I couldn't ask about that directly, but maybe I could learn some small clue as to the reason Hinami had gotten like that—even a shred would do. So if I could manage it—what should I ask Haruka-chan?

As I was mulling over that, Haruka-chan said my name with some determination. "Um, Tomozaki-san!"

"Yeah?"

She looked up at me with a serious expression. "—What's my sister usually like at school?"

I wasn't expecting that.

"I only know how she is at home… I want to know more about her at school!"

I recalled the obvious.

"Yeah…"

Caring about Hinami and wanting to know more about her—wanting to help her somehow—

—I was not the only one who felt that way.

* * *

Haruka-chan and I were at a nearby park.

"So she even started a fight with the teacher. She was like, 'Yeah, in the staff room, where the air-conditioning is on high.'"

"Huh?! So she's not really a good girl?!"

"It's more like she's too smart. But that made her really popular, and that's how she became student council president."

I talked about how Hinami had been at school before all this, too. I started off with the student council election to pull Haruka-chan in, and she was really surprised. Well, it was a pretty amazing story.

"Wow, I didn't know any of that…"

Apparently, while Hinami acted similarly at home to the perfect heroine she played at school, she didn't reveal the bold and fearless side she had shown during the election.

"And then at the end, she said, 'Hexactly.'"

"She quoted *Oinko* in front of everyone?!" Shocked, Haruka-chan covered her mouth with both hands.

“Is it that surprising?”

“No…I’m kind of glad! My impression of her is so different.”

“Guess she’s not like that at home…,” I said.

Haruka-chan nodded. “It’s like I’m hearing stories about a different person.” She wiped the corners of her eyes, as if this was funny to her.

Her smile was bright and innocent. It reminded me of the childlike smiles that Aoi Hinami revealed when she was talking about video games.

But I was also glad to see she was enjoying herself this much, which meant my conversational skills were pretty amazing, too. When Hinami is in perfect heroine mode, she often laughs at what other people say—it’s important in communication not just to talk, but to listen.

“So then can I ask how you see your sister?” I said, meeting her gaze.

Haruka-chan grinned, which drove away the awkwardness. “Yeah, sure!” Then she gave a thoughtful “Hmm.”

Well, that’s no wonder. Being asked to “tell me something” about the sister you’d lived over ten years with under the same roof was a really broad question.

“…Um, is there anything you wanted to ask?”

“Hmm…” A number of issues I had to resolve crossed my mind—the video letter, her other sister, and her relationship with her parents.

There was a mountain of things that I didn’t understand. So which one of them should I ask about?

But for some reason—

“Haruka-chan…”

—what came out of my mouth first was this:

“…what do you like about your sister?”

Even I thought it was a strange question to bring up right now. If I wanted to head straight to resolving Hinami’s problems, there was any number of other questions I should be choosing. But the words that came out felt emotionally honest.

Haruka-chan’s expression suddenly brightened into a sincere smile. “You know!” She sounded excited.

And when I heard her answer—I thought maybe this was what I’d wanted to hear.

“I want to be like my big sister!”

Recalling warm memories, she wore a smile that sparkled as if happiness were bursting in her head. The tone of her voice was colorful, as if she unwaveringly believed in Aoi Hinami as a person from the bottom of her heart, and she was so happy to talk about it.

It was somehow overwhelming to see.

“Be like your sister?”

“Yeah!” Haruka-chan nodded honestly. “I’m the dumbest one in our family—so it’s like being cheery is all I’ve got going for me!” She chuckled shyly. “So I used to feel like my job was to make everyone smile. But…” Her expression slowly grew a little somber. “Um…a lot of things happened at once. There was a time when I didn’t know what I should do or how I should act.”

I thought of that incident Hinami had told me about.

“Even though being peppy was the only thing I was good at, all the little things became scary to me, like going to school or talking to people…”

The death of the other sister they’d had. I couldn’t be certain if that was what she was talking about now, but I couldn’t imagine what else would have made her feel this way.

“Back then when I talked to Mom about it, she said, ‘You’re okay the way you are; you don’t have to change.’ That made me feel a little better, but…”

“Yeah?”

“Even if it made it easier, it didn’t change that I still felt sad deeper down. The anxiety just got worse and worse, like it was choking me.”

I kind of got it.

Being left behind by the world, feeling uncomfortable no matter where you are. Times like that, my place to belong had been *Atafami*, but if I hadn’t had that—

—I’m sure it would be really hard to live all alone like that.

Eventually, Haruka-chan’s tone grew softer. “So I tried asking Aoi about it, too—if it’s okay for me to be like this. If it really was okay for me not to change.”

“You asked her that…?”

“And then…she told me.” As she recalled that important memory, Haruka-chan’s smile seemed a little mature.

That was the look of the gamer I knew so well. It brought to mind the voice of the perfect heroine, with a smile on her face like a warm embrace for her sister.

“She said, ‘So you don’t know anymore, either, huh—?’” Haruka-chan said, slowly looking up at the sky.

“‘—So then watch me.’”

There sat the round moon. It could never shine by itself, but it was still beautiful.

“She said that from now on, she was going to be a perfect role model!”

Her words rang in my core, and my chest felt tight.

I didn’t know yet how much of that was Hinami’s sincere feelings.

But as the perfect role model for her lost younger sister—I’m sure her light had saved this one girl. It was more than enough.

“So I want to be like my sister. She makes me feel like if I follow her lead, then I can become as cool as her!”

“Mm… I see.”

“After that, every day became so much brighter!”

“…I get that. I do.”

I was able to sympathize painfully well.

The way she lived—the way she fought and the path she’d followed—was so realistic, so blunt, that facing her became exhausting. Imitating her was a burden not many could carry.

But that burning brilliance, that vivid and real feeling that you could change yourself, would be like a lighthouse for the ones who were lost—who wanted to keep going but couldn’t.

“So I love my sister…”

There was not even a hint of dishonesty.

Hinami had called herself empty and weak. But even so, the cold brilliance of the perfect girl called Aoi Hinami had saved this one lost girl.

Suddenly, Haruka-chan’s voice fell to a mumble. “Um…”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like her, too?”

I was almost startled by that question, but I knew this wasn’t a situation to poke fun or be like, *D-d-d-dummy, of course not…!* In fact, I already had an answer that I was satisfied with.

“Yeah. I do.”

There was no need to add an excuse like *purely as a person*. She had changed my life, and I was thankful to her and respected her, and I wanted to know her better.

I couldn’t possibly say that I didn’t like someone who was that important to me.

“Oh, of course!” Haruka-chan beamed, and she put both hands in front of her mouth as she continued, “So what do you like about her, Tomozaki-san?!”

“L-like what…?” The addition of a more detailed question left me a little nonplussed. I had never specifically named what I liked about Hinami. “Well…” But after considering for a while, I realized that the answer was sitting right in front of me.

So I spoke slowly, to give it weight. “—I think I feel the same way you do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

It was true. I think it was the same kind of gratitude Haruka-chan felt for the light that Hinami had added to her life.

I loved the false brilliance that had made my life shine with so many colors.

“I guess it’s how she shines and brought color to the world I see.”

Of course, I couldn’t say in front of someone who believed in it that it was fake.

* * *

I walked Haruka-chan home from the park. I’m sure if you were to count the time, we’d only been talking for less than an hour, but I couldn’t keep a middle schooler out too long when it was already this late.

The more I looked at Haruka-chan’s profile, the more I saw Hinami in her. It seemed like her suspicions of me had melted

away completely, but I wasn't sure if that was because she'd come to trust me or if reminiscing about her sister had warmed her up. The vibe between us was friendly at least.

"Um…the truth is, this is still a secret from my sister, but…"

"Yeah?"

Haruka-chan said a little shyly, "…I've been trying to be like her. Really doing my best…" Her brilliantly shining gaze was leveled at me. "So this year…I got to become student council president at my school!"

"Whoa!" I was surprised.

Haruka-chan studied me. "…Are things okay right now? Um, since she hasn't gone to school, the student council…"

"Ahh…" I recalled what I'd heard from Izumi, and for a moment, I wondered if I should hide that…but I couldn't lie. "…I hear there was an event they were working on, but since Hinami's not there, they can't move forward with it."

"What…?"

"Oh, but that's just proof of how capable your sister is!"

I tried to soften the blow a little, although I wasn't sure if it worked. Haruka-chan went, "Hmm," like she was thinking hard. Hinami wasn't even able to continue with the job she'd taken on, and it was causing trouble for the people left behind. I'm sure this wasn't the ideal sister Haruka-chan imagined.

Her fake brilliance was becoming truly fake.

Thinking about that made me feel a tightness in my chest.

"I kinda feel like I've learned a bunch about my sister that I didn't know before," Haruka-chan said sadly, with a smile like she was mulling over something important to her.

"…Me too."

I knew a side of Hinami that Haruka-chan didn't know, while she knew lots about Hinami that I didn't.

But we had one thing in common—neither of us knew who Aoi Hinami really was.

Before saying farewell, I brought something up. "Um, Haruka-chan."

"What is it?"

"…Do you mind if I come to talk again?"

I'd sent Hinami messages on LINE a number of times, but there was still no reply. The "read" notification might have given

me hope, but it was the same as an indirect rejection.

I didn't know what connecting with Haruka-chan would lead to. Maybe it would just be sharing our pain and making friends. But I wanted to hear about Hinami, even if it was simply from someone else who was close to her.

Haruka-chan was startled for a moment, but she smiled with relief and nodded. "Sure. I'd like to know lots about my sister, too!"

Hearing that took a load off my mind. "Um, so then it'd probably best to be able to contact you somehow, right? Like on LINE…"

Haruka-chan was clearly hesitant about that suggestion. "I-I'm sorry… I only use LINE with certain people…"

"Huh?"

Hold on a bit, even if you are hesitant to do it, we vibed enough that you would tell me anyway, right?

As I was confused, she said, "Um, we can do Insta."

"Huh? Oh, okay. Is that how it works?"

I had no idea what the point was in using them in two different ways like that, but it seemed that in Haruka-chan's world, that was how it was done. You put in all the work to learn LINE etiquette or whatever, and then as the world changes, new forms of etiquette just keep coming up. It never ends. At any rate, I was glad I had Instagram, even if it had been for an assignment.

"I'll tell my sister you said hi, too," she said.

"Oh, about that."

Haruka-chan stared back at me.

"…Can you keep what we talked about today a secret from your sister?"

"…? Why?" Haruka-chan asked with genuine confusion.

Hmm, how should I explain it? "Ahh, if she finds out that I'm going to this trouble out of concern for her…it'd be a little embarrassing, I guess…"

"Embarrassing…?"

"Um, if she finds out that I'm worried enough that I came all the way to her house, she'd feel weird about it, you know?"

As I was being rather incoherent, Haruka-chan waffled for a bit. Eventually, something must have struck her. "Ah!" Her eyes widened in realization. "Ohhhh!"

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

And then with a mischievous expression that reminded me a lot of her sister, she said, “—You’re trying to get with my sister!”

“Hey! No! Listen…!” *Come on, I have a girlfriend named Kikuchi-san…*, I protested mentally.

But Haruka-chan still had that *gotcha* face. “So that’s why you were out waiting for her… I see!”

“Look! Hey— I’m not!”

“It’s okay! Your secret’s safe with me! See you, then!”

“Agh, come on! Like I said…!”

And so I wound up getting flustered because of a girl three years younger than me. Well, I’d let her take that win for the day.

* * *

A few days later, on Saturday evening.

After Kikuchi-san and I got off work, we were meeting at a café in Omiya.

“Huh?! You met with the editor?!”

“Y-yes. I went to Jinbocho for the meeting…”

“Ohhh…”

I let out a breath. Just a specific place name really made it sink in. Kikuchi-san was getting steadily closer to her dream.



“How are things going?”

“They said they’ve read everything that I’ve posted online so far, and they can use the first part as is, so they want me to keep writing it, with the plan for it to be published…”

“They’re planning to publish it?!”

“They said that if I could make it in time, it might be good to try aiming for a September publication date.”

“Hold on—this was a serious discussion!” I was getting more and more enthusiastic.

“Um, they said that of course, it depends on the quality of the story, but we had to establish a deadline, or we wouldn’t get anywhere…”

“I see… Wow, your book’s getting published…”

Kikuchi-san seemed somehow hesitant, her eyes lowering. “So…I tried telling them.”

“Hmm? Telling them what?”

“…That I wanted to completely change the model for Alucia’s character.”

“Huh?” My cup made a cold clink against the saucer.

She was clearly doing this out of concern for Hinami. That made sense.

“But…then…” The brilliance of that story would be lost.

After the cultural festival, we’d interviewed multiple people to build Alucia’s character. Kikuchi-san’s insight and the spirit of the creation were all there in her.

“I think that if I leave things as they are…I won’t be able to continue the story. The Alucia inside me now…is inseparable from Hinami-san. And if I still don’t know the truth, I really can’t.”

Meeting up with an editor, who then suggested a specific publication date—hardly anything could be more exciting and desirable for an aspiring novelist.

But even with wonderful things falling into her lap one after another, Kikuchi-san remained gloomy. It was like she’d been cursed instead. “Even if I keep writing, if I don’t know the depths of her character, I won’t be able to resolve all the threads I’ve introduced.”

She was just that determined to take her creation seriously as an author. When she’d made the decision to seriously pursue her

dream of being a professional, and when the talk of publication fell into her lap, she must have decided—

—that she would be sincere with her stories.

"But…"

Would she be able to give up so easily on what she'd been writing all this time?

"Don't you still want to write Alucia how she originally was?" I asked.

Kikuchi-san pressed her lips in a line for just a moment, then eventually opened them. "…Honestly, I do want to write it. But I figured that it doesn't have to be right now."

"How so?"

"If the publication of this book goes well, then they might put out a new book of mine, right?"

"Well…that is possible."

"And honestly, if I really want to make a living as a novelist, if I want to be like Michael Andi…I think I need to become someone who can write on for a long time." She spoke smoothly, without pausing to think. "And I think I can."

She was giving me her reasons very clearly, and she was talking a lot more than usual.

As I listened to what she was saying, I was thinking.

"I don't have to put everything I want to write in my first book."

It had been less than six months since we had begun dating, but I'd been trying to take our relationship seriously, so I could tell.

"If there's going to be another chance, then I should actually get used to writing before I put my feelings into that story—"

She'd thought about all this long before she decided to tell me.

"I still have lots of time, so I was thinking it would be best for me to work hard at what I can do right now."

She must have repeated it over and over in her head.

She'd been trying to talk herself out of what she really wanted to write.

"So it's okay. Since…I've only just gotten started."

The smile she wore, the one I was sure was false, was so perfect that I never would have known if I hadn't been seriously considering what was on her mind.

"…I see. If you say so."

What she'd said sounded like a prepared excuse, but I didn't have the words to overrule any of it.

* * *

I was on my way back after sending Kikuchi-san home.

With the breeze blowing in cold air from the river, I was walking around Kita-Asaka alone.

It was spring, and summer was slowly coming, but the nights still had the edge of winter.

Kikuchi-san was moving along to her dreams. But the issue of Hinami was inseparable from that in a sense, while also being in conflict with it. While intruding on her life would help Kikuchi-san's writing, if we were careless about it, we would just be hitting Hinami when she was already down.

Now that I thought about it, ever since I'd started trying to play the game of life, I'd always been stuck between my desires and my contradictory values when I tried to think about an answer.

And that answer was never simply dropping one thing in favor of another. They were shining words, glimpsed as I was doing my best in the balancing act of keeping either from slipping through my fingers while I desperately struggled to take both.

Dropping either would seem like an act of courage, but that was just choosing the easy way.

Finding the real and more complex answer was simply that difficult.

Right now, Kikuchi-san was caught between her dreams and her morals.

Part of her was a girl with a dream—a writer.

She prioritized creating beautiful novels over the feelings and boundaries of others, and she would even trespass into places

she didn't necessarily have the right to be.

But another side of her was a normal girl—someone with common sense.

She respected Hinami's rights more than herself and felt that she should not intrude any further.

And so in the end, Kikuchi-san had chosen to make the societal compromise over doing what she wanted to do.

But—was that really the best idea?

Meanwhile, my chance encounter was connecting to this situation.

I was right to learn more about Hinami in a way that didn't directly involve her.

It was, in a sense, very nanashi-like: sneaky and roundabout. Since Kikuchi-san was my girlfriend, walking together down that meandering path was one way to go about things.

[*Hey, Kikuchi-san.*]

Rather than sending her a *Thanks for today* sort of message on LINE, I sent her a sudden text. She must have been surprised, but I immediately got a "read" notification, and she replied, [*What is it?*]

I typed my idea into the message box.

This option that could well completely unveil everything for us —

[*There's someone I want you to meet.*]

—At the same time, I was also aware that this choice might be a dramatic one.

* * *

It was the next day, at my part-time job at Karaoke Sevens.

I had come to work early, and I was in the break room, looking at my phone.

I was composing a DM to send to Haruka-chan.

The other night, I had made an invitation, telling Kikuchi-san there was someone I wanted her to meet. Of course, that was Haruka-chan. Meaning it would be best for me to tell Haruka-chan while the enthusiasm was still there, but—

"Hmm."

The rules here were kind of different from any of the situations I'd been in before, and I wasn't sure what to do. It felt like a really bad idea for a third-year high schooler to invite a middle school girl out, and I didn't know where you'd take a middle schooler anyway. I mean, when I was Haruka-chan's age, I didn't have any friends, so I had no hanging-out experience to go on.

"Well, for starters…"

I gave a brief thanks for letting me talk to her, said that I wanted to talk again, and asked if it was okay for me to bring another of Hinami's friends. Send. And then as I was reviewing my message to make sure it wasn't too weird…

"Oh!"

…a bubble that said "typing" popped up. Come on. With LINE, you already have to struggle over the difficult issue of "read" notifications—there's a new level to it on this thing? This is what makes life so hard.

Eventually…

[*Someone else, too?! Okay!*
Um, where should it be? The park again…?]

It came as two separate messages.

Even I knew that the park was not the correct answer. But if she was answering right away, then I shouldn't take too long to reply, either. I just sent a brief message:

[*Um…I'll think about it!*]

Staring at my phone again, I fell into thought. Now what to do?

So the Hinami ambush plan had gotten me a chance to speak with Haruka-chan, and there had been the threat of the safety alarm. I still had no idea where this was going.

Despite that, I had the feeling that this was an important connection if I wanted to understand more about Hinami.

“What’re you up to?” asked a dubious-sounding voice from behind me. I turned around, and Mizusawa was there.

“Whoa!”

“Flirting on Insta?”

“No, I’m not. Um…”

I thought about making some plausible excuse, but he’d see through whatever stupid thing I said. Besides… *If I can, I’d like to ask him for his opinion.*

And so I decided to explain everything that had happened recently. “Well, the truth is—”

“Oh, you’ve been busy.”

I was side by side with Mizusawa at the sink, washing dishes as I talked to him about all that had happened.

“So you’re setting up a meeting with Fuka-chan and Aoi’s sister, huh…”

Having your girlfriend meet a friend’s sister wasn’t normally something you’d have to think that hard about. But the situation was what it was…and, well, the people were who they were.

“It does seem like there’s something behind that decision—since she was the one who wrote that play.”

“Well…yeah. That’s the thing.”

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it? If we can’t get ahold of her, and waiting at her place failed, then all you can do is all you can do, even if you’re not sure.”

“…Yeah.”

Right now, so many things were vague and uncertain. But if we still wanted to be involved with Hinami, then we would have to brute-force the problem and throw everything we had at it.

“Well, if anything else happens, then let me know. If there’s something I can do, I’ll help you out with whatever.”

“Y-yeah, thanks.”

He waved a hand at me, his smile cool and composed. “I really want to do something about Aoi, too.”

His eyes were serious and sincere.

I’d seen this side of Mizusawa a number of times, but now it suddenly struck me. “…Hey, Mizusawa.”

“Hmm?”

“Why…do you like her so much?”

His eyes widened for a moment. “That’s a random question. The reason I like her…” He put a finger to his chin. He seemed to find the question intriguing. “Hmm, now that you mention it… that’s a hard question,” he said casually. Eventually, he quietly confessed, “…I think…I’m lonely.”

“Lonely?” I wasn’t expecting that word.

Mizusawa turned off the faucet with a *squeak*. The water came to a stop, leaving the sink empty. The slickly shining silver didn’t reflect us clearly.

“I only act cool, and I can’t tell people how I really feel. Well, now I’m able to actually express my weakness and say I’m lonely in the present, not just the past.”

“Not in the past? You mean…,” I interrupted without thinking.

“So I think at first…I was thinking she might understand me.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

His lips gently turned up a little. “If it was her…I wouldn’t have to say anything or expose my weakness, and she would recognize that the person called Takahiro Mizusawa is lonely,” he confessed, like it was a sin. “…Wouldn’t that be nice, to have someone who can understand the deepest parts of you, even when you can’t reveal it yourself? I think I was clinging to that fantasy, unfair and stupid as it was.”

I kind of understood.

To take life seriously, to take a relationship seriously, is scary. If that doesn’t go well, if they don’t accept you—it feels like you’re worthless, like you’re not needed, and you sink deeper and deeper into insecurity. That’s why people stay in the cage of their own sense of values, why they fear exposing themselves.

Exactly like when I had called life a shitty game and wouldn’t listen.

“So even you’re a little scared of that stuff, Mizusawa.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, I can’t be number one in Japan like you.”

Since I knew what he meant, my response was hesitant. “…I see.”

Even if others don’t understand, just being me is all the validation I need. But to people who aren’t like that, exposing themselves is like offering up their heads to be judged whether they’re worthy of validation or not… When you think about it that way, people who don’t completely retreat into themselves really are amazing.

“Basically, I was a coward. Everything would be so easy if people could be known without opening themselves up,” Mizusawa said, reflecting on the past. But there was no self-deprecation in his tone.

“Essentially…you thought that Hinami could understand you…,” I said, gathering my thoughts.

His eyebrows rose. “No, I think…” And then he gave a weak sigh. “Now it’s probably the opposite.”

“How so?”

With a smile that was childlike but also full of confidence, he said, “I feel like I could understand her.”

“!”

“—Like I could understand her loneliness, even if she won’t expose herself.”

It was true; it was the complete opposite logic.

“If she’s scared to expose herself but is still lonely…then I’ll understand her. That felt meaningful to me.”

I understood that wholeheartedly.

Or rather, I’d thought something similar myself—that I was the only one who could understand Hinami’s isolation, so I had to talk to her. Although, that was based on the bond between nanashi and NO NAME, the way we faced life as gamers.

But maybe that wasn’t right.

“That’s why I think I like her,” he finished.



Mizusawa had said that he was bad at showing his true feelings, but what he had expressed just now was most likely all true.

In the end, he smiled in a way that was innocent but strong. “It might be juvenile to play the hero, though.”

His words and honest feelings were inspiring to me—although it would sound a bit cheap to say so.

“Hey, Mizusawa.”

I was sure he knew, really knew, some of the loneliness that followed Aoi Hinami as she dealt with life—different from that of the NO NAME that I knew, but still clearly hers.

I was sure that side of her was genuine, and that I could never find it.

That was why—

“Next time I meet up with Haruka-chan, will you come with me?”

It wouldn’t just be me or Kikuchi-san.

I would work together with the people who were trying to find the real her.

That was what I should do.

Plus…there was one more thing.

“I don’t know where to take a middle schooler…”

The truth was, I was waving the white flag here. I didn’t have the EXP for this. Seeing me surrender, Mizusawa chuckled.

* * *

“N-n-n-nice to meet you!!”

It was Sunday, the following week.

Kikuchi-san and Mizusawa had already arrived, and they stood before Haruka-chan, who was saying hello to them.

We had come to Cocoon City, by Saitama-Shintoshin Station.

“Thank you for always being so kind to my sister! I’m Haruka Hinami!”

“Hello. I’m Takahiro Mizusawa. You can be casual with me. Just call me Big Bro Takahiro.”

“‘B-B-Big Bro’?!”

His sudden friendliness shocked Haruka-chan. *So Mizusawa’s*

going with the usual. Roger that.

"U-um! I'm Fuka Kikuchi. I…" Kikuchi-san introduced herself next, and she was already bright red and unsure what to say, but then… "I'm…dating Tomozaki-kun."

"Huh?! You have a girlfriend, Tomozaki-san?!" This roaring flood of information overwhelmed Haruka-chan, and she looked between all of us and blinked repeatedly.

"I-is it that surprising…?" Kikuchi-san stuttered.

"B-but you said you like my sister…!"

"Huh…? You do? Fumiya-kun?!" Haruka-chan's blabbing left Kikuchi-san quite flustered.

What the heck is this? It hasn't even been a minute since they met, and already, we have major drama.

"N-no, not like that…"

"F-Fumiya-kun, what is she talking about…?!"

"Ha-ha-ha, you got this, Fumiya."

"S-so you're in a love triangle…?!"

"No!!"

Man, I knew it was a gamble to introduce these two, but I didn't mean like this.

* * *

About half an hour later…

"Geez… Why didn't you explain earlier?" said Haruka-chan.

"You didn't give me the chance to!" I protested.

Sitting down on some chairs near the escalator, I gave everyone the rundown on what I had talked about recently with Haruka-chan. Kikuchi-san understood as well, and it seemed that the baseless accusations had been cleared. But she still seemed a little huffy, and the way she told me off with a red face was very human. I mean, she *is* a human, of course, but thinking about it now, it had been a long time since I'd had a couple-y moment with Kikuchi-san. In that sense, I was thankful to Haruka-chan… Or was I? Mm, I don't think so, actually.

"H-how is it…?"

"Oh! That's cute; it looks good. I really like it."

"You l-li…?!"

In the clothing shop across the way, Haruka-chan was coming out of a changing room as Mizusawa did his playboy routine, making her blush bright red. *If you teach this sort of thing to a middle school girl, she might become a monster who can only be satisfied by experienced older men, you know?*

"Is that okay…?" Kikuchi-san asked.

"It is concerning…in many ways," I answered.

But she seems like she's having fun, so let's just say it's fine. Kikuchi-san was also giggling as she watched, and the mood was overall positive.

"Actually, this is my first time coming to Cocoon City," Kikuchi-san said.

"Oh, me too."

Cocoon City is a mall at Saitama-Shintoshin, and when I was in middle school, I often listened in as classmates around me talked about their recent weekend trips there with friends. In other words, I'd never gone myself, but I knew it's a place where middle schoolers would want to go.

With apparel shops, general stores, restaurants, a supermarket, and even a movie theater, this place was a proper mall, and it was big enough that it would take a full day to hit everything. The perfect place to go as a group on a weekend.

"Tomozaki-san, Big Sis Fuka-chan, I got some stuff!"

Haruka-chan must have liked that outfit quite a bit, as she was still wearing it when she skipped out of the store toward us.

"Hee-hee, it suits you perfectly," said Kikuchi-san.

"Right?!" she said cheerily, doing a spin to make the hem of her reddish-brown dress flutter. I don't know if it was because Kikuchi-san was also a girl or because Kikuchi-san was so warm, but Haruka-chan had quickly become attached to her.

"She's really opened up to you, hasn't she?" I said.

"Do you think?"

"Yeah. And you seem pretty used to it…"

It seemed like Kikuchi-san didn't totally get what I meant at first, but then she put a hand to her lips thoughtfully. "Ah," she said in realization. "It might be because I have a younger brother."

"Oh, I see."

Now that she mentioned it, that was a good point. Her hidden

big sister trait had activated, which made the scene even cuter. By the way, I'm technically an older brother, too, but I've generally failed to be big brotherly to my sister. In fact, she looks down on me, so I'm stuck without any big brother element to activate.

"Hey, Big Sis Fuka!"

"C-coming!"

When Haruka-chan took Kikuchi-san away from me, I sighed. At least Haruka-chan was having fun.

"You have such nice skin, Big Sis Fuka. Cool winter, right?!" Haruka-chan asked Kikuchi-san with sparkling eyes. Her terminology was a mystery. Something about winter being cold? We were in an area with a bunch of cosmetics shops.

"O-oh, do I…?"

"What's your skin care routine?"

I found myself listening in for no particular reason. I saw Kikuchi-san as a girl now, but I've always kind of seen her as fairy-like, too, so I couldn't really imagine her using things like makeup or skin care products.

"I… Oh, I buy those ones over there."

Then she walked slowly over and picked up a green box labeled INNISFREE.

"Oh! Innisfree! My friend mentioned that brand!"

"This set has toner, moisturizer, and cleanser, so it's easy to try out."

"Ohhh!"

This was definitely girl talk. I didn't know about the manufacturers or brands or whether they were any good, but it was a new experience to hear Kikuchi-san using those words.

"What do you do for makeup?"

"Makeup?" Kikuchi-san hesitated a moment and said, "I…don't use any primer or foundation. I just use some brightening sunscreen."

"But you look so good!"

Okay, so Kikuchi-san doesn't use primer or foundation and uses brightening sunscreen… Maybe I kinda get it? Not really.

"What about lipstick?!"

"For my lips, I've always just used the tinted lip balm from NIVEA…"

"Mm-hmm."

“Lately, I’ve been using the Paul & Joe lipstick.”

“‘Pauland’…?”

“Um, do you know the kitty lipstick?”

“Oh! Yeah, I do know that one!”

The two of them seemed to be getting into a discussion about cosmetics. I was glad to be able to listen and learn about Kikuchi-san, but I didn’t get any of it except for “NIVEA.”

“Oh, hey, you can’t wander off too far.”

“I-I’ll be fine!”

Kikuchi-san took Haruka-chan’s hand, and Haruka-chan was actually the one to get shyer about it. I don’t know how to describe it, but it was clear that Kikuchi-san was being very helpful to her.

But I gradually came to realize something.

“…”

Mizusawa was going around looking at clothes and stuff with Haruka-chan, making her blush like it was second nature.

Kikuchi-san was in full big-sister mode, getting Haruka-chan completely attached to her.

“Aww, I envy you, Fuka-chan. I’d like to hold hands with Haruka-chan, too.”

“Wh-wha…?!”

“Hey, Mizusawa-san, you’re making her uncomfortable.”

“Y-yeah…!”

While watching the three of them, I thought, *Hmm, hmm…*

Yep, it’s pretty clear. Even though I introduced them all, I’m the odd one out.

* * *

It was just about five o’clock, and we were in the food court at Cocoon City. We were all lining up for the different restaurants we wanted to eat at, and I had chosen a *tan tan* ramen shop.

I picked up my tray of *tan tan* noodles with extra sesame oil and carried it to the table where the others were. By the way, I’d already seen some terrible and relatable stories online such as “I got turned off when I saw my boyfriend in the food court anxiously looking around with his tray,” so I made sure I knew

exactly where our table was beforehand and headed straight over. That should avoid any disillusionment.

And so we sat at a table for four, with Mizusawa next to me, Kikuchi-san across from me, and Haruka-chan beside her, and we began eating our food.

By the way, Kikuchi-san and Haruka-chan were sitting side by side with matching cheese *dak-galbi*, and Mizusawa had chosen an extra-large beef bowl. He always eats a surprising amount.

“Um, these clothes—”

“After this—”

So the conversation went, mainly chatting about safe topics, and I made comments to show I was listening as I considered: Since I’d gone to the trouble of bringing these two with me, couldn’t I smoothly slide into the topic at hand?

But right as I thought that, Mizusawa took a glance at everyone’s faces, then said, “Oh, hey.” He pointed to Haruka-chan’s cheese *dak-galbi*. “So you like cheese, too?” He said it smoothly and in his usual tone, but I immediately caught on to what he was implying. We all know who the other person was.

“Ah-ha-ha… Yeah. I used to eat cheesecake and stuff with my sister quite a lot.”

“Ha-ha-ha, I knew it.”

Amazing as usual. I’m really glad he came, I thought as I expanded on that subject myself.

“Hey, since we’re all here, tell these two some stories about your sister.”

“Sure! Is there anything you’d like to ask?”

In fact, I had nothing but questions, and now I had to choose one.

Her past, her other sister, her effort, Oinko, and cheese. While thinking of the many elements that comprised Hinami, I recalled the video letter, the original trigger for this fallout with her. It didn’t have anything to do with cheese; I decided to ask this:

“So does your sister…get along with your mom and dad?”

The parent-child relationship. It’s a common psychoanalysis at this point—if your parents don’t love you when you’re little, it does stuff to your self-esteem or whatever. You see it all the time online.

While I’m a little skeptical of the idea that your self-esteem is

decided purely based on those relationships, I felt that clue would get me closest to the answer. Haruka-chan and her mother were the only ones in that video letter.

"Umm, our father hasn't been around since we were small…"

"Oh…I see."

I regretted my question, thinking that I must have touched on something inappropriate, but for some reason, Haruka-chan was smiling as if she was glad I asked. There was no indication she was bothered at all.

"Well, she was actually…"

And then she declared with shining eyes:

"…really close with our mom!"

Perhaps it would be going too far to say it was an unexpected answer, but I was taken aback by how strongly she replied.

I hadn't necessarily expected to hear that their relationship was bad, but still, I'd assumed that something was probably abnormal about their family. But Haruka-chan adored her sister so much, and Hinami was close with her mother as well, so I couldn't spot any room for friction.

Shooting a look at Mizusawa, I added another question for Haruka-chan. "Has she…always been?" If there was nothing more to the story with her mother, then any family issues could be connected to the absence of their father, which she'd casually mentioned, or…

"Yes!"

"Ha-ha-ha. You sound very sure," Mizusawa gently commented as he glanced in my direction with a raised eyebrow.

Haruka-chan affirmed it so enthusiastically, it was like she was saying they prided themselves on how close they were. Mizusawa must also have been surprised to be wrong.

"Umm, how have things been at home?" I continued.

"Mom really praises me and my sister a lot." Haruka-chan spoke as if she was thinking back on happy memories. "Ever since we were small, every single day… Well, maybe not quite that often, but still, she's always said those things to us."

"What kinds of things…?" Kikuchi-san asked. But for some reason—

Kikuchi-san had been listening to Haruka-chan with a gentle expression, the way you would with a little sister telling a sweet

story, but now her expression was gradually turning serious.

Haruka-chan blushed a little shyly. “Like, ‘That’s amazing,’ ‘You’re doing great,’ ‘Thank you for being born.’”

“Oh…I see.”

That was kinda extreme.

Kikuchi-san’s gaze remained fixed on Haruka-chan.

So this was actually the complete opposite from the common assumption. Now that I knew Hinami had been devotedly showered with love and affirmation, I wasn’t sure what to think.

It was a good thing that she had received a lot of praise. But it seemed to me a little unusual that she’d even heard the line *“Thank you for being born”* on the regular.

It could have given her extreme self-confidence or the emptiness she had now…but if you start arguing that anything can turn out the opposite of what you expect, you can connect whatever testimony you get to whatever result you want to derive. Deciding what you want first and then building your rationale is a dishonest approach.

I let go of my preconceived notions for the moment and reconsidered. “I see… So they’ve had a really good relationship.”

“Yes! Oh, and…” Haruka-chan gave a happy nod at my answer and started to continue. She looked and sounded so honest as she sent the truth I’d been speculating about fleeing from my grasp.

But then…

“…In other words.”

A murmur.

Her tone was piercing and serious, clashing with the mood at the table.

It was so quiet, just barely audible, so perhaps Haruka-chan, who was continuing to chatter happily away, hadn’t heard it.

Feeling something was off, I looked at the expression of the speaker.

“…She’s close with her mother…who has also spoken lots of words of affirmation…so that means…”

There was Kikuchi-san, her eyes lowered and her brow unusually wrinkled as she muttered softly. While she seemed like

she had absorbed what Haruka-chan had been saying, it was as if her thoughts were rapidly moving ahead.

“So then my sister—”

“The reason for her efforts is…acknowledgment.”

From Haruka-chan’s story, Kikuchi-san had picked out her family environment, and the words of acknowledgment within it.

When I glanced to the side, Mizusawa also seemed to have noticed that something was off, and both of us looked back and forth between Haruka-chan and Kikuchi-san, then at each other.

“…What’s that?” Mizusawa asked me.

“Um…”

I wasn’t sure how to put it, but I more or less understood what was going on.

Actually, more than that—I’d been hoping for this, somehow.

“I think something’s happening in Kikuchi-san’s head… With Alucia, I mean.”

“…What?”

That was Kikuchi-san’s writer face.

Where her eyes had been somber before, now they were flashing and wide, focused on nothing in particular.

“That’s why it seems like no matter what she did, she’s never wrong…”

She picked out pieces of the stories Haruka-chan was telling—about the parent-child relationship, the good times they shared—and put them together.

“So then…her having lost sight of it was an acquired trait…so rather, at first…”

I was wondering how this would turn out.

“—And that was what I wanted to talk about!” Eventually, Haruka-chan finished speaking. Her warm smile was a sharp contrast with Kikuchi-san beside her, whose expression was cold as ice. “I’d like to learn some things about my sister that I didn’t know!” Still with that warm smile, she turned to Kikuchi-san. “What do you think about my sister, Big Sis Fuka?”

“…Me?” Kikuchi-san answered calmly, even though the spotlight was suddenly shining on her. It was as if the depths of her eyes, filled with a mysterious air, reflected a different world. “The way I see Hinami-san…”

Eventually, she began to murmur softly as if she was sorting

out the thoughts in her mind, but her head still seemed to be a little in the clouds. She was sharp, akin to a predator calmly catching prey that had come within range.

“It’s not what I thought before—” Kikuchi-san was muttering like she was stirring up some settled sediment, observing it closely. She seemed far away, as if she were the only one moving as time around her was stopped. Kikuchi-san took a deep breath.

What she said was something neither Haruka-chan nor I could have expected.

“—I believe she is a girl who has lost her god.”

The statement was piercing.

I didn’t know what it meant. But the quiet weight of it was overwhelming.

Haruka-chan’s eyes were wide in amazement, either because of the strength of those words or maybe because it’d helped her understand something. It was as if Kikuchi-san’s words had sewn her to the spot.

“A warm family… Unconditional love. It…surprised me that she had those things.” Kikuchi-san remained expressionless.

But she spoke carefully, as if she wanted to be certain of each thing she said. “I’d even considered the possibility of a neglectful environment, or that her family had made some twisted impositions, but perhaps that isn’t the case… That means Hinami-san…was able to believe in someone, or in whatever it was behind that person.”

Murmuring and murmuring along—

—her voice came low and cloying, twining around as if her words had physical substance.

“At first, her heart was fulfilled by just one thing…and she wasn’t scared to face the world. If that single thing enabled her to understand that everything was okay…”

Neither I, nor Mizusawa, nor Haruka-chan could interrupt her.

“…then that would be like the sun to her.”

Instead of Kikuchi-san explaining this to us, it was more like she was confronting a vague, fog-like thing that lay behind a thin membrane, observing it closely, then going deeper into those

thoughts to give it form.

“Her foundation came from another, her world from another. Her happiness was taught to her by someone else. I’m sure her family was filled with more brightness and warmth than any other back then.” Her keen eyes continued to work, so as to not overlook even the slightest clues.

Her manner of speaking took on more of an edge, more urgent than before. “That’s why Hinami-san was perfect. So long as she was turned toward the sun like a sunflower, that was enough to enable her to be herself. Just by taking in the sun and absorbing it, she could be the world’s heroine.”

Her gaze pierced straight into Haruka-chan.

“But—”

As if slamming some complex glasswork into the hard and cold asphalt, Kikuchi-san said…

“—at some point, all that—”

…in a voice reminiscent of a spell chanted in a foreign land:

“—shattered to pieces.”

Her breath caught, and her voice faded out.

There was a choked sound like someone had failed to swallow, and Haruka-chan was staring at Kikuchi-san with sincere shock. Horror, even.

“…Goff, koff.”

“…Are you okay?”

Some saliva must have gotten in her windpipe, as she coughed and gasped shallowly. Even Mizusawa’s gentle question of concern seemed a little tense.

Seeing the two of them like that—maybe without even seeing that—maybe I’d understood just from what was said.

—Most likely, Kikuchi-san’s words had crossed a line.

I cut in to stop her. “Kikuchi-san, that’s—”

But Haruka-chan held me back. “Wait…please.”

She couldn’t continue after that. No—maybe it was more accurate to say that she didn’t know what she should say anymore.

Pressing her throat and trying not to cough, she was looking up at Kikuchi-san as if she was clinging to something so she wouldn’t be shaken off.

“…Haruka-chan?” I said.

But her gaze never left Kikuchi-san.

Eventually, as if she was frightened but also somehow expectant—she asked Kikuchi-san:

“How can you tell?”

A shiver ran over my skin.

The question wasn’t very difficult to understand.

What Kikuchi-san said rang true.

Just like how during that play, the lines Kikuchi-san had written had reached past Hinami’s mask.

Kikuchi-san’s powers of imagination had arrived at the same image of Aoi Hinami that Haruka-chan possessed.

“Um, you’re completely right, Big Sis Fuka…,” Haruka-chan began slowly with trepidation, her voice clearly trembling.

Eventually, it came out like a confession.

“Our family—is a little strange.”

Right then—

“Haruka-chan…?!”

Mizusawa was the first to notice something wrong, and I followed his gaze and saw it, too.

Finally, Haruka-chan noticed a beat after.

“…Wait, huh?”

Haruka-chan’s eyes—were shining wetly.

“Huh…? Ah… I-I’m sorry…!” The look in Kikuchi-san’s eyes changed as if she’d suddenly snapped out of a trance. She sounded panicked, but Haruka-chan’s tears showed no signs of stopping, spilling out as she began to cry right there.

“Haruka-chan, are you okay?” Mizusawa asked gently in concern.

“Y-yeah…” She put on a smile like it was nothing and just scrubbed at her face, as if her tears were something we shouldn’t see.

“It’s not nothing, come on.” Mizusawa offered her a pack of tissues he’d gotten somewhere, clearly used to dealing with this sort of incident, but he still looked baffled. If you didn’t know the background here, you wouldn’t even be able to guess why this was happening.

But I was the one person who most likely had an idea of the reason for those tears.

A warm family.

Something they had believed in.



And those words like a curse—that it had shattered to pieces.

Of course Haruka-chan was shaken up.

Most likely, Kikuchi-san's observation had brought back—

—the memories of her departed sister.

But of course, there was no way the others would know that. I'm sure Haruka-chan wasn't even aware that I knew.

"It's okay… It's okay…!"

Unable to talk about any of it, Haruka-chan continued to cry for a while, just dealing with her loneliness and misery alone.

* * *

"Thank you very much for today! And I'm sorry for breaking down like that!"

Omiya Station.

We got off for a moment to change trains, and then the day came to an end with the group heading in two different directions.

"Oh, no, I'm really glad we were able to talk about this stuff. It's all right, so don't worry," I said, hoping to patch up what my girlfriend had done.

Mizusawa joined in to help. "We're all friends who want to help your sister somehow. So let's keep in touch."

"…Yeah! Thank you very much!"

Mizusawa's remark did a good job of emphasizing our camaraderie, and it made the incident that had just occurred fade into the past.

But—

"…I'm sorry."

The person who had caused it was only able to apologize quietly in a voice that Haruka-chan may not have even heard.

As I was gazing at Kikuchi-san's profile, Mizusawa poke-poked at my shoulder. "Fumiya," he said in a whisper.

"…Yeah?" I replied in the same tone.

"This is it for today, but…" He looked over at Kikuchi-san. "—

Make sure things are okay with her?”

* * *

Kikuchi-san and I were walking around Kita-Asaka.

“…I really am sorry for today,” she said.

“No, it’s okay. I mean, I was the one who invited you, so it’s my fault, too. And I did kind of think that something like this might happen.” While I was nodding, my feelings were complicated.

I still hadn’t sorted out how I should take it all—the things that had happened that day, Kikuchi-san’s words, Haruka-chan’s tears.

“Before I knew it, I was going out of control, and I couldn’t stop…,” Kikuchi-san said regretfully. “…I really am the worst.”

What should I say to her?

Should I admonish her for the things she had said? Should I say tell her she went too far and caused what had happened?

Or should I thank her instead for doing a good job?

No—more than that.

“…I think maybe it was unavoidable,” I said.

“Huh…?” Kikuchi-san’s eyes were wide as I looked back at her.

“I think…that’s probably your karma.” We just had to face it.

Just as I bore the karma of taking responsibility on my own, with no choice but to live in solitude in exchange for freedom—

I think that a certain type of person will have something like an unchangeable kind of karma.

If boldly driving into others’ hearts to weave her stories and deepen her world was Kikuchi-san’s karma—then I couldn’t reject that about her.

That would be like rejecting myself as a gamer.

“…You put so much emotion in it, and you were absorbed into it. Writing stories really is your true desire, after all.”

I didn’t know if this could be called the right thing, or if it was something she should be pushing forward with. But I honestly believed this was her real nature.

So then at the very least—I couldn’t do something that would reject her very way of being.

Surely, we should be considering how to coexist with it.

“I…hope you’re right.” Her expression did not clear.

I was a little troubled, but I put on a smile. “Yeah, I am.”

“Um—Fumiya-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“Recently…I said there’s just one thing I don’t understand, didn’t I?” she said, head hanging. “Rewriting the novel *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream* and looking at the characters, there’s still one thing I don’t understand.”

Now that she mentioned that, I recalled our conversation the other day. “That was Hinami’s motive, right?”

“Yes.” She nodded, and then her expression stiffened up as if she was steeling herself.

Eventually, her feet came to a stop.

“That’s what I thought it was, too, *back then*.” Her voice seemed to make the shadows shiver.

Just a few steps ahead, I halted and turned to face her.

As she stood there, her back was hunched and her head hanging, and she looked rather small.

“…I was mistaken,” she said regretfully, biting her lip. “The motive I actually need to know isn’t that one… I realized that today.”

“Not…that one?” I repeated.

She nodded like a small, weak creature. “It was never Hinami-san’s motive.” Her voice was quiet and beautiful, but it gave a sense of deep despair.

Kikuchi-san gazed at her palms with clear eyes, as if she would gently scoop up that sunken sediment—

—so that she could paint over her own heart with the mud she’d stirred up and scooped out.

Her voice was cold.

“—It was my motive.”

I could feel that chill close to my core.

“I think I’m making it seem as if I regret hurting someone. Really, I was pretending not to see—”

Her lips were upturned in self-loathing.

She gripped the hem of her clothing tightly, regretfully.

“I was pretending not to see that words don’t only bring color to the world. That they can also bring pain.”

Decisively, as if engraving a hidden truth into herself, she said:

“I was pretending not to see that the messages I placed in those stories, the words I had those characters say—would hurt someone. Multiple people.”

That was surely a confession—
—of her karma—or of her insincerity.

“This isn’t just about Hinami-san. Even today, just because I was curious about people’s motives, I dug up painful feelings from a girl younger than me. I told myself that I didn’t have a choice, since it was for my writing.” She bit her lip regretfully. “… I hurt her so badly.”

It’s true. It painted a shocking picture.

Kikuchi-san’s words had manipulated a girl’s feelings in a direction that wasn’t necessarily good. With the engine called karma, driving the caterpillar tread of her imagination—with the power of words that were cruel enough to crush everything—she had ground Haruka-chan’s heart into a mess.

It had been Kikuchi-san’s words that had pulled out the sad memories lurking within Haruka-chan. Maybe some of those feelings had been purified and sublimated by those tears. But it was still a rough way to treat the wound, like burning off the affected part with liquid nitrogen.

“I love Andi’s works, and that’s why I wanted to write…”

Kikuchi-san had said that when we first met—that she loved Andi’s books for showing her such a colorful world. That she wanted to write books, too.

“…but those are just the aspirations of a child.” She shook her head. “I think the world of a child is too small for what I’m trying to do now…”

“Well…” I started denying it, but then I stopped.

The way Kikuchi-san felt about her book and the words that resulted from that had already gone beyond what one person could take responsibility for. It was affecting others.

“…Will you tell me, Fumiya-kun?” Kikuchi-san bit her lip, and imploringly—weakly, like a swing with one chain broken, like she was relying on me—

“What I want to do—”

Pasting on a crumbling smile, she said:

“—writing a novel—is it something I should really prioritize over people’s feelings?”

Her question was like a hollow cry echoing into a dark ravine.

“I don’t know. All I have is my love for it. I don’t have any reason beyond that.”

And then as if turning the gray scenery into words—

—she voiced her tangled, twisted struggle.

“—Why do I write stories in the first place?”

Her question was filled with urgency, as if she was questioning the root of her own existence.

“If I don’t know that…I may not be able to proceed.”

At the same time, I had a feeling it was similar to the important thing I was searching for right now, for someone else’s sake.

* * *

That night.

After parting ways with Kikuchi-san, unusually, I was sitting alone on a swing in the park in Kitayono.

I wasn’t doing anything, really. But I had too many things to

think about, and I didn't feel ready to go back to my life. I wanted some time where I could just zone out and be alone.

People seek reasons in order to move forward.

If the desire to do something is an engine, and the ability to push forward is the wheels running on the ground—
—then the reason is the gears that connect those two.
Even if you have the feelings and the ability, like Kikuchi-san, losing the reason makes it hard to move forward anyway.
On the other hand, as long as you don't lose track of your reason, you can slowly move forward even if the wheels are a mess. If you keep making progress, you might eventually reach a major milestone.

At the end of the day, as long as people have some unshakable reason, they can move forward.
Conversely, if they lose that reason, then whatever they have will wind up empty.

I'm sure that was the case for Aoi Hinami, too.

"Our family is—a little strange."

Those words had stuck with me.
"Strange…huh."
If the reason was the gears—then Hinami and Haruka-chan must have gotten their reasons from a family that was a little strange.
I recalled Kikuchi-san's quiet words when Haruka-chan had told us her story.

"That means Hinami-san…was able to believe in someone, or in whatever it was behind that person.
"If that single thing enabled her to understand that everything was okay…
"…then that would be like the sun to her."

If that something that was like the sun had been Hinami's reason—the same way Hinami's brilliance was Haruka-chan's sun—then Hinami would also have been moving toward that brilliance at some point.

—If it had shattered to pieces—then what exactly did that mean?

When I heard those words, I had immediately thought of their dead sister. But if what had broken was the "sun that Hinami believed in," then that conclusion didn't quite feel right.

It wasn't impossible for a younger sister to be like the sun, but it wasn't the typical order of things.

So then—what had those words been referring to?

What had Hinami lost?

After what happened, I had immediately sent a concerned DM to Haruka-chan, but I still hadn't received a response. We had clearly dug into a vulnerable part of her heart and done something pretty bad. I'd thought the conversation could be a balm or an antidote, but perhaps the poison of it was lingering quite badly.

"…Agh, what a mess."

I had a mountain of things to consider. I did think that if I told Kikuchi-san about what was bothering me right now, if I borrowed her powers of insight and imagination, then we might arrive at the answer very quickly. But she was worrying over her own karma right now. She was probably too upset, and I figured I shouldn't rely on her.

"So then…here I am."

On my own, by myself, taking solo responsibility.

Maybe life is always like that in the end.

"Whoa!!"

—And then something hit my back hard enough to make my vision shake.

Sudden violence in a park at night usually means life-threatening danger, but that voice and that impact were too familiar for that. I also remembered that this was Kitayono. I knew who it was before I even turned around.

"What're you doing, Mimimi?"



Standing there in a sporty windbreaker and running shoes was Mimimi.

“Ohhh! Fancy meeting you here,” she said.

“Did you happen to pass by…? Why are you here?”

She gave me a questioning look. “Hey, that should be my line, though?”

“Huh?”

She roughly grabbed the chain of the swing I was sitting on and rattled it, rattling me along with it. I made pathetic flustered noises.

“I bet you’ve been here for over half an hour, haven’t you?”

Now that she mentioned it, I pulled out my phone and checked the time. “Huh? How did you know?” In fact, it might have been more than an hour. I’m a guy who takes his time thinking.

“I knew it.” She sighed and then sat down on the swing next to me. “I was going for a run around here, but when I left, there was someone sitting on the swings who was definitely not a kid. Mighty suspicious.”

“Urk…” She’d thought I was suspicious. *Man, I’ve had a lot of people suspecting me of being some weirdo lately, haven’t I?*

“And then he was still sitting there even after I came circling back…so I was wondering if I should call the cops…”

“Someone almost called the cops on me again?!” I shot back as I leaped out of my seat on the swing.

“What do you mean, ‘again’?” Mimimi tilted her head.

Seems like my fate is to be reported these days. Not a fate I want.

“Anyway, I looked a little closer and realized it was you.”

“Agh… I’m glad the suspicions were cleared,” I said, sitting back down again. The chain quietly clinked, and I took a breath.

“But actually, I’ve seen you around quite a bit, Brain!”

“Huh? Really?” I said, though I was thinking, *Then just say hi.*

“But you were with your sister and stuff… Oh, and then, like, you started dating Fuka-chan, so it made me wanna hold off, right?”

“Ahh…” Back when I was making Kikuchi-san worried and lonely, Mimimi had resisted going home with me after school from Kitayono.

“Even now, coming over when you’re alone kind of feels a little against the rules.”

“You don’t have to worry about it so—,” I started to say, but reconsidered. That wasn’t just for me to decide. “Or… I don’t know…”

As I started to fret seriously about it, Mimimi sounded even more flustered. “A-and, like, just the other day! I went and glomped you right in front of Fuka-chan!”

“Ah…yeah, there was that.”

“W-was that okay? I—I wasn’t even thinking! What a bungle! It was excessive—excessive touching!!” She seemed to really regret that particular incident.

“I think…it’s probably fine. Kikuchi-san was laughing,” I said.

“R-really?! But girls smile most when they’re suffering…!”

“That sounds like you’re speaking from personal experience, so I’m not sure what to say now…”

Even being an otaku and ignorant in the ways of girls, I’d known Mimimi long enough to recognize that she was the type.

“But if Fuka-chan isn’t bothered by it, then I’m relieved!” she said.

As we chatted, I was impressed. Mimimi wasn’t just trying to have a good time—she was trying to change her behavior to adjust to our changing relationships.

“…Thanks,” I said quietly.

Mimimi grinned and whopped her chest. “No prob!”

And so I returned to the subject at hand, partly to direct the conversation away from that. “But then…why did you talk to me this time?”

“Ah-ha-ha. You don’t know?”

I had no idea, and when I frowned back at her, Mimimi gave me a teasing smile. “’Cause it was so clear that I could tell even from a distance that you have a problem!”

“Urk…”

Now that she pointed it out, I was embarrassed. It’s always bugged me when people take their anger out on objects or make a big deal out of being in a bad mood to get attention from others. As I realized I’d been doing something similar, my face burned. Of course someone would assume I’d planted myself on the swing for an hour because I was waiting to be found.

“If a grown man is sitting alone on a swing, you generally assume that it’s because he’s been dumped by his girlfriend or

laid off!”

“Urk…but it’s neither.”

“Ah-ha-ha! I guess not in your case!” Mimimi cackled. With that natural smile still on her face, she faced forward and waited for me to talk.

That’s why I decided to tell her.

“…The truth is…”

About how I’d waited in front of Hinami’s house and met her little sister, Haruka-chan.

About our outing with Kikuchi-san and Mizusawa, and what Kikuchi-san had made Haruka-chan face there.

About the strain that had created—and about Kikuchi-san considering her reason to write novels.

On the swaying swing, Mimimi patiently listened to me talk.

“Hmm, I see.” She tilted her head and thought. “Frankly, I can’t answer those hard questions about what happened in Aoi’s past or what Fuka-chan should prioritize. Using your head is *your* specialty after all, Brain!” Mimimi spread a hand in front of her, palm out, to look at her nails. “But you know, I think I get some of those things better than you.”

“Like what?”

Mimimi relaxed, dropping her hand down onto her windbreaker. The dry, lonely scrunching sound rang through the crisp air of the park.

“Like Haruka-chan’s feelings!”

Mimimi stood up on the swing and shook the chains, making them clank. “You know…I’ve always felt that way, too.”

“…How?”

She looked up at the stars and the moon from a spot that was a little closer to the sky than usual. “That I’d like to be like Aoi.”

The pallid light of the stars quietly fell upon Mimimi’s porcelainlike skin. “She’s just that kind of person. She shines bright, but you can never reach her. And then at the most unexpected times, she’ll say something to you that’s sincerely motivating. I love that about her.”

I could understand what she said so well it hurt.

“So I get it. I think—right now, Haruka-chan isn’t just worried… I think she’s scared.”

“Scared?”

“Yeah. —Hup!”

Mimimi bounded down from the swing, and the chains rattled and swung around. The sound of her running shoes crunching on gravel filled the empty park.

“I don’t think she wants to imagine that someone who shines as bright as Aoi could be wrong.”

“…Of course,” I said, since that made sense to me.

“Do you really understand, Brain?”

“Huh?”

Mimimi’s brought her face near. I looked away, having her so close. “When someone you admire is unhappy, you know—it’s the same thing as being unhappy yourself.”

“Umm. Is that something like…your favorite band member’s happiness being your own?”

“Hmm…that’s half right, but half nothing like that.”

“Urk…”

Nothing like that? Mimimi’s pop quizzes are hard.

“I mean, when someone is your role model, you want to be like them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“If the person you have as your role model seems unhappy, what do you think will happen to you, then?”

“Ah…” Then I got it.

Well, I don’t have any celebrities I’m a fan of or anything—but if you’re talking about a role model, then I do have someone. “You mean that if your role model is wrong, you can’t be happy even if you do your best to become like them.”

“That’s what I mean!” Mimimi spun around, sitting down on the swing fence. “The important thing is that you can’t believe in that anymore.”

“You can’t believe in it anymore…”

“If you were so sure that something was right and then that belief gets shaken, then you wind up feeling like you’re wrong no matter what, right?”

It seemed intuitive and yet also very logical. People would project themselves on their idols and see their ideal selves. When

the one they admire is unhappy, would they be able to believe in their own happiness?

I remembered when Hinami had pointed to her own head and boasted that she had a strategy guide right there. I had found my answers in Hinami's accomplishments and in her overflowing confidence, and she became my role model in my efforts. It's fair to say that was because I could believe in Aoi Hinami, in NO NAME.

If I'd seen Hinami fall from grace—then of course I couldn't keep playing the game of life through her methods.

"So I don't think Haruka-chan wants to believe that her perfect big sister's story is a lie, either."

"I see…" I had the feeling Mimimi was referring to Kikuchi-san's words about her sun being destroyed.

"I think…Hinami has noticed how Haruka-chan feels, too."

"She must have." Even though Haruka-chan admired her, Hinami was still unable to get back up on her feet, and she was cooped up at home spending all her time playing *Atafami*. There was no way that Aoi Hinami, who had once aimed for perfection, would want that.

"Hey, Brain."

I could sense the gentle determination in her voice, and I had the feeling she was thinking the same thing as me.

"Friends help each other, right?" Mimimi's expression was filled with hope, despite the situation.

So I stopped leaning on the swing, too.

I gave the chain a rattle and met her gaze.

"Aoi has helped me so much, but I haven't been able to do anything for her at all." There was no calculation or self-interest in her expression—just kindness as she looked straight at me. "So I want to help her."

And her smile was gentle but filled with determination. "I want to be friends with Aoi in the real sense."

"…Yeah. I get it."

And then Mimimi said mischievously, "Hey, Tomozaki, do you remember what led to us becoming friends?"

"Huh? That time we talked in the home-ec room?"

"Not that! What led to us becoming even better friends!" Happily, nostalgically, she said, "It was the student council!"

“…Ah.”

Even though she was talking about the past, Mimimi’s eyes were facing straight ahead. “Hey, Tomozaki. No—Brain!”

And then she said with energy:

“Why don’t the two of us give it another shot? —The student council, I mean!”

4

No matter how leveled you are, it's game over if you get bad RNG

It was the next day, after school on a Monday.

We were marching into the student council room.

"I beggeth your pardon! Yield your signboard to me!" Mimimi declared loudly like a dojo-busting swordsman as she slapped the door open.

Cut it out, don't make weird demands.

"Mimimi-senpai, what's the matter?"

The student council (I assumed) all started murmuring to one another at the sudden intrusion. There were about five students and one teacher in the room, and all eyes were gathered on us.

"Heh-heh-heh, aid hath come!"

"Pardon?"

Mimimi was being silly even to the younger student who had kindly addressed her, leaving her with a blank expression. Despite that, Mimimi's still so popular—earning that goodwill on a daily basis is important, huh.

As for me, while attention was focused on Mimimi, I was observing the situation in the room. For a new quest, you observe first. Those teachings from my master are ingrained in me now.

The students had pulled their desks to face each other. Some were playing board games, while others acted like they were doing work on their computers, but they were actually just talking to some chatbots or whatever. Nobody seemed to be actually doing their jobs.

I didn't know if it had been like this pre-Hinami or if it had started after she was gone, but it was most likely the latter. I got the sense that without the central figure keeping them moving, they had run out of gas.

"Um, what do you mean, 'aid'...?" one of the student council

members asked.

"Aid for the student council, of course!"

Some of the students got excited. "Yeah!"

Well, Mimimi had gone up against Hinami during the student council election. Even though she'd lost, she had left quite an impact, and now she'd shown up just when they needed her. She was perfect for this job; no one was better to fill the hole Hinami had left.

"Um… The truth is, we're in a little trouble right now."

"You can make things work out somehow, right, Mimimi-senpai…?"

One after another, the student council members were falling into agreement. I'd been thinking that nanashi could step in if a disagreement started, but it seemed things would be okay.

"Hey, hold on there." Putting a halt to this trend was Muramatsu-sensei, the student council teacher advisor. He was a well-built male teacher in his forties, and I seemed to recall he was in charge of the advanced class. His lips were drawn in a hard line that expressed a certain firmness of will. He looked like a rather tough person to negotiate with.

"What's the matter, Muramatsu-sensei?" Mimimi said brightly.

Furrowing his thick eyebrows, Muramatsu-sensei took a step closer to Mimimi. "It's true you could help. But we can't let in someone who's not a member of student council."

There was the thick wall: *It's the rules.* Well, as the teacher in charge, he had to hold the line. While I considered how to deal with this, I watched to see what Mimimi would do.

"But when I lost the student council election, you said I didn't have to be the president to join the council—right?"

"Ahh, I do seem to recall that…," Muramatsu-sensei said, cocking his head. "But you refused, didn't you?"

"I did!"

So you said no? That's no good.

If we needed to play semantics for this negotiation, then it was my turn to step in, but as I was considering various approaches, Mimimi kept talking. "And back then, you said to me, 'If you change your mind, then come any time!'"

"Agh. It's true, I do think I said that…" Muramatsu-sensei's expression was spasming.

Eventually, Mimimi said with a smug look, “—And now I’ve changed my mind!”

“Hey now, look…”

Seeing Muramatsu-sensei’s reaction, an idea struck me. “Um…” And I joined in with a rather conspiratorial tone. “If you invited her beforehand, then I don’t think it would count as giving Nanami-san special treatment.”

Most likely, Muramatsu-sensei wasn’t actually worried about Mimimi joining the student council. In their current state, they would probably welcome her right now.

However, this would set a precedent for allowing someone to join partway through the year on someone’s discretion. As the teacher in charge, he must have figured that he couldn’t make exceptions.

Put another way: Our interests were most likely aligned in the sense that we might be able to get this stalled student council going again.

I decided to give him an excuse and to propose a line to connect the two points. “I assume this kind of situation is why you left the door open for her in the first place…”

“Hmm… Well, you could look at it that way… Hmm…”

And as that excuse led him toward my goal, Muramatsu-sensei’s lips relaxed out of that hard line.

Then Mimimi followed up with another blow, just for insurance.

“Please!! That’s!! Exactly right!!”

Another blow for insurance. In other words, sincerity and volume. A loud voice makes you ten times more convincing.

Eventually, Muramatsu-sensei raised both eyebrows and let out a little sigh. “Well, frankly…I was thinking we might not even be able to keep the event running…” Then he surveyed the rest of the council, and they actually seemed excited at the arrival of this unexpected ace. “It seems nobody opposes it, and your help would save us.”

“Thank you very much!” I exclaimed along with Mimimi.

Then she declared loudly, “All right, ladies and gentlemen! Please welcome Minami Nanami, appointed as the substitute student council president!”

“Did you just appoint yourself to an important position?!”

“Which means—what about you, Tomozaki?” Mimimi said excitedly as she laughed and jab-jabbed at my side with her elbow.

I sighed at her. But eventually, remembering the fun times we’d had, a smile spilled out of me. “I’m the Brain, right?”

“You got it!”

Ding, ding, ding, ding. Her smile was genuinely happy, with none of her earlier reservations.

“I’ll be counting on you!” Mimimi said, raising her hands to the sky.

“Yeah, yeah, likewise.”

While my reply was careless, the truth was that this was a shot in the arm for me, too. Back when we’d been playing that game, I’d been sincerely enjoying myself.

—Clap.

The sound of us sealing our relationship as accomplices rang out pleasantly in the student council room.

* * *

“All righty then, Brain, so then what shall we do?”

“Ha-ha-ha, you’re still a no-brain, huh.”

On the way back that day, we were having a strategy meeting as we walked.

“Of course! That’s what you’re here for!”

But still, what we were thinking of wasn’t that complicated.

I’d asked Mimimi to get the situation from the student council members, and from what I’d heard from her, it seemed that the student council had mainly been relying on Hinami’s connections to come up with guest candidates for the career-path seminar, and then they contacted them one by one. But Hinami had vanished halfway through the process, and everyone they had reached out to had refused, they’d said.

Hmm, hmm…

“So that’s why they haven’t made any progress,” I said.

“It’s actually getting me excited to not have anyone taking over!” Mimimi chuckled, and I laughed back.

“Then…I think the question’ll be who we invite. Is there

anyone you can think of?”

“Hmmm. You mean it should be someone as famous as possible, right?”

“Probably…from what I’ve heard.”

I’d had absolutely no interest in the event, after all. I’d basically forgotten everything about my time at school before I started playing the game of life, since every day back then had just been “nothing happening” to me, so I functionally only had one day’s worth of memory. In other words, that also meant that I wasn’t wasting my memory allocation. Jealous, aren’t you?

“My mom works for a beauty company,” Mimimi said, “and she might know some people in the industry…but a model isn’t quite who you want to invite for something like this, huh.”

“Hmm, I feel like it’s not out of the question…but I’m not sure.” It didn’t feel like it was the absolute right answer. Also, it seemed like it would cost a lot of money.

“But what about you, Brain—? You don’t have anyone? Like a famous person you know!”

“No, I—,” I started to say, and then I realized. “Ah.”

Oh yeah. Recently, I had taken a step into the adult world, which had been unknown to me. I had even spoken with people from that world.

And I felt like there was one person there who would fit that perfectly.

“Ohhh! So there was someone!”

I nodded, and after thinking about it realistically—I figured it wasn’t actually a bad plan.

That profession would probably be popular with high school students, he was probably used to talking in front of people, and most of all, it would be easy for me to ask him.

“I might have someone. And he’s someone I’d like to ask more about his job myself.”

* * *

It was lunch break the next day.

“I see… For the student council.”

“Yeah. So I had to tell you, Kikuchi-san.”

“Oh…thank you.”

I’d come to the library for the first time in quite a while, sharing with Kikuchi-san the conversation I’d had with Mimimi.

I was telling her what I’d mentioned about Haruka-chan, and the matter of helping the student council.

“But that’s rather interesting,” she said as she set down an astronomy book. “So when the person you have as a role model is unhappy, then…”

“…Yeah?” *So that’s what she’s interested in*, I thought. Kikuchi-san was not talking about the student council, but my conversation with Mimimi before that.

That remark must have pulled at her heartstrings, as she repeated it and lowered her eyes thoughtfully before eventually lifting her chin like she’d suddenly realized something. “Um…so then will the career-path seminar…be all right?” She changed the subject.

“Oh yeah. Actually, I already have an idea about that.” I nodded.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, really? A guest, you mean?”

“Yeah. I’d like to ask someone I got to know at a meetup recently. So next time I see him, I was thinking I could go to a tournament and discuss it…”

“A tournament… I see.” That must have made her figure out who I wanted to invite.

But at the same time, I could also see her expression grow somber. “Um…at the tournament…… No, never mind, actually.” She started to say something and then stopped, unsure.

So I said it myself. “Um, Kikuchi-san. I’d like you to come with me.”

“Huh…?” Her eyes widened. “B-but I’m not in the student council…”

“Neither am I.” I was just the Brain for the impromptu student council president substitute.

“But…”

“I don’t want to worry you.”

Kikuchi-san’s lips opened in a little gasp.

I’m sure she was about to ask whether Rena-chan would be at that tournament. And maybe she was also worried about me going there alone with Mimimi.

I wanted to do my own thing and also show care to my girlfriend, Kikuchi-san—so I wanted to think carefully and keep everything in balance as I moved forward.

That's how you battle with life, I think.

* * *

The following Sunday, I had come to the event venue in the city with Kikuchi-san and Mimimi.

"Ohhh! So this is where they hold tournaments!"

"It's so big…"

Mimimi and Kikuchi-san made comments about the place as they looked around.

We were at an esports studio in Ikebukuro with a black and white interior, and there were about eighty gaming PCs and monitors lined up. We wouldn't be using all of them, but apparently, they came with the space if you rented it. At the front was a stage for streaming, with a giant multidisplay installed.

An *Atafami* tournament run by volunteers was about to be held there.

"This is my first time here," I said. "This is cooler than I expected."

"For sure! It's so pretty in here!"

Mimimi agreed, so it was probably safe to assume it actually was cool. After all, I'm the kind of geek who would buy a sewing set with a dragon on it. By the way, Kikuchi-san seemed overwhelmed, as if the place was swallowing her up, so it wasn't like everyone would have the same opinion.

Though the tournament that day was going to be smaller than the ones held on major long weekends and such, the small- to medium-scale environment was set up for streaming on YouTube.

And I had come here together with Mimimi because—

"Hey, nanashi-kun."

—the pro gamer I was after was attending.

"Ah, Ashigaru-san. Nice to see you."

The person I was hoping to ask to be our guest for the career-path seminar was none other than Ashigaru-san.

Pro gamer was a new type of profession, and the title would

most likely draw interest from high school students. Since he filmed himself talking in videos and streams, there also shouldn't be any complaints about his ability to talk on stage. If we could set up an opportunity to show off his skills, like the *enka* singer who'd come the previous year, then letting him play on a projector or something might be an easy way to get people excited.

In other words, he was the perfect man for the job.

"Sorry for making you come all the way here." Ashigaru-san glanced over toward Kikuchi-san and Mimimi. "I met your girlfriend before, and… Are you a classmate of nanashi-kun's?"

"Huh? Ah, yes!" Mimimi seemed momentarily confused by the unfamiliar word *nanashi*, but she figured it out right away and nodded. She's as quick on the uptake as I'd expect.

"Nice to meet you. I'm the *Atafami* player, Ashigaru… Hmm, it's embarrassing to call myself that to a high school girl."

"Nice to meet you! I'm a classmate of the guy you called nanashi, Mimimi!"

"M-Mimimi…?"

Ashigaru-san had been embarrassed at introducing himself by his handle, but it seemed that was no problem with Mimimi. This was a pretty unique exchange.

As I was thinking this, for some reason, Ashigaru-san looked between me and Mimimi, then fell into thought about something.

"Man…nanashi-kun…you really…," he said calmly but in a somber tone. He was probably thinking about how I'd not only brought my girlfriend last time, but now I was bringing another girl, too…

"It's not like that. The student council is running an event, and Mimimi and I are in charge of it," I said, making excuses for myself.

Ashigaru-san paused a moment, hmming. "Ha-ha-ha, it's fine. Just watch you don't get yourself canceled."

"C'mon!"

Mimimi and Kikuchi-san didn't quite get it and were staring blankly. Fortunately.

"But anyway, more importantly!" I said.

"Oh, did you want to talk?"

"Yeah. I wanted to get it done before the event starts."

As we were chatting, one of the managing staff called out, “Ashigaru-san!” in an impatient tone. “Can I ask you to commentate for the opening?!”

“Ahh, sure… Sorry, nanashi-kun, can you wait a little?”

“Yeah, okay.”

He headed to the streaming commentator’s seat.

“He’s a popular guy…huh,” said Mimimi.

“Well, he is a major pro gamer, and a YouTuber…”

I looked at Ashigaru-san, who took a seat at the commentator’s chair to the side of the stage and adjusted his headset. He wasn’t too far away. He glanced over at us while saying something to a guy who was a little younger than me—he had to be staff or something.

“So then let’s watch for a bit as we wait,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Mimimi agreed.

“O-okay!”

Mimimi and Kikuchi-san sat down with me in the audience seating. Their eyes were on the commentator’s seat.

Ashigaru-san shared specialized knowledge, making things fun for the audience with the odd joke. Well, Ashigaru-san was the type of pro gamer who regularly uploaded videos for entertainment purposes, but this ability is definitely one of his assets as an entertainer.

“…You want to be like that, too, right, Fumiya-kun?” said Kikuchi-san.

“Yeah. A pro gamer.”

Ashigaru-san started giving the rundown on the competitors participating in the tournament. You could tell even from over here how his expression and voice brightened… As I watched him, I thought vaguely to myself—

So what sort of pro gamer do I really want to be?

* * *

“What’re you up to, Brain?” Mimimi asked me as I was on my phone in the audience seats. “DMing girls?! You’re cheating?! You’re making moves?!”

“No, that’s not it. Don’t talk like Mizusawa.” I openly showed

her the screen.

“Ah…”

“I’m messaging Haruka-chan.”

It had been a week since I had sent Haruka-chan that concerned message after coming back from Cocoon City. She still had yet to reply. But I continued to make an effort to text her sometimes so it would be easier for her to respond once she had sorted out her feelings.

“I said we’re trying to help out her sister’s student council.”

“…I see.”

Today, we had taken over a project that had stalled because of Hinami’s absence, and we had come to ask someone to be a guest. I had wanted to tell Haruka-chan about that, especially since she’d followed in her sister’s footsteps as a student council president herself.

“Since we *have* inherited Hinami’s story as the perfect student council president.”

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s right.”

The three of us had come together for more than just helping the student council… There was the very important reason of protecting what Haruka-chan believed in.

“She’s still in middle school, after all. I’ll be her listening ear, too, if anything happens!” said Mimimi. She maintained a comfortable distance—not intruding too much while also not being apathetic. She always did her best to respect others with her actions, and she would say just the right thing. At the moment, I was making this situation an excuse to take advantage of that.

“…Yeah, thanks.”

“Huh? Fumiya-kuuun.” A nasally voice tickled my neck. “You decided to come? It’s been so long.”

“Whoa?! …Hey, Rena-chan.”

“?!” Kikuchi-san’s shoulders twitched at the name. Well, that was no wonder.

The person walking up to us was indeed Rena-chan.

She was wearing clothes that hugged the lines of her body, as usual, with something like a collared shirt underneath it today, giving both a fake sense of modesty and sexiness at the same time. She had what I guess you’d call a hairband on her head,

with a sort of goth-ish hair decoration on it—it gave her the air of an alt girl who nerdy guys would go crazy over. I had run into the person I least wanted to see in a place like this.

Kikuchi-san was clearly tense.

“Someone you know, Brain…?” Mimimi asked.

“Yeah, more or less…”

“Huh…”

I had hardly said anything, but that was enough for Mimimi to give me a really serious look. Rena’s existence itself had to make her an enemy of women. I thought so, too.

“F-Fumiya-kun…,” Kikuchi-san said.

I mean, from where Kikuchi-san stood, Rena-chan was the biggest reason we had fought before, and she was the kind of person who set the alert level at SSS. She had a sweet smell about her—some kind of berry and vanilla—as she slid right up to me. I’d smelled it many times before, and it brought back memories.

“Huuuh? Someone’s calling you Fumiya-kun!”

“!”

Rena-chan eyed Kikuchi-san with an attitude that was challenging but also condescending and calm.

“Huh? So, so? Who’s she?” Rena-chan demanded as she took my arm very smoothly. Her softness touched my arm for just an instant, but—

“I told you—” I immediately knocked her aside—but right then.

“Please stop it!” Kikuchi-san’s voice was clear like spring water, but this time, there was a rare roughness in her tone.

She had made herself clear.

“Hmm? Why are *you* the one saying that?”

“B-because…” Kikuchi-san stood up and glared at Rena-chan. “I-I’m Fumiya-kun’s girlfriend!” She had tears of desperation in her eyes as she staked a claim.

But Rena-chan was unbothered, glaring back at her. It was fair to call Rena-chan’s gaze evaluating, and Kikuchi-san’s face twisted up. She seemed overwhelmed.

“Ah. I see. I’ve heard all about you.” She smiled, bending over to be at her eye level. “How cute,” she said with a snakelike grin.

The way she said that word, it wasn’t like Kikuchi-san was cute in a threatening way—she was saying “cute” like you would of a

little sister or a pet, in an unconcerned manner toward something that wouldn't harm you.

Kikuchi-san must have sensed the condescension, or there was something she couldn't stomach. She bit her lip, drumming up her courage, and took one step toward Rena-chan. "U-um!"

Though her gaze was drifting downward, she was doing her best to look Rena-chan in the eye. Her cheeks were red, and you could tell she was wound up as tight as she could go. Rena-chan, on the other hand, was grinning in amusement, calm and cool. That smile really did remind me of Hinami.

"I have something to say to you!!" Unusually, there was sweat on Kikuchi-san's forehead, and her voice was raised desperately.

Despite this, Rena-chan was completely unperturbed. She really was quite a nuisance. "Hmm? What is it?"

"P-please stop…"

"Hmm, stop what?"

And then Kikuchi-san glared at Rena-chan, face bright red, and said:

"Please stop saying sexual things to Fumiya-kun!"

"…Pardon?"

Rena-chan tilted her head, and time froze for me and Mimimi.

* * *

When Ashigaru-san came back, he was trying not to laugh.

"Heh-heh… Oh, wow, your girlfriend is amazing, nanashi-kun. I heard her from my seat over there."

"I-I'm sorry…!"

"I don't think it'll be in the stream, but… Heh-heh-heh."

Ashigaru-san was laughing unusually hard, while Kikuchi-san was bright red and bobbing her head in apology. Mimimi and I had no choice but to watch the two of them with awkward smiles. Rena-chan had warded off Kikuchi-san's admonition with amusement. "What a nice girlfriend you have," she said coolly and then fluttered off somewhere. I didn't know what she was

thinking.



“Nanashi-kun, could I talk about what happened today on stream—?”

“Abso*lutely* not!”

Seeing my reaction, Ashigaru-san burst out laughing again. *Okay, so he’s one of those people, huh? He thinks it’s funny when people are embarrassed or uncomfortable.*

“Ahem, ahem!”

And then Mimimi gathered attention to herself by saying the sound effect instead of actually clearing her throat. “Right, so we’d like to get down to business!”

“Oh yeah. A career-path seminar, was it?” said Ashigaru-san.

“Yes! And so—passing it over to you, Brain!”

“Hey.”

She’d dumped the whole business of explaining the details onto me. *When she makes me do this stuff, it kinda feels like “Brain” is a minion for odd jobs.*

And so I explained. “…That’s why I was hoping that I could ask you to do this speech for us, Ashigaru-san…”

“Hmm, hmm, I see. It’s another request to speak, then.”

“Oh, do people ask you for that sometimes?”

“Yeah. I do it as a pro gamer, and I also have a day job, remember? I occasionally do speeches for that, too.”

Then Mimimi went, “Ohhh! So you must know what you’re doing! Brain believes in you, so I knew you’d be something special!”

Mimimi was talking like she was completely used to this. Being able to do her usual Mimimi thing even though she knew hardly anyone here was pretty amazing.

Ashigaru-san was overwhelmed. “Uh, yeah…”

“So as for your conditions…how much do you normally charge to appear…?” I timidly asked the difficult part.

Ashigaru-san’s expression shifted into something distinctly adult. “Hmm, yeah. Well, there is actually a general market price…but even if it is work, I couldn’t bear to take money from my kouhai who wants to be a pro.”

“Oh, no, but I couldn’t have you do it for free…”

“Well, if that’s the case, nanashi-kun…” Ashigaru-san grinned like he was scheming something. “Instead of payment, can I ask you for a favor?”

“A—a favor…?”

He nodded calmly. “I’ve been thinking for a while now that I want to liven things up in the *Atafami* competition scene.”

His eyes were calm but enthusiastic. “But just having talented players fighting on and on inevitably gets boring. The best players tend to be the same people every time. Some parts of the audience will enjoy that indefinitely, but that doesn’t work for the casuals,” he said fluently, as if he was making a presentation. “So I want something fresh.”

I think I know where this is going.

“That’s where you come in, nanashi-kun. —Will you join this tournament?”

“I—I knew it… Well, if that’s all it is.”

“Ohhh! So I can see you fight, Brain?!” Mimimi’s eyes were shining.

Now Ashigaru-san directed his gaze and voice in an unexpected direction. “And—Mimimi-san, was it?”

“Huh? Me?” Mimimi was taken by surprise, and he eyed her like he was scheming something.

What exactly is he planning to say? She’s just a substitute for the student council president.

“As soon as I said hello to you, I was thinking—your voice carries well, and it’d sound good on stream.”

“…Huh?”

“You’re articulate, you have a lively inflection, and you’re pleasant to listen to. There’s not many women active in the competitive *Atafami* scene, and I’ve been thinking that’s an issue.”

“D-do you mean…?!” Mimimi trembled.

It was true. Looking across this venue, the gender ratio was nine to one…or not even that. It was really all guys.

“That’s what I mean. I want your help for just a bit.”

“W-wait, please. But I’ve never played *Atafami*…!”

“Are you familiar with the blind-guessing meme?” Ashigaru-san dodged Mimimi’s protest and continued explaining, taking control of the conversation. That seemed like an adult conversational skill. “It’s a thing where people know nothing about a given piece of media, and they’ll show off just how clueless they are about it to entertain the audience.”

Mimimi stared blankly back at him. I was aware of it, but if you're not online a lot, you wouldn't really know.

"And there's a subsection of that called blind commentary."

At this point, I fully understood what Ashigaru-san was trying to say.

"Basically, it's where someone who doesn't know anything about that game commentates on a match, and we laugh at how ridiculous it is."

Then it seemed that Mimimi caught on, too.

"Mimimi-san, will you talk for us for a single match? Just say whatever you like, whatever comes to mind?" Ashigaru-san turned his face toward the commentator's mics, which were equipped for streaming. "With me, in those seats."

"…No waaaaaaaaaaaay!"

* * *

"Well then, the next match will be an experimental one, and we're going to try and see what happens when we have commentary from a high school girl who doesn't know much about *Atafami*. This is Ashigaru commentating."

Mimimi just had this unthinkable job foisted on her. "Th-thank you for having me!"

"I'm sure things will seem nonsensical at first, but please cut us some slack. All right, Mimimi-san, say hello."

"Say hello? U-um, I'm Mimimi, and I'm going to be commentating…is that okay?!"

"That's fine. Mimimi-san is a classmate of nanashi-kun, famous as a high school *Atafami* player, and he came here today to ask me to do a speech at his school's…career-path seminar, was it?"

"Th-that's right! And you said yes, but only if I help do commentary!"

"Ha-ha-ha, don't tell the audience. And so Mimimi-san is an amateur when it comes to *Atafami*. Everyone, say hi to her. Oh, by the way, sorry, but we're not showing faces."

In order to succeed Hinami's story as the perfect student

council president, Mimimi had gotten into quite the situation. It's a tough job filling those shoes. I'm glad I'm just the Brain.

"No, no saying hi to me!! I really don't know anything, you know?!"

"That's what makes it interesting. Well, it's only one match, so do your best."

"O-okay! But at what?!"

"So the next match is to get into the top eight. Up against nanashi-kun, the online champion who will be competing offline for the first time, we have Kevin, who uses Jake. How does he look to you, Mimimi-san?"

"Huh?! Um." Mimimi hesitated for a moment, then went for it. "Well, nanashi's my friend, so I hope he does his best!"

"Thank you for your very biased opinion."

Ashigaru-san's chill comeback made the audience chuckle. Mimimi's wild energy and Ashigaru-san's steadiness might actually make them a pretty compatible duo.

And then—of course. The match that Mimimi was going to be commentating was none other than my own. It felt a little like a home-court advantage, but I'm not sure if that made it easier, or harder because it was distracting.

With these thoughts in mind, the match began. I controlled Jack to hit my opponent with a dash attack.

"Wow! A punch to the stomach! That looks like it hurts!"

"It just does damage numbers…but now that you mention it, maybe it does hurt…"

"It's gotta hurt! His whole weight was in that one!" Mimimi voiced her incredibly unsophisticated opinion, and the audience chuckled again.

Trying to stay focused, I knocked one stock off my opponent.

"Now nanashi-kun has got a head start."

"Um, Ashigaru-san! I want to ask something!"

"What is it?"

"These guys… Was it Jack and Jake?"

"Yep."

"Why are they fighting?"

"Huh? Because it's a tournament." Ashigaru-san answered like he was confused.

"I don't mean that!" Mimimi said energetically. "I mean, that's

why nanashi and Kevin are fighting, right? There's no reason for Jack and Jake to fight, is there?!"

"Well…I don't think so…"

"Huh?! There's no reason?! That's not good! Fighting for no reason only causes grief!"

"Hmm, I never thought a match in a tournament would turn into a philosophical conversation."

The audience tittered again. By the way, when I glanced at the monitor installed a ways away from me to see the comment screen, it seemed people were receiving them well. I saw *lolololololol* and *lmfao* and even *What the hell, people with good communication skills IRL are powerful online, too?*

Eventually, the match progressed—

"Whoa there, Brain?! Are you okay?!"

"…Brain?"

"Ah, whoops."

"Brain!! Mess up like that, and Fuka-chan will—!"

"Fuka-chan?"

"Ah…"

Hmm, there's no mistaking it. As I played, I came to a realization.

"This isn't the home-court advantage. I'm…completely distracted."

But I was still quite a bit better than my opponent, so I was able to win without trouble, so all was good. Or was it?

* * *

About a half an hour later.

"That was great, Fumiya-kun," said Kikuchi-san.

"Yeah, thanks."

"And, Nanami-san…you were amazing…!!"

"Thanks…!"

"She gets more appreciation than me?"

Kikuchi-san welcomed us after the match and commentating were over.

“Oh, thanks for that, you two,” said Ashigaru-san. “Sorry, Mimimi-san, for making you chat with me a while longer afterward.”

“Oh, no! Once I got started, I was on a roll!”

“You guys were really letting me have it, though?” I said.

Well, nanashi’s image was already changing to begin with, so it was fine.

By the way, Mimimi’s commentary was apparently not only well received by the in-house audience, but she was popular over the livestream, too. Some people even mourned when she left the commentator’s seat. What a place to show off your talent.

“Well, it wasn’t that big a tournament, but management was happy that they got quite a lot more subs to the channel,” said Ashigaru-san.

“Heh-heh-heh, it seems the world has noticed my charms,” Mimimi said with a smug expression as she stroked an invisible beard. But Ashigaru-san was right; she was a fast-talker with a voice that carried. She might actually be pretty good at streaming. Huh? Did that mean she beat me in that regard?

“Now then—how was your first tournament, nanashi-kun?”

“Well…” With complicated feelings, I replied, “Frankly, I kind of have lots of regrets…”

People in the scene had been talking about this tournament a fair amount: *nanashi, the number one online player, is attending a tournament for the first time?!*

In the next match after the one where I’d won with Mimimi’s commentary, my time in the tournament had ended—in other words, I’d reached the top four.

Considering that it was a small- to medium-scale tournament, I had wanted to rank a little higher. But getting fourth place in my first IRL meetup wasn’t a bad number.

“You know, since I’m serious about trying to be a pro gamer.”

Ashigaru-san nodded silently.

“But…even given that I’m not used to playing IRL, I think I didn’t manage certain characters well, and I wasn’t focused enough. I should have done better. I should’ve won or at least gotten runner-up.”

I knew that was arrogant of me, but I was a top player who consistently maintained the first-place ranking online. I'd said "at least runner-up," but if I had actually gotten runner-up, I think I still would've said I was frustrated I hadn't won.

"You're worried about the results, huh," Ashigaru-san repeated what I'd said, folding his arms as he mulled over the issue for a little a while. "You might be thinking too inflexibly, nanashi-kun," he said, then added, "Oh yeah," as if something had just struck him. "Can you wait a little bit for me?"

He walked up to one of the participants who had been glancing over at us from a little bit away. "Shimaaji-kun, look, you can talk to him now."

"Oh, y-yes! Can I?!"

Ashigaru-san brought over a boy who was a few years younger than me, probably in middle school. He stood before us nervously, giving us—well, actually me, if it wasn't my imagination—little glances.

"Um…who's this?" I asked.

The boy who'd been addressed as Shimaaji-kun said timidly, "Um…you're nanashi-san, right…?"

"Y-yes! Uh…?"

When I looked to Ashigaru-san for an explanation, he said, "He comes often to tournaments to talk to me, but he says he's been watching you online for a long time."

"Oh…?"

"U-um! At first, I only played online, the way you did, but… lately, I've started to go to tournaments and stuff…"

"O-oh, really…?" I wasn't sure how friendly to be in this sort of situation, and I just replied vaguely. *So…would this make him my fan?*

"Even at small tournaments, I still totally lose in the first or second match…but one day, I'd like to fight you at a tournament…!"

"Th-thank you."

"Um…I really love the way you play Found and Jack…um." He was flustered, but that was what made me know he was sincere. His words echoed gently in my head.

It wasn't really sinking in—it didn't feel real.

"That's why I invited him today. I told him nanashi-kun was

coming," Ashigaru-san said.

Shimaaji-kun nodded. "Ashigaru-san said that you weren't on the list of participants, but you would probably join in."

"Huh?" Startled, I looked at Ashigaru-san.

"Cat's out of the bag. But might as well show you off in a match, right?"

"That was your plan all along, wasn't it?!"

What a schemer. Ashigaru-san cracked a crooked smile.

"But…I'm sorry, I only got into the top four."

"That's nothing to apologize for! I mean, please don't apologize!" Shimaaji-kun said.

"Huh?" I was startled.

Shimaaji-kun said honestly, like he believed it from the heart, "I mean, you always kept your cool, watching as closely as you could to read the other player. I could tell you were nanashi-san!"

His eyes were sparkling, gazing at me like I was a hero or something.

I'd never experienced something like this.

It felt like a gust of wind whooshing into my heart.

But whether it was due to my contrary nature or my competitive spirit, part of me still couldn't be okay with it.

"R-really…? But I mean…the *Atafami* scene can be a little tough… I feel like people will say that I couldn't hack it offline…" I didn't want to mention it, but the negativity popped out of me before I could stop it.

Was it shyness, modesty, or just putting myself down?

But Shimaaji-kun didn't seem to be bothered by that side of me. "That's not true at all! Look!" He tapped on his phone, then showed the screen to me.

There were rows of comments about my playing.

The way he moves around is so clean. This why I love Atafami.

If this is his first tournament, what'll he be like once he gets used to playing offline?

He's good-looking and good at Atafami, *I'm a loser in comparison lmao.*

Nanashi's playstyle really is so refined. Maybe I'll try using Found, too.

It was all positive. There were also some tweets talking about my looks, but that was funny in a way, too.

"…Wow."

"So I'm looking forward to the next tournament! I know it won't be long til you're used to playing offline, too!"

"…Yeah, thank you." *What the heck? He approached me because he was a fan, but for some reason, I'm the one getting encouraged.*

"So I'm gonna keep cheering you on!"

Shimaaji-kun had a beaming smile on his face, and I knew he was glad to have been able to talk with me. With that, Shimaaji-kun left. It was so unexpected, I was shocked.

"Now do you understand?" said Ashigaru-san.

"…Understand what?"

Finally, he spoke like he was offering me some advice. "—What attracts people isn't just how good you are."

Kikuchi-san and Mimimi were also listening with interest.

"You might think that a pro gamer needs the skills and tournament wins, and that's the only way to get famous. Of course, might makes right, and it's fair to call that part essential. Without it, you won't seem like a real gamer—but it's not the only thing you need."

I'd seen that plenty, even that very day.

Like a skilled competitor who had been seeded highly losing in the first round.

Or someone who had dropped into the losers' bracket after the first round but had gotten six continuous wins after that.

Or someone who had lost at the semifinals and almost slammed the controller in frustration, then felt bad and took a step back.

It wasn't just about strong versus weak—everyone had their own drama.

"You need more than skills to attract people—you need a story."

The confidence in his tone must have come from personal experience.

"You got such-and-such rank because you went through some

experience, or had some frame of mind. The story made by that string of events—your story—will earn the audience's excitement, respect, and faith. Of course, it's assumed that a pro will be good at the game. But—"

Ashigaru-san's firm gaze remained locked on me. "People can't give their hearts to just pure talent."

In the end, he took a sweeping look across the venue.

"Listen, a pro gamer's job…is to make themselves a story that will attract people."

His words really struck the core of the matter.

"—Um!"

That was when Kikuchi-san cut in.

"What's the reason that you wanted to become a pro gamer, Ashigaru-san?" she asked with a serious look in her eyes—she must have intuited that she could gain something from it.

"…A reason?"

"Yes…! Um, right now, I'm having doubts about my career path… What you said made me want to hear more."

"Ahh, I see." Ashigaru-san seemed a little startled to hear this enthusiastic question from quiet Kikuchi-san, but he gave her a mature smile. "Is this like a warm-up before the career-path seminar?"

"Ah-ha-ha, I suppose so."

Seeing me laugh, Ashigaru-san raised an eyebrow proudly, then slowly began to speak. "Well, I think my reason is something that continually changes."

"How so…?" Kikuchi-san asked with deep interest.

"I originally thought of myself as a selfish person. I just wanted to win, and I didn't think about the losers. Well, I think that people in the competition world can be like that a lot of the time, though."

"Ah-ha-ha. I'm like that, too," I agreed from the side.

"But one day, I realized I was slowly getting more well-known and gradually getting more people I could call fans. At first, I'd thought this sort of thing wasn't me, and I didn't care what other

people did…”

I was slowly being absorbed by his words—he was describing what I’d just experienced.

“When people said to me, ‘I started playing *Atafami* because of you,’ or ‘Watching you play made me want to go pro with Lizard’…I was happier than I expected. It made me think, *Man, I’m lame*, feeling moved by this when I was so aggressively competitive.”

“That’s not lame…at all,” Kikuchi-san said hesitantly.

But Ashigaru-san cracked a smile and continued, “But you know, then I’d be in a bad situation in the next tournament or something, and I’d be thinking, *Man, I’m gonna lose—there’s no way to turn it around the way things are going*. That’s one of those lessons you learn through experience, so you do lose motivation and start believing there’s no point in trying anymore. But—”

Ashigaru-san seemed a little embarrassed as he said:

“—that’s when those things come to mind.”

For such a coolheaded person, the fire must have been unexpected.

“The faces of the fans, and their words. —And their faith in me.”

I think this is only something you’ll hear from someone who has continuously been in the spotlight, granting people dreams.

And now those feelings were starting to grow within me as well, just a little.

“It’s true that you can get stronger by admiring someone and trying to be like them. But—” Ashigaru-san gazed at his palms. “Having someone admire you and attempting to carry their feelings—that can make you stronger, too.”

“Carrying their feelings…” I repeated those words with a certain weight.

“So…if you’re unsure about your reason to keep going—you can find your answer down the line. I think that’s one way you can go.”

* * *

“So thanks for today. I’ll be counting on you at the career-path seminar,” I told Ashigaru-san.

“Yeah! Thank you very much!” Mimimi piped up.

“Thank you for today…!” said Kikuchi-san.

After three of us said our farewells to him, we got onto the Saikyo Line. I took a seat on the empty train so that I could send a message to Haruka-chan first thing and let her know we’d locked in a guest for the career-path seminar. Maybe this would put her a bit at ease.

“Today’s been a rewarding day,” said Mimimi.

“…Yeah,” I said, zoning out as what Ashigaru-san had said ran through my mind.

Mimimi pouted and thoughtfully hmmed. “You know, what Ashigaru-san was talking about was kinda similar to Aoi’s situation.”

“…Yeah,” I agreed. I felt that keenly.

Kikuchi-san had been listening and joined the conversation. “You mean about being admired by someone.”

“Yeah!” Mimimi pointed at her.

I thought back on what Ashigaru-san had said—and the thoughts of the fan who’d spoken to me.

Shining bright would attract people and be their landmark, guiding them like a lighthouse.

“If you’re going to put it like Ashigaru-san did, then Aoi’s been a pro gamer for a long time,” Mimimi said.

That caught me by surprise.

If being a pro gamer is about making yourself into a story that attracts people—

—then Aoi Hinami as a person is special to Haruka-chan, or to Mimimi and everyone else who admires her brilliance. In other words—you could call the two of them Hinami’s fans.

For a long time now, Hinami had occupied the place I’d been aiming for.

“You’re right… She is a pro gamer,” I said.

What game was she a pro at? Obviously…

…the game of life.

“…Before she lost it, what was her landmark she was moving toward?” I said, imagining something that would fill her emptiness. “What she had as her role model… What was the sun

to her?”

In the tournament, I’d only reached the top four. While that hadn’t satisfied me, hearing from an apparent fan, and the positive comments on the Internet, had given new meaning to results that I’d found unsatisfactory. They had validated my results by adding meaning after the fact.

I’d failed to produce results, but the words said afterward had validated my accomplishments.

That was kind and comfortable. And it could well push victory further away.

I had a feeling that the hint for figuring out what Hinami had lost lay there.

This was completely the opposite from how she did things—setting up all the causes needed to produce the desired results.

“—I believe she is a girl who has lost her god.”

I recalled what Kikuchi-san had said.

“If the words that gave meaning to Hinami-san’s results…were the sun to her, and her god…”

Those words had been given to her by her family that’s “a little strange,” as Haruka-chan had described it. It was her sun, her god, her reason.

If it was shattered one day—I had the feeling that there was still something lacking in the hazy outline I’d begun to discover.

—And then.

My phone vibrated with a notification.

“!”

Kikuchi-san noticed my reaction. “…Fumiya-kun?”

But I just stared at that line of text.

I’d gotten a DM from Haruka-chan.

“Sorry, you two.”

This message must have been brought to me by the broken story of the perfect heroine, the continuation of which we had written—

[*Thank you very much for handling the stuff with the student*

council.

There's something I want to talk to you about.]

"I have to go somewhere."

—At the same time, I had the feeling that it was connected to Hinami's past, before she had become perfect.

* * *

About half an hour later—

"Thanks for waiting."

—I was in a park close to Hinami's house.

Haruka-chan's expression as she waited on a bench was just a little hollow, but she seemed determined, too.

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to reply, Tomozaki-san."

"No, it's okay," I said in as gentle a tone as possible and smiled. "What did you want to talk about?"

Then she drew in a breath and paused a moment. "What Big Sis Fuka said…"

"…Yeah?"

"Um…about things shattering."

Shattering to pieces. She probably didn't repeat the full phrase Kikuchi-san had said because saying it out loud would hit that sensitive point again.

"Um…what does that mean?" I replied.

Haruka-chan continued, "At first…I thought it might be about a certain someone."

"A certain someone…"

That had to be the one I also knew about.

Haruka-chan slowly rose up off the bench. "Um…can you come with me?"

"Come where?"

She started walking with small steps. "It's…really close."

* * *

We came to an ordinary corner on the road, not far from the park.

There was just one thing there that drew the eye.

Nearby one of the telephone poles lay a beautiful bouquet of red, white, and purple flowers.

"…Right here…"

The way Haruka-chan was acting, the past I knew about, and what we were looking at now—

In my head, I was certain these were all connected.

"…You mean this is where your other sister…had that accident?"

Haruka-chan paused a moment, staring at me with wide eyes. "So you know about that, too… Did my sister tell you?"

"…Yeah," I answered honestly.

"…I see." Despite having tears in her eyes—Haruka-chan smiled with relief. "…I'm glad." She had affection in her eyes, like you'd show toward something small.

"You're glad…?" I asked, overwhelmed by a strange discomfort.

She smiled weakly and answered, "I've never managed to talk about that with her even once." As she spoke, the muscles beneath her eyes spasmed. "When I tried to bring it up, she seemed so hurt, I couldn't talk about it at all…" Tears spilled as her face crinkled in a smile. "I'm glad she has someone she can talk about Big Sis Nagisa with!"

"!" I couldn't say a word. Haruka-chan admired Hinami, but I was sure she was also carrying a kind of loneliness I couldn't imagine.

"You know—when Big Sis Fuka said that, I thought it was about the accident. The reminder really hurt, so that was why I reacted the way I did." Her gaze went to the three-colored flower bundle left there all alone. "But…I had a feeling like that wasn't it."

"Do you mean…?"

The accident where they'd lost a sister, the words *shattered to pieces*, and the sudden change in Aoi Hinami.

It seemed like those were connected so simply by a single line.

But it was true that something didn't feel quite right.

"I think what broke wasn't a person or something like that," she said.

The wind blew through.

The purple petals, which particularly stood out in the bouquet, were swept away into the sky.

“What broke was *everything*.”

She spoke with a dispirited expression that seemed to be looking back on the past.

I had seen Hinami in Haruka-chan many times. But right now, the resemblance was intense—her eyes black, having given up on everything.

“By ‘everything,’ do you mean…?” I didn’t understand specifically what Haruka-chan meant.

But—I felt like the structure of its essence was the one thing I did get.

“You mean…the stories that were believed at your house?”

Haruka-chan paused a while, digesting that, then said, “…How much do you know?”

“No, I don’t know anything aside from what I just said. I don’t know what the stories were or why Hinami believed them.”

I really didn’t know anything. This was as far as I got.

“But…I might get it.”

“Why…?”

That was probably because I had been thinking about Hinami constantly for the past few weeks.

Because I had witnessed myself the stories of many “reasons to believe.”

Because I’d managed to learn a little about the responsibility of being a reason to believe, myself.

—And one more important thing.

“…Because…”

Thinking about it now, I’d been choosing not to see it.

No, maybe I had understood. But I had tried to believe that it was not the case in the real sense.

“It’s because your sister…”

My mouth felt heavy.

“…Aoi Hinami…”

I’m sure I didn’t really want to say it out loud.

“Aoi Hinami is weak.”

I said it myself for the first time.

The remark would hit deep, so I smiled as kindly as I could.

I hadn’t wanted to believe that the magician who had brought color to my world was actually a bottom-tier character herself.

I wanted to show respect to her, the person who had trained me when I was level 1 to make friends and a girlfriend and to really engage with people properly.

So this was the first time I was able to face her weakness in the real sense.

“So she was probably given—”

Because I had experienced it myself, I was able to put it into words.

I’d produced results, being number one in Japan at *Atafami*, and that had given meaning to the life that I’d thought was all wrong. And when I’d produced results I’d been unhappy with, the voice of a supporter had added color to my life.

I used to believe this game sucked, until a magician had turned it into one of the best.

That magic had given me reasons time and again.

“—reasons to believe in herself from someone close to her.”

I heard her breath catch.

The silence hanging in the air affirmed my hypothesis.

Eventually, like surface tension breaking as water overflowed —

“…That’s what our family is like.”

—the words slowly started to spill out.

“We were taught that everything would be okay, no matter what. Good things and bad would all be taken positively.”

Tears were starting to build in Haruka-chan’s eyes.

“Our family was just that brilliantly amazing. So whatever happened, we were able to be positive about it… No matter what happened, there was no need to change.”

Just from that, maybe it would sound like good parenting.

But.

“—I see.”

It made sense to me.

Because part of the essence of the Aoi Hinami I knew fit into that.

“—I think this means I had it backward.”

If the essence of Aoi Hinami was that she needed a reason for everything she did, then—

“The Aoi Hinami I know has always built up the reasons herself to produce results.”

—a single simple and clear structure had emerged.

“I thought that the one thing she believed in was the effort she’d invested.”

I’d tried to believe—that behind Aoi Hinami, the monster of independent efforts, lay endless darkness.

I had wanted to believe—that the only one who could resolve that was the ultimate gamer nanashi, who could fight evenly with her.

I had wanted to believe—that Aoi Hinami was more special and stronger than anyone. That she was just that brilliant.

“But she wasn’t like that at first.”

That was why I never realized until now that her initial motivation had been very small and childish—

—and so weak, laying responsibility on others to an unbelievable degree.

“The one thing she believed in was the words of another, validating her after the fact.”

Even as I said that, I was shocked by the weakness those words indicated.

That magic had to feel so warm, gentle, and comfortable.

It could be a reason stronger than anything, one to believe in.

But it coddled you, like an infant in the womb.

If that was all you clung to, then inevitably—one day, the speed of reality, the moment that left those words behind would come.

“Yeah… That’s why when she lost everything, she—,” Haruka began, but right then—

“Hey, you—!”

—a very familiar voice reached my ears—the voice I’d wanted to hear all this time.

Still clear, and full of confidence.

But now it sounded tired.

“What are you doing with Haruka—? Oh.”

When I turned toward the voice, there was—

“…Hinami.”

There was Aoi Hinami, before me for the first time in a long while.

“…Big Sis…” Haruka-chan gazed dumbly at Hinami.

“Haruka…”

Hinami’s hair was dull, her clothes worn out. The careless frown on her face was far from the expression of the perfect heroine. I thought I’d seen something like this before—thinking about it, she looked a lot like the guy I’d seen in the mirror that summer vacation after my farewell with Hinami.

Hinami dropped her gaze weakly and bit her lip. “…Sorry.” Her expression and tone seemed crushed by guilt. “Sorry…for letting you see me like this.”

Haruka-chan admired her. She’d even said that she wanted to be like her big sister. I didn’t know whether she’d said that to

Hinami, but Hinami had to have noticed her feelings. She'd feel ashamed and pathetic—and she'd want to run away right this minute.

But Haruka-chan was seeing something else at the moment. "Big Sis, um!" Her eyes were earnest, desperately wanting to make sure she would communicate her feelings. "You know—I admire you, and I want to be like you…!" Her words were full of real enthusiasm. "Just recently, you know—I made student council president…!"

"!"

Like she was looking for attention, reporting what she'd worked on hardest to the person she most wanted praise from—

"I'm not good at stuff like you, so I campaigned really hard and asked lots of people. Then I finally made it. Because I had to be like you, because I wanted to be like you, I worked really hard." Her voice was wavering uneasily as she took shaky steps toward Hinami. "And—and also? The student council work that you can't do right now because you happen to feel unwell—Tomozaki-san and his friends are all handling it, you know…?"

"Huh…?" Hinami was looking at me with confusion and surprise.

"So it'll be okay…?" Haruka-chan replied once more, slowly breaking down Hinami's expression. "You can go back to being you…!"

One step after another, she approached Hinami on unsteady feet.

"So, Big Sis…" Her fingertips touched Hinami's unmasked cheek. "Talk with me again—lots, okay…? I want to hear lots of cool stories from you…!"

The heat and weight of her words made me understand.

"If you don't…I won't know what to do…!"

To Haruka-chan, Aoi Hinami was no falsely brilliant icon.

She was the real sun—so bright, it could never be replaced.

"Haruka-chan."

Hearing my voice, Haruka-chan lifted her face from where it was buried in Hinami's chest. "Tomozaki…san."

"Can you leave this part to me?" I said.

"But…"

As Haruka-chan looked up at me uneasily, I smiled back at her.

“It’ll be okay.”

I know that life is difficult, and there are no guarantees.

But.

“—It’ll definitely be okay.”

That was one area where I was just as sure as I was about *Atafami*.

“Because I love your sister just as much as you do.”

* * *

“…So it was you,” Hinami said, exasperated. “I thought she’d been going out a lot lately… Agh.”

She said that Haruka-chan had started leaving the house without saying anything to her family more often, and they had been worried she might be wrapped up in some trouble. Well, in this day and age, kids can readily connect with adults on social media, so it is concerning when they go out without permission.

“People in the neighborhood were talking, too… They said some sketchy guy had been waiting for over an hour in front of our house.”

“I’m really sorry for causing you trouble.” *Have I become a really suspicious character these past few months? If I was caught on all this, I think I’d be denied parole.*

Hinami was sighing, but I was happy just to hear it. “…Why are you doing something like this?” she asked. There was a lack of confidence in her voice, though, so she must have known the answer.

After all, she was the one who’d been acting strangely in the first place.

“I couldn’t get a hold of you,” I said.

“Still…contacting my family without my permission has got to be breaking the rules.” Her gaze flicked away, surely an expression of guilt.

“Yeah. But…you know, right?” Looking at Hinami’s feeble expression, I smiled. When I’m with her, I can’t help but run my mouth.

“Nanashi bends the rules.”

Right now, I had most certainly gone against a number of rules.

You can’t broach territory you’re not responsible for if the other person is against it.

You can’t force someone to be a certain way just out of your selfish desires or ego.

—You can’t hurt the people you care about.

These are obvious rules in life, but I’d bent them to say my piece to her.

“…I suppose so.” Her narrowed eyes were weak, as if the world they saw was colorless. “The complete opposite from me.”

Her expression drew a clean line between us, loneliness apparent in her eyes. “I can’t even breathe without rules.”

Her words were frank, with no warmth or feigned strength.

While this made me sad, I was also incredibly glad.

“…Yeah.” I agreed with her. “You always…depended on them.”

—I was going to hurt Aoi Hinami.

Because that was what I had intended to do when I reached this point.

“What do you—?”

“I do know,” I cut her off. “Since I’ve been thinking about nothing but you for this past month. Haruka-chan told me about what happened, and I’ve thought about it over and over to get here.”

“—At some point, all that—shattered to pieces.”

I think because I’d learned about her little sister through those interviews, because I’d heard about it from Hinami’s own mouth, I’d been too fixated on one idea to figure it out.

“What shattered wasn’t your sister—”

I had believed that “shattering” had been referring to her other sister’s death.

But hearing about everyone’s reasons to believe—and what Haruka-chan had said just now—I had finally connected the dots.

“—It was your sun.”

Hinami bit her lip slightly.

It wasn’t a person who had shattered.

—It had been a reason.

“You’ve always believed in one thing.”

And those cogs had broken irreversibly.

“Those words of affirmation would give meaning to your accomplishments, win or lose, and light up your world.”

I pushed even deeper into that place she didn’t want touched.

And I put everything into words, as if pulling up my organs forcibly out my throat.

“But if that was to break, then you wouldn’t be able to give meaning to your life every day. No matter what you did, no matter what happened, all that remained was your empty results.”

Causes and results. Results and meaning.

While these seemed similar, the order and what gave rise to them were all different.

“That’s why…you tried to take responsibility for everything.”

Aoi Hinami’s view of her own responsibility was extreme.

Back when we first met, she’d called me a sore loser. That attitude was so harsh, it would hurt anyone who heard it. If you’re a loser, that’s your own fault, you’re pathetic, you just didn’t try hard enough. It was clearly extreme, and at first, I had simply believed she was projecting her own successful

experiences onto others as one who had succeeded through her own effort—that she was just one of those self-improvement types.

But that wasn't it.

The truth was that Hinami—

"If you take all responsibility for the results—then you can feel that all the results you achieved, attained through your own abilities, have value."

"!"

The emptiness building up within her.

The hollowness of meaning granted after the fact.

When everything broke—the place she arrived at, the lifeline she clung to, was this.

"Whether you could become successful and popular, whether you won or lost at a game, whether you were good at your studies or sports—and even things that seem innate, like luck—you thought you caused all of it—"

This was surely the vector that Hinami's individuality had taken.

The true essence of her extreme view on self-responsibility.

"—so it seemed like everything you achieved, you got with your own strength."

As I said it all aloud, my hypotheses turned to certainty.

In other words—she was a gamer who was devoted to her goals.

Hinami had been so thorough that it was a little crazy. That was why she had achieved growth to such an abnormal degree—and had sacrificed any sense of fulfillment, leaving her hollow.

"With that view, when things went well, all the results you produced added to your value. Track, mock tests, relationships—all of it. The more you felt that things were your own

responsibility, rather than RNG or external factors like environment, the more you could leverage your own effort, and you could build your confidence with the results you produced.”

As if those results were what might save her.

“Since you had to do that—or Aoi Hinami wouldn’t be fulfilled.”

Listening silently, Hinami gave me a look that was hostile but also somehow panicked.

“What’s wrong with that…?! I take responsibility for myself. You’re like that, too, and so am I. I don’t look for help from anyone else, and I don’t cause problems for anyone. You have no reason to complain about me living just for myself—”

“I do.”

I declared it flatly.

I recalled what we had talked about that evening, surrounded by beloved characters.

“You said it yourself. You don’t know the reason your sister died. You saw the result; you still don’t know the cause or the reason for it.”

“…So what?”

“You could never ask her, so you’ll never know. So you don’t even know how to regret it, you said.”

I realized.

I had found Aoi Hinami’s lie.

“—But that’s not really true, is it?”

“!”

Her expression twisted asymmetrically. No remarks or arguments followed; I had rattled her.

What I was about to say was most likely true.

“The truth was, you already had your answer.”

Yes. It was simple.

“To you, everything you’ve gained came through your own efforts, which means—”

If you take responsibility, then you can credit yourself with everything that you gained.

Do that, and it’s possible to flood your emptiness with value.

But if that double-edged sword was turned the other way—

—then it would shatter everything in your heart with one blow.

“—to you, everything you lost was your own fault.”

Was that atonement?

Or from another angle, was being able to feel regret a kind of salvation?

Or was it just better than nothing? I didn’t know.

“So as a gamer in a solo game—”

Most likely, this was—

—Aoi Hinami’s real karma.

“—you’re trying to believe that everything that happened with your sister is your own responsibility.”

Hinami was just looking at me in silence.

“But, Hinami. Listen.”

I told her my feelings:

“The things you’ve lost are not at all your fault. And the things you’ve acquired are not necessarily by your own hand. Luck and chance do exist. There are plenty of things that you can’t do anything about on your own.”

Frankly, I thought it was the truth.

“If this world is a game, then RNG is a part of it. Even in the best games, if you miraculously just keep rolling bad RNG, then sometimes, effort won’t get you anywhere. So won’t you try unloading some of the burden you’ve placed on yourself?”

It was true that, as Hinami said, this world might be a game.

But precisely because it is a game—you won’t be able to escape from luck-based elements.

“You’re not empty, and there’s no need for you to be fulfilled. It’s enough for you to just be yourself.”

I took that step toward Hinami now that I hadn’t been able to take then.

“Can’t you try letting someone else take some responsibility for your successes, failures, everything? Just a little at a time… and walk just a little easier.”

As for who that was—it went without saying.

“I want you to talk to me—about what you’ve been bearing on your own.”

What I was offering Hinami wasn’t my fist for a shared fight together.

I held out a hand for her to take so that we could walk to the same place.

“I want to be more involved with you.”

Silence hung for a while.

Aside from the fact that I owed her, in the end, I didn’t know why I was thinking about her this much and why I was trying to be involved with her.

The one thing I did know was—

—to me, she was special, in the real sense.

Less than a minute must have passed before eventually, Hinami sighed in resignation and parted her lips a crack. “… Listen. I…”

“Huh? Really?” I blurted anticlimactically.

She shot me a sullen, sharp glare. “Not if that’s your reaction.”

“Wait, sorry, sorry! Forget that—tell me!”

She sighed, then once again, she began to talk.



It was the winter of fifth grade, and Aoi Hinami loved everything in the world.

Her whole life until then, Aoi’s days had been so bright, it was difficult to remember any times when she wasn’t happy. She was surrounded by a mother she loved and adorable little sisters; every day, she ate delicious homemade food. While it was a bit of a walk from the station, her home was large and clean and full of love.

“I like you. I love you. You’re good just the way you are.”

“Thank you for being born.”

Her mother, Youko, said those things so many times, the family’s pet parrot would imitate it, but no matter how many times Aoi heard it, it left her in such high spirits that her head was ready to pop.

If she absolutely had to dig up some unpleasant memory, then she could recall a fight with a friend at school once, but even that was connected to happy memories. It didn’t even count as a sad one.

One winter, in the living room, Youko was stroking Aoi’s hair. They had three humidifiers running to keep everyone’s throats from drying out.

“It’s okay. You haven’t done anything wrong, Aoi.”

“Why…? But I said something awful…”

While looking at Aoi across from her at the dining table, Youko smiled gently. “Mm-hmm. You’re so kind, Aoi.” While petting her head like she always did, Youko told her slowly, “I’m sure your fight with Miyoko-chan was practice for other fights you’ll have like that in the future.”

“!”

“So it’ll be okay.”

Aoi suddenly raised her head, and the tears brimming in her eyes dried a little.

“Oh, I know!” Youko jolted out if her chair like she’d just remembered something and hit her right thigh on the table. “… Ow!”

“A-are you okay?!”

“Oh, I’m fine, I’m fine!” Youko said, putting on her slippers. She hopped off toward the kitchen on one leg to protect the one she’d hit, the way you’d expect from a girl Aoi’s own age.

“I got this from Sano-san.” She pattered over to the fridge, then opened the door and pulled out a rectangular white box that had been hot-stamped. “Ow, ow, ow…,” she said rhythmically along with her hopping. She was totally cheerful, as if she was still having a good time.

But if it hurt that much, she should just get the box after the pain subsided. Her mother seemed even more innocent than her, as always, and watching her filled Aoi with warm feelings and made her smile.

“Here.” Youko placed the paper box on the table and opened it, and inside was…

“…Cheesecake?”

Inside the open box was brown sugar sprinkled like sparkling gold over cheese, with moistly textured dough visible underneath. The cake looked thick and heavy, and you could imagine the rich sweetness even before eating it.

Youko smiled at Aoi like the sun. “When sad things like that happen, the best thing to do is have sweets.”

“R-really…?” Aoi asked, dumbfounded.

Youko smushed her daughter’s cheeks in her palms. “—Really!”

And suddenly, Aoi had a fork in her hand as Youko smiled down at her. Aoi obediently took a bite, and the moment she put it in her mouth, honeyed sweetness spread in her desolate heart. It was like with every bite, the sadness was gradually oozing away inside her mouth.

“…It’s so good.”

“Right?”

“It’s so good…”

She hadn’t thought that she’d been that bothered about that

fight. But the taste shared between the two of them, the kind words, just felt rather warm. She gave a pathetic sniff, and her voice broke.

Youko ate the cheesecake with her and gave a gentle smile.

“It tastes sweeter than usual when your heart is tired, doesn’t it?”

“…Yeah.”

“That’s why…”

And then as if affirming everything about Aoi, Youko said:

“…that means you fighting with Miyoko-chan today—was to make this cheesecake taste even better than usual!”

Aoi felt like her own heart was getting a hug inside her.

“Ah-ha-ha…”

At first, she’d been a little frustrated, but before she knew it, it had all turned to feelings of joy.

“—Maybe you’re right!”

Just thinking that made her heart feel lighter.

Just thinking that turned her feelings positive.

It was just like magic.

“So next time it happens, you’ll be fine, right?”

Youko would weave a tale to connect the dots between the events that had happened, like an improvising storyteller—

“…Yeah!”

—and Aoi loved it.

The Hinami family had a room in their house that other families didn’t.

Aoi only remembered that it was carefully decorated and had a long vertical piece of paper with some words on it that seemed important.

“Ah…”

One time, Aoi saw Youko when she opened the door of that room and returned to the living room.

Twice a day, morning and night, sometimes even more—

—her mother would go into that room and shut the door

behind her for twenty or thirty minutes, and Aoi hated it.

That wasn't only because it meant she would get less time together with the mother she loved.

When her mother had invited her to do *that* together with her, she'd felt an indescribable unease—but surely, that wasn't the real reason, either.

—It feels like when Mom is doing that, for just that moment, she's not Mom anymore.

At least, that's how it felt to Aoi.

So Aoi didn't know much about that room.

No—if she was being honest, it was more that she couldn't remember.

Because that room couldn't exist in the happy world she wanted to believe in.

Because the ideal mother she wanted to believe in couldn't be so common.

So Aoi locked that room in the depths of her heart.

And she decided not to go near it.

There were just two things Aoi knew.

That this was something that her classmates couldn't find out about.

That this place was the real reason their mother could keep being strong and kind.

That was all.

The cracks in their life started to appear when Aoi was in sixth grade.

Her sister, Nagisa Hinami, who was two years younger than her, made a comment at the dinner table. "Hey, Mom. There's something I want to ask about."

"What is it?"

Three or four homemade dishes were set out at the table.

The topic she'd chosen to bring up was:

"Everyone's ignoring and saying nasty things about someone in my class. I really hate it."

Youko's brow furrowed.

“I want to help her out…but what should I do?” Nagisa asked.

A moment of silence fell at the lively dinner table.

When it came to the issue of bullying and how to resolve it—

—there was no true correct answer.

If you wanted to produce an answer that sounded nice, perhaps telling off the aggressors would be the right choice. But there was no guarantee that it would resolve the whole problem, and sometimes, that would make it worse and get you hurt as well. And if the adults weren’t doing their jobs, who knew how bad it could get?

So not only was it beyond Aoi and Haruka—but Youko struggled, too.

“I wanna try telling ’em all off. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

An honest and direct sense of justice, and the noble desire to help.

It was a righteous and strong-willed decision for a fourth grader—which was precisely what made it so dangerous.

But Youko’s daily showering of love had built up her self-esteem, and that self-esteem gave her the strength for that decision.

Eventually, Youko opened her mouth with some determination. “As your mother, I’m proud that you’d feel like you want to help. I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

“Really?!”

Youko smiled and nodded. “I’m always on your side, Nagisa.”

“Mom…!”

“But, Nagisa…” She lowered her tone chidingly. Her next words were filled with honesty, with faith in something invisible. “The world has chosen for that child to be bullied, right?”

Aoi’s eyebrow twitched.

Nagisa would have chosen to fight the world, but Youko wasn’t as strong as her.

So one by one, she wove together the words toward her fixed goal. “This incident might be a chance for them to gain something, too.” She wove her story as if she was fitting the pieces into their destined places. “It might be a trial. Remember what happened with Aoi? She made up with her friend one day, and she was able to eat some yummy sweets with someone. For

her, it was the best thing in the world."

Like a storyteller directing clarity to the desired conclusion, she made up reasons that sounded nice and decorated them with pretty words. That was the way she always spoke.

But for Aoi, the impression this story left on her was a little different from usual.

"So I think you don't have to do anything. After all, Mom… doesn't want you to push yourself too hard."

Her remark at the end sounded a bit like a request, like it was just out of kindness—the parental desire to simply not have something bad happen to her child.

But at the same time, it revealed her extreme logic based on her own biased ideas and preconceived notions.

Aoi would never know which it was.

Just—whatever the case, she would not forget that day.

For the first time in her life, she thought something was strange about what her mother had said.

A few weeks after that.

Nagisa asked Youko and Aoi for advice about what they'd most been afraid of.

She said she had defended the student in her class who was being bullied, and now she had become the new target.

"They just kicked my desk a bit…but I have a bad feeling about this."

"I see… So that's what you chose…," Youko said. Her voice was shaky, as if she was desperately trying to think of something.

"Yeah. But it's okay," said Nagisa.

"It is…?" Youko asked.

Nagisa gave her a strong smile. "Because, I mean…"

She thrust up a finger, pointing at the heavens.

And she declared proudly:

"—I'm so correct, I think I've been hexed! I'm hexactly right!"

She spoke as if defining herself, a sunny smile on her face.

That was the signature phrase said by the piglike character in the video game that the three sisters had played many times ever since they were small.

“Oinko says that if you believe something is right, then if you fight justly to the end, that’s enough to clear the game!”

She quoted the words like they’d come her personal bible, making them her reason for fighting. To Aoi, that nobility was incredibly impressive.

The bullying got worse, but there was no way to stop it, and it was wearing Nagisa down. When the rest of her family worried about her, she continued to put on a smile and said this:

“But you know, I told off the bullies again today. And I got to give some advice to the kid who was getting bullied.”

Her expression of forced cheer showed obvious signs of exhaustion and wear.

“This whole time, I get to do what feels right to me. —I’m hexactly right!”

But deep in her eyes was a flame of firm conviction.

And within that lay the strong and playful pig character the three sisters loved.

“…I see. That’s noble of you. You haven’t done anything wrong. Mom is absolutely on your side.”

“Yeah… Thanks.”

Every time, Youko said encouraging words to Nagisa.

She made sure to warmly assert that she was on her daughter’s side.

“It’s okay. I’m sure—this is a trial that’s happened to make you even stronger.”

But in the end—she always affirmed the situation Nagisa had been put in.

One day, as Youko was setting the dinner table, Aoi said to her, “Hey, Mom.”

Youko turned down the heat on her pot of cabbage rolls and turned around to Aoi. “What is it, Aoi?”

“Hey…”

—Is it really okay for Nagisa to be like this?

Those words had risen to mind many times before that day, and her unease just grew every time.

But—

“…”

Voicing her doubts was so scary for some reason, much more than it should be. She felt like the act would deny something important within her. Like if she said it aloud, something that had always felt fulfilled would all spill away from her.

So Aoi said no more and just shook her head. “…Nah.”

Her smile then was insincere, pretending she didn’t see the contradictions and doubts rising inside her.

“It’s nothing!” She denied her words, her doubts, pretending they had never existed, then weakly dropped her gaze to the ground.

“…Really?” In an honest voice with no affectation, Youko said, “All right, then!”

She smiled brightly and without a trace of doubt, but something about that warmth was hard.

Once again, a sense of unease pricked at Aoi’s chest like thorns.

Actually—now that she thought of it, she may have felt this unease many times before.

Mom is always on our side.

Mom always says positive things.

But Mom wouldn’t take any concrete action to change Nagisa’s situation.

Aoi was smart.

That was why this rising uncertainty enabled her to doubt the foundation her mother had instilled.

Aoi was kind.

That was why she was able to think seriously about Nagisa’s

situation and about what would be best to do for her.

But Aoi was weak.

So even if her unease was legitimate, she didn't have anything new to believe in—and so she couldn't take any sort of action herself.

"Hey, Big Sis Aoi."

A few months had passed since the start of the incident.

Nagisa had been talking less, and she was zoning out more often. And that day, her eyes were glazed over again, staring at nothing as she spoke to Aoi.

"Was what Oinko said really right?" Nagisa's speech was slow, as if using her unsteady head took effort.

Aoi and Nagisa both loved that catchphrase, and they'd imitated it many times just because they liked the sound, even before they knew what it meant. Once they'd understood the words, whenever they were unsure about a choice in life, they always recalled that phrase. That was because it was a story they loved and believed in.

"'I'm so correct, I think I've been hexed! —I'm hexactly right,'" Aoi said.

Nagisa delivered the follow-up. "'If you stick to what you believe is right, then that's enough to clear the game!'" Then she gave a tired smile. "Hey, Big Sis."

"Yeah?"

Suddenly, the energy seemed to bleed out of Nagisa, and Aoi imagined her vanishing into mist.

"Oinko says if you stick to what you believe is right, then that's enough to clear the game…"

Finally, she gazed out the window in resignation with her hollow eyes.

"—Do you think he'd still say that if he saw me now?"

"…!"

Aoi felt a heavy, dull shock.

On an emotional level, she understood—this was what she had feared more than anything.

She had known just how scary it was to doubt the pleasant feelings that fulfilled you, and to give voice to those doubts. If she denied the important foundation that made her up, if she abandoned the words that validated the results she produced, then everything about her would become empty. Because she had been unable to shake off that feeling, she had never been able to do anything.

That was why she'd spent this whole time pretending not to see the cruel situation Nagisa had been placed in.

But now Nagisa had put those doubts into words.

Now that she had been pushed this far, now that she was close to her limit, she had doubted it herself.

Now Aoi knew just how much despair Nagisa was facing in the midst of all this.

"Well…"

Nagisa couldn't be wrong. So it would be okay.

That was what Aoi wanted to say to her.

She wanted to say that Oinko would definitely say that. He would point at her and say, *You're hexactly right.*

And then as her older sister, Aoi would kindly lay a hand on her head.

But.

"…"

Was it really right to keep believing in that line?

Would that faith and hope really save Nagisa?

Would wishes and prayers bring back the glowing smiles that Aoi loved to see on her face?

Would some vague and abstract words change Nagisa's concrete reality as the victim of bullying?

—She found herself feeling there was no way.

"…Big Sis." Nagisa smiled weakly, her presence like smoke flickering and vanishing.

Aoi's head was hanging, so she couldn't see Nagisa's final expression, like she was seeking help.

"Maybe…it doesn't mean anything, saying to stick to what you believe is right."

Those words were like a curse on the world. They fell like a wet lump of flesh that stuck to the floor. It was unsightly.

A few weeks later.

That day came very suddenly.

Haruka and Aoi were in a waiting room at the hospital, sitting side by side like they were praying. The door opened, and Youko came out. Her expression was dark and dull, as if she had seen the end of the world.

Really, the girls might have already known then.

"Mom…!"

"How is Nagisa…?!"

Aoi and Haruka both implored her.

But Youko's expression remained dark.

"Nagisa…is gone."

Aoi and Haruka could barely speak, their voices quiet and choked.

A member of their family was dead. A sixth grader and a third grader were far too young to really accept those feelings.

"Aoi, Haruka…"

Youko slowly knelt down to get on eye level with them and meet their gazes in turn. She desperately tried to hold back her tears, but of course, she couldn't. Her teardrops, which seemed too large, overflowed one after another.

But even so, she put her daughters first and kindly petted their heads—

—slowly, very slowly. As if she was checking to feel their warmth.

Her outline, wet with sadness, blurred, and she ran her hands over their hair so that they wouldn't disappear, too.

Love was the only word for the gesture.

Saying nothing, the two of them felt their mother's kindness, her understanding.

—But.

Youko looked in both their eyes and smiled encouragingly through her tears.

And then she said to them—

"Look—there was nothing we could have done."

The dark shock that Aoi felt then—

For the rest of her life, she would never forget that moment—when the beautiful formation of colorful building blocks all turned to black ash in a single night.

"The world chose Nagisa's death—so there's meaning in this, too."

For just a moment, Aoi forgot how to breathe.

Youko's words made a cacophony in Aoi's darkened heart.

The cursed words continued to roll around in the hollow there, shaking her eardrums over and over until she was dizzy.

"So let's stay positive and find that meaning."

With her reddened eyes and strained smile, Youko was, without question, sincerely mourning Nagisa's death.

But the way she spoke—she was treating Nagisa's death as something *positive*.

"Mom…?" Emotions tinged with despair spilled from Aoi's mouth like blood.

She did want to believe what her mother said.

She wanted to nod like always at these words, which came

from the person she loved most in the world.

She wanted to love these words, which had come from someone she loved.

But in that moment.
That was one thing she couldn't do.

"Hey…Mom…it's not true, is it…?"

Her voice cracked and shook, like a violin with rusted strings.
Maybe even Youko had just said it to avoid the sadness of Nagisa's death—or to encourage her two daughters. At the very least, you only had to see her tearstained expression to know that in her heart of hearts, she couldn't accept Nagisa's death.
Surely, Youko was also weak, and she had no choice but to think that way.
That had to be why she'd entrusted everything she was to that story.

That was when—it struck home for Aoi.

"There was no way to keep Nagisa from dying…?"

The values system that had been running rampant in their family, taking everything as positive to enjoy their happiness—
—it was a pretty facade full of lies, simply beautifying realities you didn't want to accept.

"Are you seriously saying…that there's meaning in this, too…?! Are you…?!"

Everything she had believed in and loved from the bottom her heart, all that had supported her—was fake.
"…Aoi." Youko was surprised to see Aoi snap at her with a tense and angry expression.

But Aoi's words never reached Youko's core.

"Listen…Aoi."

Her voice was shaky and weak despite her smile, but there was no uncertainty in it.

There was only one place she could end up.

"That's—that's just how the world is, okay…?"

The only thing that she believed in was the god inside her.

A few seconds ticked by between Aoi and Youko, marking the world.

The large clock hanging on a pillar in the waiting room indicated that it was ten thirty at night.

"—!!"

"Aoi?!"

She started to hate everything her mother said.

All the words that had controlled her now seemed dirty.

"…Hn…nk… Ahhhhhhhhh!"

No, maybe her mother wasn't the one who seemed dirty.

What was really dirty, and what was so repulsive that she wanted to avoid it was—

—the flabby ball of deception stuck right in the middle of herself.

Now that I think about it, I've always been like that. Whenever something unpleasant happened, I would copy Mom. I would force myself to interpret it as a trial so that things would go well next time, or as a message telling me I should stop that. I ignored how miserable I was. I knew doing that would make everything feel better, just like when Mom always did it, so I continued making excuses for myself. I was good at it, too, so I kept anyone from getting hurt. I leaned on the value system of someone I loved and abandoned thinking for myself, distorting my world.



But that wouldn't change the reality I faced.
And I wasn't able to realize that until I lost the sister I loved—

"I…! I…!"
My chest feels tight, and I can hardly breathe.
I was only able to shake that off since I was being faced with Nagisa's death.
When Mom said that, for an instant, I tried to feel like Nagisa's death was something inevitable, just like always.
If I did that, I could use everything as fuel to move on.
I could forget the sadness in a heartbeat.
There was definitely a part of me that was almost swept into the easy way, into feeling better.
And the reason that I felt that way was—

—because this *was stuck there, right in the middle of my heart.*

"…! —ay!"
I beat the curse in my heart again and again.

Go away.

Even if that meant hurting myself, painfully distorting my own shape.
Even if one day, that would destroy my capacity and turn it into junk that would never be filled or fulfilled, I was fine with that.

Go away, go away.
Go away, go away, go away.
Go away and get out of me right now.
This isn't positive.
This isn't kind.
This is absolutely not right.

This is just—looking away from the truth in order to feel better.

From the core of her body, Aoi realized that everything about

her was made of lies.

Her measuring standard was gone, and she simply cursed the ten-plus years she had believed in this family.

But that was everything to her at this point.

If she tore that away, all she had left was an empty vessel.

“Hnk…bleh…! Hah…!”

She spat out into the gutter by the side of the road.

How much easier it would be if she could get *this* out of her body simply by throwing up.

But all she managed to get out was vomit and a sticky thread from her mouth. She hadn’t managed to purify any of the wrong parts inside her, and it was so painful and gross.

If she was going to redo her life, where should she start, and how?

When she asked herself the question, she immediately came to the answer.

I think I’ve been racing full speed down the wrong path ever since I was born.

I’ve been running with a smile down a dark, pathetic, and dirty path, just as Mom taught me.

So how should I live from now on?

What should I believe in to move on?

“…I…”

She looked around the town of Omiya, which she was so used to walking around.

Everything she saw seemed so sincerely stupid and ridiculous, laughter welled up inside her.

I thought my whole world was full of color.

I thought my whole world was bright.

But the world around me now is like… Ah-ha-ha-ha.

Like a monochromatic burned-out landscape.

“I see… I’m…”

In this moment, Aoi Hinami…
…hated everything in the world.

“…I’m so disgusting.”

❀ ❀ ❀

The sun set, covering us in the night.

Now done with her story, Hinami still wore that asymmetrical smile, her black eyes fixed on me. “That’s all it is.” Her lips were dry as they moved, the red cracks painfully bright.

Aoi Hinami’s thin face peeked out from under her untidy bangs, clearly imperfect.

I could only stand there as she told me that lost story.

“—The god inside me died.”

God.

I’m sure that word meant essentially that.

In an unbalanced environment, she was made to believe a single value system.

With just one word, she’d been able to take any outcome as positive, and she had lived happily. But then suddenly, one day, the world had forced her to confront that her entire foundation was wrong.

A hole had been left after that loss, and if only ugly contamination was rising up to fill it—

Then while I could understand that logically, I wasn’t able to truly empathize.

But still, I refused to let go of that logical understanding that I did have.

“So there’s nothing for me to believe in anymore,” she said, as if dispassionately stating the facts. “At the very least, I certainly can’t believe in myself after living the wrong way my whole life.”

Surely, those words were like a scream.

“So what is there aside from securing a ‘victory’ that seems trustworthy?”

What Hinami collateralized as her value was never herself.

“If even that is wrong…”

Victory, demand, value, recognition, dependence.
They were all to replace her god.

“…what should I believe in?”

Hinami was questioning the foundation of the reasons to believe.
I felt like I could finally understand the meaning of what she’d asked me that time in Osaka.

—*“Can you say that’s right in the* real sense*?”*

When Hinami said “in the real sense,” she meant—
Questioning the reason to believe, questioning the reason you can believe that reason to believe, and then questioning layers beyond that reason—when you went all the way back to the root of it all, what lay beyond that? Did any answer beyond emptiness exist? Who could guarantee that was right?

Surely, the only thing that could give that reason was a god.

Drawing in a breath, I fixed Hinami in the center of my field of view—
This time, I would absolutely not miss the moment she revealed her real weakness for the first time.
So that I could tell her everything I wanted to say.

To keep Aoi Hinami from being alone anymore.

“I know the answer to that.”
I fixed my gaze on her.
“See—as nanashi, I’ve always believed in myself.”
While thinking of the past, starting as a loner, and coming to be able to enjoy life—

“As you know yourself, I was a miserable guy with no life. Anyone would have seen me as a loser. But even back then, I always believed just in myself.” I told her stubbornly, “So between us, I’m the one with more experience in that.”

Her expression twisted in displeasure, but she sighed in resignation and kept her eyes on mine.

“I’ll teach you the way to always win this game.”

My answer, simple and clear:

“You don’t need reasons.”

This was how I really felt from the bottom of my heart.

“Even if it’s empty, and there’s nothing really supporting it, you just believe like an idiot ‘because I’m me.’ You don’t have to think so hard about it—that’s enough.”

I spoke with confidence, trying to validate who she was.

—But.

Hinami was looking at me with an even more sorrowful expression.

“Yeah, I think that’s a fair argument… It feels like you really are more experienced,” she said with cynical self-deprecation. There was an air of defeat around her. “That’s the only way to believe in yourself. There’s no such thing as truly ‘right,’ so the most logically correct and consistent thing is to believe anyway. Even if there’s no deliberate foundation for it.”

“Right? So if you can believe like me—”

“No. But that’s…” She narrowed her dull, black eyes in resignation.

They bore a fragile smile, like thin ice covering a nighttime lake.

“…not something a bottom-tier character like me can do.”

Not so long ago, I would have been shocked and left speechless by this declaration of loss.

I’d wanted Aoi Hinami to be strong.

This was probably out of admiration and trust. But at the same time, having this expectation for her was selfish.

So hearing Hinami define herself with those words again had made me sad and stopped me from thinking.

—Just like in the summer at Kitayono Station, when our friendship had been severed.

—Just like that Osaka night, when we'd talked under the starry sky.

But now I was different.

Now I was looking right at her—

—at the fact that Aoi Hinami, the girl I had wanted to be strong —

—was a weak person in the real sense. A bottom-tier character.

"I thought you would say that."

Now I could put what came after into words.

"I know that. You're unmistakably a weak person."

Nobody else thought such a thing.

If I asked Haruka-chan or Mimimi…

…or if I asked Mizusawa or even Kikuchi-san…

…they'd see Hinami as more noble and brilliant than anyone.

Maybe she felt alone—but she was stronger than anyone. That's what they would answer.

But I was different.

I was looking right at Hinami's weakness.

And I thought of her as special.

That was why I was the only person who could barge into her life and get *inside* her weakness.

"If you say that you can't believe in yourself…"

So that Fumiya Tomozaki could beat Aoi Hinami's weakness for her.

The best gamer in Japan, nanashi, told NO NAME.

"…believe in me."

It was a lot like the simple logic I'd voiced before.

But what was different this time was my determination to bear this for her.

“Believe in the top-tier character Fumiya Tomozaki—the only one you’ve never been able to beat.”

I could use this logic precisely because I believed in my own strength.

I could say this precisely because I saw her weakness.

“I have no reason or basis for it, no sound logic or anything—but I’ll still validate you.”

And—this was something I could tell her precisely because I’d always been alone and I understood being alone.

“Aoi Hinami is right.”

I just said it, like an idiot.

I mean, I had no rationale, no basis for this.

Aoi Hinami didn’t even have to believe this about herself.

I just had my confidence, as baseless as a god, that I felt that way.

Hinami stared at me open-mouthed for a while, and then she giggled like all her tension had drained away. “Believe in nanashi, huh?” She smiled in exasperation.

“Yeah. I said it during summer vacation, too, didn’t I? I know I’ll beat you in this area.”

“Yes, you did.”

But for some reason, there was a little sadness in her smile. “Hey, Tomozaki-kun…no, nanashi.”

“What is it?”

She took a step, walking outside the park. “There’s a place I want to go with you… Will you come with me for just a little?” I could tell she was opening her heart, somehow.

“Okay. Sure, take me anywhere.”

Right now, I might finally be talking with Aoi Hinami in the

real sense. That was the thought on my mind as I followed after her.

* * *

And so I was sitting on my knees idly, alone in Hinami's room. This was a similar situation as the first time I'd visited her house, so unconsciously, I was wondering about where the unknown pleasant smell was coming from as I waited by myself for Hinami's return. It was probably the strange rocklike thing by her desk. I'd grown since then; now I knew there were rocks that could absorb aroma oils and fill the air with a scent. *I have penetrated your illusions!*

Eventually, I heard someone coming up the stairs, and a figure came in. It was a girl with same air as Hinami, just younger. In other words—

"So this time, it really is Aoi Hinami's little sister."

"Tomozaki-san…! Did you come in with her…?"

The first time I'd stopped by their house, I'd mistaken Hinami without her makeup for her sister, but this time, it was actually Haruka-chan. What déjà vu, right?

"Yeah. It's okay. We had a talk," I answered kindly, and then I heard the sounds of feet pattering up the stairs again.

When I looked over, Haruka-chan hastily bobbed her head in a bow at me. "Um…then I'll go!"

Just as Haruka-chan left, Hinami came in.

She'd brought controllers for *Atafami*.

"Hold on…you mean…"

"Of course. Pick the one you like. Let's do it. —One-on-one," Hinami said as she dispassionately started setting up *Atafami*.

But for whatever reason.

There was something like sadness in her eyes.

"Still, *Atafami*, right now?"

"Yup. Got a problem with it?"

"No, there's no problem, but…"

Smiling wryly, I chose one of the controllers that Hinami had

brought and connected it to the console. She seemed a little different from before—sharper, quieter.

The character-selection screen was displayed on the monitor.

“Then I’m going with this one.” I chose Jack, who I’d made my main a little while ago. It was a little sad that I couldn’t fight with Found, since that was how we’d met, but I might have become even stronger with Jack than with Found lately. Plus, she wasn’t prepared for him, so this might give me an advantage.

“So you really have quit playing Found,” Hinami said sadly, slowly moving the cursor.

And then the character she picked with the cursor was—

“Wait, that’s…”

“I’ve been practicing with him a lot lately. Whenever I’m at home, I’ve just been going crazy.”

“I mean, I did hear about that…but skipping school for it?” Though my smile was still wry, I was a little glad. So it was true that she’d been playing *Atafami* this whole time.

“There’s no helping that. You changed your main. So even if I used Found, I can’t get any better than that,” she said dispassionately, like she was explaining the facts. “But you know…I did gain something in the process.”

“What was that?”

Hinami looked vaguely at the screen and said, “Your playstyle is visibly refined—a lot of improvisation, but still very good. It was like you pursued what everyone thought of as the ideals of *Atafami*. But…”

She spoke like it was unimportant.

“…I think all I care about are results.”

The deep-voiced *Atafami* narration called a name.

“…Boxman, huh?”

It was shockingly like Aoi Hinami.

Boxman.

He was a DLC character that had been added to *Atafami* later, and unlike highly mobile characters like Found and Jack, he would avoid enemies and gather materials to power himself up—a kind of defensive character.

He commits to camping and steadily growing stronger, and when the opponent tries to interrupt the process, he counterattacks to gain massive returns—he's the picture of a cold-blooded character, and a little different from earlier conventions in *Atafami*.

"All right, sure. We'll see if you've prepared enough to go up against me."

"…Yeah."

It was true that before, Hinami had come off as calm and collected—even cold—but now she seemed kind of different. Like she was just focused on the game.

"Let's go with first to three."

First to three. In other words, whoever gets three points first is the winner—it's the typical format for tournaments.

"Sure. That's the way I like it."

"…"

I still felt like I was more into this than her, uncomfortably so, as the match started.

A few seconds in—Hinami didn't seem to be attacking, just gathering materials.

"Pretty boring way to play."

Hinami ignored my attempt to rile her up.

"Attacking means you start having to read each other," she said. "That's always risky. So I should just force you to do it alone."

Boxman would build a wall and hide behind it, digging through the stage to gather materials. In terms of damage and distance between characters, it would appear as if nothing had changed on the screen, but he would be steadily making slight gains through the power-ups.

It was like the perfect heroine, who would devote herself in solitude to her studies.

"If you're only talking theory, then maybe you're right…but," I said, and my Jack rushed toward her, "I don't care about that."

Jack cleanly jumped over the wall that Boxman had built and launched a surprise aerial attack. Jack had excellent air speed and fall speed. I wouldn't say he had an advantage against

Boxman, but he could hold his own when we were poking at each other. Hinami went from a shield to a counterattack, but—

"Not good enough."

From an empty jump, I did a short hop to wait and see, then came behind her while she was guarding. With some tight dash-dancing, I lured her into attacking, then seized the opening for a dash attack. I launched Boxman into the air so that I could get him before he landed.

Boxman's weakness was being in the air, and when he didn't have many materials, he wouldn't be able to use any techniques helpful for landing, which left him at a disadvantage. So you take that opportunity to persistently and continuously slam him to accumulate your rewards. That's more or less how to deal with him.

I quickly and dispassionately executed the basic Boxman counterstrat, and—

—the first match ended with my victory.

Hinami couldn't handle the variety in my attack patterns.

I placed down the controller with a "Phew" and turned to Hinami. "I told you. You didn't prepare enough to go up against me. But why are you suddenly—?"

Then she tapped a bunch of characters into her phone and stared at it. "—It's first to three, right?"

Yeah, I'd said that, but it was a new character for her, and my first win had come easily, so she should have been a bit more anxious about it.

"Well, sure, but…"

The next match began.

Round two was basically the same thing over again. I was attacking, while Hinami was on the defensive. But if I pulled the same strat as before, we'd just get into reading and poking each other again, so I approached her in a way I hadn't tried before.

I won a second time, but she'd managed to fend off a number of my attacks, so my victory was narrower than before.

You'd think Hinami would be feeling pressed, but she didn't panic, just staring at the notes she'd taken on her phone. Her expression was so calm, it was bizarre, as if she wasn't at all afraid of losing.

"Hey, if I get the next one, then I win…," I said.

"…Hold on a second." Patiently, as if she was reviewing her notes one last time before a test—she said nothing and only studied the screen intently.

"…"

Hinami closed her eyes a bit, started muttering something, then eventually said, "…All right, let's do it."

"Man, taking your time, huh."

And so we picked up the controllers, ready for round three.

The third game. Though we were getting into a weird rhythm, I wasn't the type to get tilted over that. After all, I'd played hundreds of games online and maintained my position at the top of the leaderboard.

"…Huh."

I guess I should have expected this from NO NAME, as she was fending off the attacks that I'd already tried on her. Of course you wind up reading each other because there's no way she could respond after seeing the attack. But when Boxman successfully reads you, it often makes the exchange not worth it, meaning that you need to successfully read him over 50 percent of the time. That was why I was varying my attacks randomly between all the patterns I had used thus far, so that she wouldn't be able to pin me down.

But.

"For this…I go like this."

The game was getting tougher as the competition wore on. When we were reading each other around fifty-fifty, the outcome was to my disadvantage.

In the third match—Hinami won.

She got me on her last stock. It felt like a waste—at the very end, if I'd just gotten her with my KO move, I would have swept the race to three.

It was two–one. I needed one more win, but Hinami only needed two. Now that the scales were balancing, I had to stay on my toes.

Her eyes were fixed on her phone screen. “This wasn’t right… I’ll adjust here…”

I found myself smiling wryly. Just how committed was she to victory?

“All right, next,” she said.

At her pace, as always, the fourth match began.

“…”

It would be hard to describe what had changed, and how. But she was closing the gap between us.

Hinami was just calmly fending off my attacks, as if she was dealing with something she already knew.

“I saw that before… This one, too. Oh, I was wrong. I’ve got to look more closely.”

“…!”

I hadn’t made a single mistake as far as I could tell. My fingers had even warmed up a bit, and I felt like I was doing better. But when I was the first one to lose a stock, I realized something was off.

I was clearly at a disadvantage.

Against Hinami’s defenses, there was no such thing as a singular way to attack. But when we were evenly matched when reading each other, I lost because I was less rewarded by a win. That’s why even if I kept going in to play mind games, I had to make full use of Jack’s mobility at every strategic point to take advantage of her mistakes, poking and chipping away at her—but I couldn’t find any opportunity to do that.

I mixed up my attack patterns, feinting and occasionally backing off. But even when I was doing that repeatedly, she fended off everything I did, and I was running out of ideas.

“…I see,” I said.

In other words, this was Hinami’s playstyle.

Gathering materials would accumulate very minor rewards; at a glance, this would look like defensive play, but it was also an offensive strategy that slowly led her toward victory.

“Just to confirm…,” she said.

“?”

“If we run out of time, we’re deciding the winner by tournament rules, right?”

“…!”

In this game, if seven and a half minutes passed before a player lost all their stocks, the game would end. In the actual game, the player with more stocks would win, and if both players were tied, it would initiate a sudden death game where both of them would die instantly if any attack hit—but that didn't happen in tournament rules.

If they were tied, then the one with more damage would lose.

For that reason, rather than knocking off all the opponent's stocks, if you were in an advantageous position, it was a valid strategy to just continue to wait until time was up.

In other words—I was under pressure to attack since time was running out.

"…So you're considering that, too. Well, that's very you."

In actual tournaments, using up the whole seven and a half minutes happened less than 10 percent of the time, and it was a rule that you didn't really have to account for that much outside a situation where neither character had a way of breaking the other's guard.

But Hinami was anticipating a victory by time out.

This was beyond low risk and middling returns—her manner of play could be described as *no risk, super-low returns*. Frankly speaking, if this game was on a stream, the chat would tear you a new one, complaining about how it's boring or whatever.

But—if you wanted to win, then it was the right way to play—nothing wrong about it.

"How I feel about it or whatever doesn't really matter."

Her eyes were fixed on the game screen.

"I just keep doing the right thing to do."

She played dispassionately, handling what I threw at her. She looked a little gloomy; she wasn't styling or playing mind games or engaging with the game concept, only making one logical move after another toward victory. Her playstyle was like the devil's.

—When you got down to it…it was so Aoi Hinami, I couldn't even complain.

"Ngh…"

Eventually, the fourth game ended.

My Jack went down. In other words, Hinami won.

Now the score was two–two. Whoever won the next match would be the overall victor.

“…I see.”

Winning the first two in a first to three, then having two games taken back is something you see occasionally in *Atafami* tournaments. Generally, the side that’s put the pressure on tends to be at a mental advantage. Technically, the situation should be fifty-fifty, but you’re more likely to imagine that they’ll continue their streak into a third win.

But while I felt anxiety, I didn’t let my guard down.

“—Phew.”

I already knew that she’s really good at the game.

Since NO NAME was the first *Atafami* player who I had acknowledged.

“Let’s start the final game,” I said.

Hinami didn’t seem to be paying attention as she pressed the start button.

“Not gonna look at your notes?”

The screen changed, and Jack and Boxman landed on the stage.

“No, I’m fine,” she said.

The match began, and immediately, Jack began to attack Boxman.

—However.

“I get it now.”

My attack was abruptly warded off.

“Huh…?”

When I left an opening, Jack was launched and hit with a massive combo that kept juggling him in the air. Suddenly, the situation was to my disadvantage.

“Get what?” I asked.

“Your attack pattern. How I should respond with Boxman.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s no way you could figure it out in just four matches…”

“Of course I can.”

And then she gathered materials again to continue powering up her character. As before, she didn’t attack at all, simply

watching what my character was doing.

“Have you forgotten how I became good at *Atafami*?”

Her cold gaze only captured reality.

“I know your playstyle better than you do.”

“…!”

That was when I became certain.

What Hinami was saying was probably true.

Even if I changed my attack pattern, she would come up with a precise strategy to deal with it, eliminating all my options.

While you shouldn’t ever be able to escape from the rock-paper-scissors element when reading each other, the match wore on while I had no way to gain an advantage.

How should I approach to make it work? I just couldn’t figure it out.

“…Fine, that’s just how I like it,” I said.

If she had seen through just about all my attack patterns.

Then the way out was to show her a method I’d never used before.

A move that Hinami couldn’t anticipate.

For that, I’d need knowledge and incredibly precise control. This wasn’t stringing random combos together on the fly or something like that; I was thinking up a strategy, which I usually did when I wasn’t playing the game. It was the sort of thought experiment I used to do before I met Kikuchi-san, in breaks when we were moving from one classroom to another. This time, I was doing it in an actual game.

I had to hit her with an attack pattern that I would normally never use.

There are many little tricks and secret techniques in *Atafami*, and there’s a number of incredibly difficult combos using those. But most of these are too hard to be worth it, or they have no realistic chance of success in a real match and are only for showing off.

So naturally, these are moves that nanashi would never have done before.

That was why NO NAME, with her obsession with logic,

wouldn’t anticipate them.

I made my brain work faster. I had Jack’s movements in front of me, and Jack’s movements in my brain. Fortunately, since Hinami’s Boxman was a defensive character, she wouldn’t pull any attacks that I couldn’t handle while I was busy visualizing.

In a match with a top player, making a combo I’d never done in a real game succeed in just one try—that was a feat that no *Atafami* player could pull off.

But I’m different.

I’m nanashi.

Confidently, I switched directions in midair, found the right distance, then immediately went to a double jump and fired my gun.

“—Yup, I knew it.”

Hinami’s voice was filled with sadness, as if she’d anticipated this.

“At a moment like this—nanashi would confidently choose the most difficult technique to execute.”

My move should have been impossible to predict, and yet she handled it as if she’d seen the future.

“Listen, this time I’ve been off school, I’ve done nothing but play *Atafami* and watch *Atafami* videos.”

In the opening when Jack landed, Boxman slid in close.

“Your playstyle really was ideal. It was beautiful. You were aggressive, never running defensively, always going into mind games and winning them. Nobody else could do that.”

While I was still landing, Boxman’s combo starter slammed into Jack’s stomach.

“Nanashi’s playstyle is cool, ideal, and brilliant. That’s why I wanted to be like you before I even knew what was happening.”

Boxman just kept on firing that same strong attack in the same way.

Over and over, without changing a thing, he continued to swing.

“But you know…it wasn’t suited for me to imitate.”

Again and again and again. The technique ate away at Jack’s percentage with raw strength and nothing else.

“All I can do is win.”

I was unable to escape from her combo as the damage piled up.

“So while I was holed up at home, I abandoned looking good and abandoned my ideals. I focused just on winning. If I do that —”

Boxman’s attack hit Jack right where it hurt.

“—then just winning is something I can do.”

And so ended the final match.

“…”

Displayed on screen was Boxman, robotically celebrating, and Jack, falling to his knees in despair.

“You said before, didn’t you?” Hinami was expressionless, dispassionate. “‘Believe in nanashi, the one person you couldn’t beat,’ was it?” she said coldly, but with sorrow. “Now there’s no reason for me to believe in you. And no reason to believe in myself.”

I couldn’t say a thing.

Atafami was the one arena where I had always been able to win against Aoi Hinami.

“So I have to apologize to you for just one thing.” Hinami held down the power button of the game console, turning it off.

The TV screen went all black.

“…Apologize? What for?”

On the monitor, where only dim black appeared.

Only cold-blooded darkness was reflected in the awkward distance between Hinami and me.

“I was wrong from the start. From the day I met you in Omiya.”

And then she spat—

—as if she had been swallowed up by the curse that clung to her—

“Life is a shit game.”

5

A magic mirror will always reflect the dark lord's true form

How many years had it been since I didn't even feel like playing *Atafami*?

Even that summer of my second year, after that first split with Hinami at Kitayono Station, I'd immersed myself in *Atafami* to get away from it all even with my fuzzy head. Now that I think about it, I can't ever remember a time I had lost the energy to engage with *Atafami*.

Right now, I couldn't even do that. I was lying in my bed in my room as if I'd been tied down.

The same thing kept spinning around in my head.

"Life is a shit game."

That's what Hinami had said.

In the year since I'd started taking the game of life seriously, I had been thinking earnestly about my involvement with people and what I wanted to do. Eventually, that had changed into the goal to make Hinami's life fun—but I hadn't been able to change anything for her.

"Weren't you the one who showed that to me…?"

Was it frustration, or was it sadness?

"That life is one of the best games there is…"

Now that I had lost to Hinami, I couldn't even use my ace in the hole: "talk once you've beaten me."

Even though she had changed my life and had given color to everything, I'd been robbed of the ability to return the favor.

"Now I don't want to do anything…," I muttered to myself, and then my consciousness dissolved into the night.

* * *

The next day was a Monday, and I stayed home from school.

I came up with some whatever lie for my parents.

I didn't do anything at all.

I felt spaced-out, lazy, and tired, with less and less will to do anything. So I had no choice but to lie around and recover my energy, but oversleeping just robbed the clarity from my thoughts even more.

In this hopeless negative spiral, not being able to think right actually helped. If I'd been considering everything between me and Hinami with a clear head, I'm sure that I'd come to hate everything so much that I would want to hurt myself.

"Agh…"

I rotted like mud in bed, the boundary between myself and the world blurring.

As I was in that halfway space between waking and sleeping—

—my phone suddenly vibrated.

"…Hmm."

I looked the pale light shining at my pillow to see the icon and name telling me I had a call from Kikuchi-san.

She would be worried after I missed a day of school. Maybe she'd sent me a message on LINE that I'd missed.

"…"

Frankly speaking, I wasn't sure whether I should answer. I didn't know if I could act normal. She'd told me that she was feeling lost with her reasons for writing, so she was stressed enough dealing with her own problems. But despite that, she was worried about me enough to call. I had to respect that.

Head still feeling hazy, I took the call. "…Hello?"

"Fumiya-kun…!"

I could hear the sincere relief in her voice.

But—I was feeling so zoned out, even that sounded gray to me.

"Am I right to assume that after we spoke…you were able to see Hinami-san?"

"Huh…?" I was surprised. She'd figured it all out, even though I

hadn't told her anything yet. "H-how did you know…?"

"Of course I knew." She spoke quietly, but with a firm core to her words. "Because I'm your girlfriend."

"…"

I was grateful to her from the bottom of my heart.

But still.

"What did Hinami-san—?"

"—There's nothing we can do anymore." I cut off Kikuchi-san. "I mean, I sent her messages on LINE, I waited by her house, I met with Haruka-chan multiple times, and then I finally got to see her. I told her what I wanted to say. I even played her in *Atafami*… but I lost."

Even as I said that, I kind of realized.

"Well, I think me losing is beside the point."

My loss had just been a single trigger. I could get serious about practicing *Atafami* now and beat Hinami again, but that wouldn't solve anything. She wouldn't have a change of heart and be like, *I'll believe in nanashi and move on.*

"At the end of the day, this and what happened during summer vacation were both just band-aids."

I'd even realized it myself, and I knew I wasn't really getting to the heart of the issue. But I'd believed we could take our time finding the real answers afterward. I'd thought we had enough time for that.

But my voice wasn't reaching Hinami anymore.

"…It's frustrating, but the time I've spent with her wasn't enough." I could hear Kikuchi-san's breath catching. "Obviously. She's lived with her family for over ten years… I'm still just a guy she played the game of life with for only a year…" Sadness spilled out of me as I spoke. "…'Just' a guy. That's how unimportant I am to her…"

Even I could tell my voice was trembling. I'd done everything I could, but I'd still been rejected and lost at the thing I was best at. I felt miserable and pathetic.

"That's…not true," said Kikuchi-san.

"It is…! I mean, I think she's special to me, but to her, I'm just…!"

"No! I'm sure to her, you're more…" She must have been about to say *special*. But she trailed off instead.

“So you can’t be sure enough to say it…huh,” I said, though I realized I was putting myself down.

“That’s…that’s not true.” I could hear Kikuchi-san’s voice growing shakier. “It’s just that…”

“That what?”

The trembling turned to breathy sounds, reaching my ears as emotional noise.

“…saying that the two of you feel the other is special…”

That rough sound became louder and louder.

“…just makes me feel…bitter.”

“!”

“When you’re supposed to be…my boyfriend…”

I realized—I really hadn’t even been paying attention to Kikuchi-san. It should have been obvious that Kikuchi-san, who had worried so much about me and yet still reached out to me anyway, was watching my fixation with Hinami and sucking it up.

“You…wouldn’t understand,” I said.

But out of my own misery, my shame over not having been able to even consider her feelings, I said some harsh things in attempt to look away from my own weakness.

“Since I’m…always alone. Even if I make friends with someone or date someone, I always am.”

The karma that swirled around me turned into a rejection of others, spilling out of my mouth.

Eventually, both of us fell silent.

She was the one to break it. “So my words…haven’t reached you, either.”

Her sad voice and the quiet after she eventually hung up the phone crushed my heart.

* * *

The next day, on Tuesday, I stayed home again.

If someone asked me if I was sad about my parting with Hinami or about my fight with Kikuchi-san, the answer was neither.

I was simply filled with the utmost despair.

Thinking about it now, I'd always handled the things that mattered to me using words.

Like with the game of life. At first, I'd come to the conclusion that it was a shitty game based on my own experiences and logic, and I'd chosen to spend my time with the far superior *Atafami*.

Eventually, that had slowly changed because of what Aoi Hinami had said to me, as well as the words I'd prescribed for myself.

When I first clashed with Hinami—I'd become aware of the decisive rupture that divided us, but I still wanted to bridge the gap.

She had only believed in her cold mask, while I'd wanted to believe there was something she really wanted to do, and I'd used words to connect us.

I had forcibly bridged those two feelings, extending our relationship with words: first, with the cheap argument that I was good at *Atafami*, and secondly, in saying that you could have both the mask and what you really wanted to do. There was nothing right about that in the real sense—at that point, words were all that connected us.

Most likely, this wasn't just about me, either.

After the student council election, words had also resolved Mimimi's inferiority complex and contradictions.

Mimimi had always wound up comparing herself with others. She was at the mercy of her nature, unable to feel confident about herself without producing results, so she had been unable to shake her sense of inferiority toward Hinami. But then Tama-chan said, *"You're the best to me,"* and that cleared up the murky feelings inside her. With that, the issue had been settled.

But maybe this could be called Mimimi's karma—when you

considered that her tendency to always compare herself with others hadn't changed, that resolution hadn't really resolved the fundamental structure of her problem. Mimimi had just been feeling positive at that moment because Tama-chan had called her the best.

When we'd been preparing for the sports tournament, when Izumi had worried about how she was, words had also resolved the matter then.

She'd hated the way she would accommodate others without thinking and always wind up in an uncomfortable position, but at the same time, she had realized that she couldn't abandon people when they were in trouble.

She'd been uncomfortable about having jobs forced on her for the sake of other people, and that was why she wasn't excited about taking over for Hirabayashi-san when she was struggling to lead the tournament. But Izumi also didn't want to just abandon Hirabayashi-san. —Thinking about it now, this contradiction itself may have been Izumi's karma.

And while she'd had that contradictory view, words had made her realize: *"If I want to do it, then I'm okay being in an uncomfortable position."* That had brightened her outlook. A single remark had changed everything.

It was the same with the incident with Erika Konno and Tama-chan. When Tama-chan had just about been crushed by the conflict between what she believed was right and the wrongs of the world, once again, words had freed her.

Clearly, the world was in the wrong, and Tama-chan's values were not. But seeing her fight with the wrongs of the world had made her friends sad.

She had been at a hopeless dead end, but she'd broken out of her situation in a beautiful way with contradictory but very honest words—that she wanted to change, even though she was right.

And then—with me and Kikuchi-san.

That time at the cultural festival, and the farewell party.

She had been caught between her ideal for the world, that she really shouldn't date me, and her desire to move ahead regardless.

There was me, caught between my karma of being unable to share responsibility with another in the real sense, and still caring about Kikuchi-san as a girl. If it was Kikuchi-san's karma to consider ideals and examine the world from a bird's-eye view, then both of us had been caught between karma and emotion.

However, both of us had karma that was bound to harm others. But we affirmed each other and chose each other because we wanted to—and using our words as "characters" living in the story of this world, we had been able to close the gap between karma and emotion.

People can only observe the world from their own eyes, and that's why, in principle, everything is divided into the "self" and the "other." That being the case, obviously, you can't interact with anything other than yourself in the real sense.

In other words, isolation is frankly a matter of course, and facing that day after day is too cold for anyone to handle—but it's *right*. In order to survive in that harsh reality, the one magic for connecting yourself and others—is words.

But.

Even using all the words at my disposal, I hadn't been able to change Hinami.

I'd waited outside her house, and I'd approached her family without her permission.

I'd used my own girlfriend's karma in a way that was taking advantage of her, in a sense.

I'd wanted Aoi Hinami to shine, and I'd looked directly at her weakness, using up all the words I had.

—But even then, I hadn't reached Hinami's core.

If a reason was a cogwheel for the sake of moving forward.

Then the one who had given me all the cogwheels for playing the game of life was Aoi Hinami, no question.

But at the end, she had said—that life was a shit game.

So what's the reason I'm playing this game, exactly?

When words and reasons are removed from your life, all that remains is just emptiness.

I must have fallen asleep at some point. Suddenly, the low buzzing sound of my phone penetrated my hazy consciousness. After all this time I'd spent melting away uselessly, the sunlight shining through the curtains had turned into a violet color of mingled night and evening. When I groped around the bed sleepily, my phone had a notification on it. It hadn't even been plugged in to charge.

"…Huh?" I said.

Displayed on the screen was a notification that my watch list on a reading app had been updated.

There was only one item on that list.

It was Kikuchi-san's *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*.

Part two, the latest section, had been posted about half an hour ago.

"…"

Head still sluggish, I opened the page.

I think saying that I was just curious wouldn't be quite accurate.

I had a feeling— No, maybe I could even say I was certain.

It was my conversation with Kikuchi-san the day before that had turned into a fight.

Her novel hadn't been updated for a while, thanks to her struggle, and yet here was a new part.

I don't like to assume that everything revolves around me, but I wasn't optimistic enough to think this wasn't related.

I got up from the bed and sat down at my study desk.

"…"

I tapped the notification to unlock my phone and opened up

Kikuchi-san's user page on the novel-submission site.

I began reading the story, and it pulled me in.

After Alucia and Libra meet at the beginning, the novel is more of a school fantasy as the two enter the Academy at the royal castle, where they face difficulties and deepen their connections with others.

The story of part two focused on the school's magical-crafting competition.

Up until this point, Alucia had spent a lot of time with Libra to help him succeed in his life at school, but she ended up distancing herself a bit from him so she could go into this competition.

Meanwhile, Libra lived his life at school in his own way, but he ended up making friends with one of Alucia's relatives, a girl called Nana from the blue race—

"You're close with Alucia, aren't you, Libra?"

"Huh? Yeah, more or less."

"So then tell me about Alucia's weaknesses!"

On Nana's whim, he wound up helping her out in the magic-crafting competition.

The magic-crafting competition was more or less what it sounded like—a major Academy event where students would compete in crafting using magic. Being that it was not crafting but *magical* crafting, victory was based not only on appearance and aesthetics but also on the special effects that these crafts had.

Nana, who was on a team with Libra, was the star of the Academy magical-crafting club and the most likely candidate to win the tournament. She had over ten years of experience, so people figured it would be no competition at all. But then Alucia declared she was participating; she had her royal blood and her unique trait of being "bloodless," and the rumors suddenly turned. The vibe of the tournament changed, and now people were looking forward to seeing who would win.

"Do you think…I can win? I'm up against *the* Alucia."

“I can’t make any promises…but I have a plan.”

Alucia was of the royal line, the bloodless girl who had everything.

Nana was of common birth, and she felt like her only redeeming feature was in magical crafting.

In this final showdown between the two of them, the Pureblood Hybrid, Libra—who knew Alucia’s secret side—was supporting Nana. —That was the main plot of part two of *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*.

“…Wow…,” I muttered to myself while reading it.

This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. So I understood now that it was no coincidence.

A boy who was good at outlandish schemes joined forces with a hardworking girl, and they aimed to defeat the incredibly clever queen.

—This structure was very similar to that of a story I knew well.

Nana excelled at the art of making magical crafts, but she was unskilled in combat and other forms of magic. So it was difficult for her to acquire valuable resources from the gold mine on Academy grounds or deep in the Lost Forest.

Alucia, on the other hand, used her bloodless ability to absorb the pure blood of various races into her body, which allowed her to temporarily borrow their powers. Since that experience made her skilled in all areas, there was nothing she was bad at. She was not only excellent at crafting but also talented at magic and in combat, so she was able to enter dangerous places to acquire rare resources.

The rumors were saying that odds were about even, but Libra, who had learned how to succeed at the school, and his good friend Nana knew just how polished Alucia was in every aspect now.

In other words—if they went into the fight without a plan, there was hardly any chance of victory.

“If taking her head-on won’t work…then let’s take advantage of her weakness.”

“Her weakness…?”

If they were to compete fair and square, Nana would be defeated by Alucia’s raw talents.

Since Nana was in trouble, Libra carved out a new path with his quick wits and ideas to push his former teacher into a corner. In other words—

“…I knew it.”

My sense of déjà vu became certainty.

The story was very much like that election—when I’d worked with Mimimi to go up against Hinami. The characters that flowed by on-screen seeped easily into my head, as if they were about me.

Ever since the play, the essence of Kikuchi-san’s stories had been about digging deep into people’s hearts by gathering information about them. So I might even call the resemblance inevitable.

This book was definitely based on the story I’d told her of the election campaign.

But there was just one thing about this novel— just one element that was different from the story I knew.

—The main character of this novel was not Libra, but Alucia.

“Ice that never melts, the lifeblood of a sky snake… Okay, now that we have all this, we only need—”

Alucia was steadily getting ready for the competition, but she also felt unsure.

Most likely, if she fought now, she would win by a wide margin.

But that would shatter the pride of her good friend Nana. And since Nana had been focused on magical crafting for ten years, the blow would do unimaginable damage to her.

On the other hand, that was the nature of competition. If you were going to fight, you had to be prepared to lose, and

considering Alucia's future as a member of the royal family, it could be said that she had to take this chance to show off her dominance in this field.

But Alucia didn't understand—

—what was she trying to win in this tournament for?

What meaning could be found in a title to be won or in victory?

"Because…I'm going to be a ruler," she muttered as if she was telling that to herself, but the words somehow rang hollow.

"I…have to be."

Those words implied that she had a sense of duty, but there was no strength of determination in them.

It was true that victory would gain her prestige. When she eventually inherited the throne, a long list of tournament wins during her Academy years would make it easier to gain support from the people.

However—

She gazed at the moonlit night from the balcony on the highest floor of the Academy and murmured:

"What would it do for *me*?"

Breaking her close friend's pride—

—it would grant her prestige for her future as a ruler, a future she didn't even want.

Would the worth and recognition and all that she gained really be for her, for *herself*?

She couldn't help but feel like the ability and brilliance she'd gained would eventually vanish and leave her empty again, just like when she put others' blood into her bloodless body.

Is that really what I want to do?

Is this something I need to hurt a friend to accomplish?

"…But I have to do it."

Still without any answers but propelled by something, Alucia came up with a flawless strategy—

This storyline was clearly modeled after the election. But the aims of the story's theme were different from the events I'd lived

through.

At that time, I had learned about Mimimi's inferiority complex, her contradictions, and her uncertainties, and my mind had been on those. I think she really showed me the meaning of effort, and the karma of being unable to think of yourself as special—in other words, the discrepancies created by a fundamental lack of self-esteem.

Mimimi's sad smile, her desperate words, her tears of regret—they were still deeply embedded in my heart, and I think that experience has enabled me to more deeply understand people who can't feel confident in themselves.

However, this story of the magical-crafting competition was all about the emptiness of the bloodless girl Alucia.

One time, Alucia was looking for a magic vine that was softer than silk but also strong enough to never be cut, and so she headed alone into the depths of the Lost Forest. But then a poisonous bite from a snake got her, and she fell to the ground.

The wound festered.

Since she was bloodless, the poison wouldn't circulate around her body, but she couldn't possibly walk properly on that leg anymore. Eventually, some carnivorous animal would find her and devour her.

Alucia imagined this coming, but she was not discouraged.

Then she was saved by a boy called Shareef, a mixed papillon and human boy, but right before losing consciousness, Alucia swiped aside Shareef's helping hand and muttered:

"Stop it… I've finally been freed from this prison."

—Maybe I'm fine just dying like this.

—I was empty to begin with. Even if I died now, it's just nothing becoming nothing.

"So it's fine… Leave me be."

I sucked in a breath that made my lips stick to each other, and I realized that my mouth was dry.

Before I knew it, my hand holding my phone felt cold and unnaturally sweaty.

I couldn't say just how close Alucia's feelings were to Hinami's.

You might even say it was breaking the rules to take a character clearly modeled on a real person and depict her in a mental state twisted enough to desire her own death.

But Hinami had said that trying to become number one, helping me with playing the game of life, all of it was in order to prove that she was right. She could only prove that she was right in the real sense by reproducing the results of her efforts. That's why she continued to repeat this "correct" behavior.

Calling that a prison—didn't feel wrong to me.

During the election campaign, I'd been focused on playing Mimimi as a top-tier character against Hinami, so perhaps I hadn't been able to think deeply about Hinami's motives. As I was investigating strategies that could beat the big bad, I'd never tried to peek into Hinami's heart or wonder what she'd been thinking as she'd built up such a perfect strategy.

On the other hand, in *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*, as Alucia was preparing for the tournament, doubts always followed her behind her accumulated efforts. Her struggles and questioning were depicted with incredible persistence.

It was as if the writer of this world was showing Aoi Hinami's heart, supplementing the parts she hadn't been able to depict from my point of view in this story from an omniscient point of view.

Eventually, the story reached the climax: the magical-crafting competition.

"The victor is—Alucia!"

The Libra-and-Nana team had also shocked the judges with all the ideas in the item they'd crafted, but Alucia dominated the room with an item of minute planning and absolute perfection.

She'd won so decisively that anyone would recognize it. There was no way that some makeshift, outlandish scheme would beat her perfectly polished competitive style.

With Alucia's victory, the first half of *Pureblood Hybrid*'s second part came to an end, and eventually, Nana took her loss as a chance to change direction as she began to have doubts about herself.

She had lost in an area she took pride in to her friend, who was no specialist in that area.

She had devoted everything to magical crafting, which was all she had, and a royal girl blessed with everything had shoved her loss in her face.

Aside from her excellence in magical crafting, Nana was just a normal girl you'd find anywhere, so there was no way she could remain as she had been.

Eventually, Nana started skipping out on training in magical crafting, even though she'd never missed a single day before. Finally, she completely abandoned all the efforts she'd continued to invest for over ten years.

So the story went, and though it wasn't completely identical to what I had experienced, the parallels were there.

It was familiar and yet unfamiliar, and I devoured it.

Alucia, who had caused Nana's breakdown, watched her friend lose what mattered to her and felt responsible.

"This is…my fault, isn't it?" *Things are messed up because of what I did*, she thought.

It wasn't like she was particularly fixated on this magical-crafting tournament, after all.

Magical-crafting classes were actually the first time Alucia had started practicing the art, in fact. Losing this competition wouldn't have damaged anything important to her, and neither did she have any pride to maintain.

Even if she'd landed second place, getting runner-up in her first competition would be more than enough. With her opponent being her good friend Nana, who had devoted herself to magical

crafting for ten years, the story would be told as a particularly dramatic one.

She hadn't necessarily needed to win.

She wondered if she should have held back somewhere.

One time, Libra asked Alucia why she was so fixated on victory, and she realized something.

"Wouldn't *you* understand, Libra?"

"Me?"

"There are thirty-two races in the world, and they all have gods they believe in, right?"

"Yeah…"

"But you know. Being bloodless, I have no god to believe in."

"Ah…" *I'm the same*—so Libra thought.

"You're the Pureblood Hybrid. Though you're different from me, you don't belong to any race, so you understand, right? I'm empty—with nothing to believe in."

That was one of the few times Alucia had expressed her honest feelings.

"So then I have no choice but to win. To win and have everyone acknowledge me," she said imploringly, as if seeking one of the few of her kind in the world.

But—

"I…" Libra was struggling to answer.

And his answer was not the one Alucia had hoped for.

"I don't possess a drop of pure blood, so it's difficult for me to believe in one thing. But…" He faced the future, like the sun. "I feel like I can believe in everything, bit by bit. The god of the sun, the god of the moon, the gods of the earth and sea—all of them!"

Alucia's expression twisted.

Libra's smile was pure, with no doubts at all toward the world. To her, it was a form of hope—but also a deadly poison.

"…I see." Alucia smiled sadly. "So you're not like me at all."

"What do you mean…?"

The poison turned into despair inside her, giving rise to words of isolation. "Since I'm…the opposite of you. —I'm bloodless," she spat, her eyes tinged with distrust toward the world.

“I know—I can only doubt everything.”

The remark was cold, but it captured reality.

“You know, I thought that I had to win at everything.” She felt compelled to speak, as finally, her words began to contain something like determination. “But look. Maybe someone who I beat had a really valuable sense of aesthetics, or the desire to help someone, or a passion for the art, right? Maybe that was what they were fighting for.”

She said with envy:

“I don’t have anything like that.”

She smiled in resignation—and then a tiny tear dripped down her cheek.

“I’m just filthy and empty.”

The empty vessel’s will to make the world beautiful had broken.

The doll, cold as ice, had ruined a precious, harmonious soul.

The machine with no desires had extinguished someone’s real passion.

And all she had gained in return was—an empty victory.

She wondered, *Does an empty person like me really deserve to win?*

Eventually, Alucia told Libra of her decision in no uncertain terms:

“Listen. In the next tournament, I think I’m going to lose.”

“What…? Why?” He was surprised to hear that.

“Victory doesn’t befit someone who fights to win for winning’s sake. Just being able to win doesn’t mean you deserve the victory.” With simple words, Alucia rejected all she’d been. “Until I can understand my own form, I don’t need any empty victories.” Her determination was distorted, but it was firm.

“So, Libra, I have a request.” She took his hand imploringly.

Her hands were not shaking, but they were very cold. “Even if I’ve lost, even if I stop being brilliant and special…”

Her eyes, wavering like the surface of a lake blown by the wind, were filled with unsteady light.

“…will you still need me when I’ve lost?”

A few days later, Alucia was participating in a knockout competition in dueling class.

It was a practical class, held in a tournament format, where students would wear special protective attire and battle using their magic powers until the protection wore down to a certain point.

Alucia easily beat her classmate in the first round, and in the second round, she was up against Nana.

Alucia was planning to lose this fight on purpose.

“L-let’s have a good match!”

“Yeah, let’s do it, Nana.”

The two of them faced each other in the arena. Alucia’s eyes were filled with real force, focused on some distant point. Meanwhile, Nana was trying to act like this was the same as always, but she just couldn’t settle her nerves. Even before the battle started, Nana seemed far less intense.

Alucia was the favorite to win this competition, and Nana shrank before her. Alucia had even beaten her at her own specialty, and Nana was terrible at dueling to begin with. In fact, it was basically a fluke that she’d managed to win the first round.

But Nana didn’t think about giving up.

In fact, burning flames had lit within her. She wanted to gamble on this moment to get back at Alucia.

It was clear Alucia was much stronger.

If Nana had any chance at all, it would be with a quick, unexpected move.

Before it turned into a protracted fight, she would take Alucia by surprise and disable her with one attack. That was her only goal.

“Begin!” the teacher referee called, and Nana raced out, her

ponytail drawing an arc after her. Her steps were clumsy, and she didn't know her stance well. Her attempt—a ploy to get close to Alucia—was yawn-worthy to the other girl. She could avoid it on reflex.

But Alucia was trying to lose deliberately, so this was a good opportunity for her.

She threw everything into a surprise attack I wasn't ready for, and she turned the tables on me.

She took a high-risk gamble on one hit, and before I knew it, it was all over.

Nana was so worked up trying to get back at me for the crafting tournament, she won on spirit!

With that story, it would make sense to the audience how a much stronger opponent had been overcome. After considering what she could do to make her loss a reality, she had to use this.

—And so.

"?!"

Alucia made a dramatic show to the audience of gasping like she'd been surprised. She exaggeratedly followed Nana's feint and clearly exposed herself in a big way. She moved so naturally that anyone would think she'd fallen for Nana's trick.

A ball of light fired from Nana's staff. The light ball was unpracticed and unshapely, far from the clean spheres that an advanced caster would throw. But despite that, it was very large and summoned with such spirit that it would end the match in one shot unless Alucia defended herself.

The ball of light came closer and closer to Alucia's face.

Alucia was thinking she would turn around and deliberately take the hit.

But right then—

—she was struck by a sensation like an ice-cold hand clenching her heart.

—You'll lose.
—And that means you're worthless.

If you lose—all you have left is emptiness.

Those black words tore through her body, and a beat later—
—before she realized it, she was swiping aside the ball of light with even more precision than she knew she had.
She turned aside, and with a spring in her step from muscle and magic, Alucia bounded off the ground—

"Gah… Ah!"

—and a moment later, she had ruined everything.

Hands pressing the pit of her stomach, Nana slowly fell to her knees, then weakly collapsed.
There had to be less than ten people who had been able to follow everything that had happened. The only thing the audience had managed to witness was Nana being flung away by enough magic to go slightly over her defensive attire's threshold, then collapsing in pain—and to the side, Alucia was standing there cruelly.
What had happened? Nothing at all.
Nana had used the best strategy she had, and then Alucia had vanished from her field of view—dominating Nana with just one strike a few seconds later.
"V-victor…Alucia!"
Alucia wiped the uncomfortable sweat that was streaking from her armpits. She was the winner of the match, but she was breathing hard as if she was deathly ill. You could see the paleness on her face even at a distance.
"She's so strong!" "Oh, I knew she'd win, after all…!"
"But…did she have to go that far?" "Well, it is a competition!"
Cheers, applause, and some slight confusion embellished Alucia's victory, making it even more dramatic and scandalous.
But—none of those voices reached her ears.

As Nana was lying there, breathing shallowly, Alucia was even more drained than her. She stared at her hands.

She was plenty used to the feeling of being alone and apart from the world, but right now, she felt somehow terribly, hopelessly cold.

This is a curse, she thought.

Alucia had always used her reason to keep full control of herself in order to win, and she had believed that she could manipulate herself perfectly. The ability to absorb the blood of others and amplify it to gain their powers was just a bonus. She even felt that this almost excessive coldness and completeness was the greatest strength that she had gained from her bloodlessness.

But.

—Choosing to lose of her own accord was beyond her.

She couldn't even do something so simple.

"I see…so I…"

Smiling brokenly, Alucia passed by Nana's fallen figure and slowly stepped down from the stage. The cheers and applause from the audience sounded so far away, as if they weren't even directed at her.

"—I'm just scared of becoming worthless."

* * *

The second section came to an end, and I went on a break for a while.

My breathing had gotten shallow, so I took some deep breaths to calm myself down a bit.

—There was no way I could read something like this without

having any thoughts about it.

The story was asymptotic to reality in a deliberate way, with such precision that it was willing to hurt and exhaust the reader. It depicted the depths of individual hearts and revealed their shapes—so much so that I could be certain that her writing it now of all times had to be a message.

Most likely, Kikuchi-san had rewritten the story of *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream* to structure it just like this.

She grasped the essence of things that happened in my life, then adapted them.

She granted our cores to characters that shared commonalities with us to make a different story.

And—consistently through this whole story, she'd added a new element that hadn't been there before.

And that was the point of view that was probably the one area that hadn't really been talked about in my own experience of the story.

That was Aoi Hinami's emotions and motivations.

Kikuchi-san had most likely made the story from Libra's perspective as the base, and she was trying to reveal Aoi Hinami's essence by reconstructing and composing it from Alucia's perspective.

"…I see."

Eventually, I slowly came to understand one more thing.

The various storylines of *Pureblood Hybrid and Ice Cream*—

For example, Alucia using Libra to try to verify the pureblood power that she'd tested previously, or Nana teaming up with Libra to try to defeat Alucia.

None of those were events that Kikuchi-san had seen herself.

All those were from the world only seen from my own first-person perspective.

I was the only one who should know those events firsthand.

I thought back on everything from the first time I had spoken to Kikuchi-san until now.

Every time I had stumbled in life and had been indecisive about something, I'd gone to the library as if I was visiting a save point and talked to her about my problems.

Each time, I'd received hints, and she'd put the underlying motives to words to guide me.

At some point, she had said:

That when she was listening to me, the images came to her mind *just as if she was reading a book*.

Eventually, I started dating her, and then I began talking to her about an even broader range of things.

I'm sure it's not unusual to feel like you can tell your significant other things you can't tell your friends. That was why I told Kikuchi-san about my secrets with Hinami, and little inside stories that I hadn't spoken about before, as much as I could without being insincere to others.

—But.

What if Kikuchi-san was creating a novel based on the things seen from my point of view?

What if Kikuchi-san was writing a story based on the *memories like a novel* that I had talked about?

All the various things that I had told her since I had started playing the game of life—

—were being turned into another story.

I swiped on the screen feeling like I was hauling in a lifeline, reading the continuation of the novel. I had no idea what the point of view or emotions this story gave to me might bring about.

But this story reinterpreted my own life, rattling my very sense of values, and it shook my instinctive desires. My brain was

seeking more.

But—

“Oh…there isn’t any.”

When I scrolled down, the right side of the screen did not display the “next chapter” link. It seemed this was as far as Kikuchi-san had written.

I put down my phone.

I’d felt like involving myself with anyone, or even playing *Atafami*, was too much trouble.

But now—I wanted to read more of this novel.

I wanted to talk with the person who had written it.

I’d gotten back my reason to move toward something.

I closed the reading app and opened LINE.

I wanted to see what this feeling really was. No, I probably already knew, more or less. I mean, I’d discovered possibilities in this stirring in my heart.

When I opened up LINE, I found a number of messages of concern after I missed two days of school. Even if I had fewer well-wishes than Hinami had gotten for her birthday, it felt like a show of the results of my efforts thus far in working on my life.

Betting on a single ray of light, I called Kikuchi-san.

A few hours later—I was in the park in Kita-Asaka, waiting for Kikuchi-san.

“…Fumiya-kun.”

She was panting a little as she trotted toward me. She must have hurried over so I didn’t have to wait. She really was far more mature than me—and so important to me. She’d stayed with me even when I suddenly rejected her, then suddenly changed my mind.

“Hey.”

That’s why I had to say something first.

“Kikuchi-san—I’m sorry.” I’d selfishly imposed my feelings on her, flinging words at her and then running away. But she was still facing me now—I could never apologize to her enough.

And more than anything.

“And—thank you.” The greatest feeling that welled up in my

heart was—gratitude. “For waiting for someone like me, even after all that.”

“Oh, no. I could only manage to say awkward things then myself…”

“That’s not true at all… Besides, I think in the moment, no matter what you said to me and how, I wouldn’t have listened. I think I’d already decided in my heart that I was going to reject everything before the conversation even started. Sorry.”

“Oh, no. I’m glad we could talk again.” She just forgave me. Every one of her words was like an embrace permeating my heart.

“Hey, Kikuchi-san.”

“Y-yes?”

“I read your book.”

I figured that would tell her most of it, since what Kikuchi-san had written communicated everything more densely than talking directly.

“Since the fight the other day, I felt like nothing anyone said to me would have any effect. Nobody’s messages really reached me—not even yours.”

It was a feeling like my body was unconsciously rejecting all words—like I was cooping myself up in a cage, plugging my ears to calls from outside.

Everything in the world had become unpleasant to me, so there was no room for remarks from anyone.

It should have been an absolute fortress with no way to get out. After all, people are fundamentally alone.

“But—”

A certain magical power had brought that fortress crumbling down.

“—your story got through to me.”

When my heart had been all tangled up, the story she’d woven had moved it.

“…So I think I can’t do it myself.”

Even waiting outside Hinami's house had done nothing, and not even honest words full of my heart and soul could reach her.

I no longer had a single thing that could break through Hinami's shell.

—But.

I knew just one more way—

—to show her a message I really wanted to tell her—a theme I wanted to share.

A way to reach her that wasn't just yelling or beating her at a game.

"I want your help."

This was the great power created by Kikuchi-san's karma.

The violent magic that had so affected Haruka-chan—and Aoi Hinami.

And a brilliant magic that had abruptly moved me when I'd become sick of everything.

—The power of stories.

I'd seen it with my own eyes.

Even when Mizusawa had expressed how he really felt to her during summer vacation, and even when I had tried to pry more deeply on the station platform, Aoi Hinami's heart hadn't changed. But the lines of Kikuchi-san's play had shaken her and forced her to confront her darkness.

From just a few clues, Kikuchi-san had dug into the Hinami family's past and upset Haruka-chan's feelings.

And—when I had been unable to believe in the power of words, when I felt sick of everything—when I didn't want to talk to anyone anymore, she had scooped me up from that dark place so deftly, it caught me off guard.

The trigger for all these things had been the stories Kikuchi-san created.

“I want you to make one with me.”

I wanted to involve myself more deeply in Hinami’s life, but I had lost my way to do that.

Kikuchi-san had hurt people with her magical stories and insight, and she had lost her *reason* to write.

I had a reason I wanted to involve myself with Hinami, but I had lost the method.

Kikuchi-san had the method to involve herself, but she had lost the reason.

Wheels and cogs. You need both to move forward, but we each only had one—

—and now here we were, as boyfriend and girlfriend.

“A story to validate Aoi Hinami.”

Frankly speaking, it might be a crazy idea to believe a story could change someone’s values and the way they lived to dramatically save them. It was something a naive kid would think up.

Maybe it’s a wrongheaded assumption, basically just self-satisfaction, and even voicing this idea was embarrassing.

But with Kikuchi-san, I felt like we could do it.

I believed it.

“You really are…a bold dreamer, aren’t you, Fumiya-kun?” She giggled like a young girl.

“Urk…you really think so?” I blushed at my own dramatic declaration.

Kikuchi-san nodded readily—and finally, she gazed at me with mischievous eyes.

“But—this time, I’m a little bit confident.”

“Huh…?”

“The truth is, I still haven’t found a reason to write. But—” As if trusting me, leaning her weight on me, she said, “This time, you’ll give me a reason to write, won’t you?”

She was entrusting me with something even more important than her body—with her whole heart.

“It’s a very lovely one—the desire to save someone you care about.”

Her words drew me in.

It might be weird to say this, but I even found myself thinking that this might be the reason that I had come to date Kikuchi-san at all.

“So I’d like to try it. I can start with the reason that I got from you, and in the course of it—I’d like to find a reason just for me.”

Was she speaking as Kikuchi-san the creator, or as Kikuchi-san the girl?

No—it was as Kikuchi-san the person.

“…Yeah, I think if it’s you, it’s possible.”

She shook her head. “No, not me.”

“Ah, oh yeah… You and me both—”

“Fumiya-kun.”

She gave me a chiding, mature smile.

“—That’s not it, either.”

I couldn’t imagine what it was she was about to say.

“The characters that appear in this story, not just Alucia and Libra…they’re all important characters with their own souls. They’re important friends for discovering Alucia’s truth. That’s why—”

As if looking back lovingly on what she had gained so far, she said, “Nanami-san, and Mizusawa-san, and Izumi-san, and Hanabi-chan…” Her tone was firmly positive and gentle. “I want all the characters who appear in your story to help.”

The brilliant ring of her words stole my heart.



“Not only the honesty of the main character…someone’s lack of confidence, someone’s cowardice, someone’s indecision, and someone’s strength…and even the memories so dark that they’re unbearable—it’s with everyone’s feelings and experiences that you can start to disentangle things. Alucia is just that complex. She can’t be dealt with so simply.”

Eventually, she smiled like a fairy of the spring who could see through everything.

“In this story, Alucia makes it look as if she’s the heroine who needs to be saved…”

Kikuchi-san’s words easily crossed all boundary lines, light as a dragon in flight.

“…but I think—she’s the dark lord who must be defeated in the end.”

I burst out laughing.

“Wh-what is it…?” Kikuchi-san asked.

“No, it’s nothing. But…” It was just too identical.

“…I was thinking the same thing—she’s not the heroine. She’s the final boss.”

Kikuchi-san giggled, too. “That’s right. This story is a school fantasy…but Libra is the hero, while Alucia is the dark lord in the guise of a heroine. I believe that’s the relationship chart for this story.”

“I see…so then…” I gave her a determined grin.

That was something I was quite familiar with, after all.

“…this is what I’m best at.”

The whole party joins forces to defeat the dark lord.

Isn’t that how it always goes in a video game?

Afterword

It's been a long time. This is Yuki Yaku, light novel author, now experienced with a second season of anime.

It's been three years since the anime *Tomozaki* was on air. By the time this volume is on sale, the second season of the anime will be right in the middle of broadcasting—it's a strange feeling, like time is moving quickly but also slowly.

It's been two years since that really big ending in Volume 10, and during that time, not only have I been supervising the second season, but an original anime with me on script has also been announced, and I've been quite literally murdered by work. But finally, I've been able to deliver a story to you all. I hope that this long wait has enabled me to finish something that meets your expectations.

However, I expect to hear some angry voices flying around, saying, *Hey, at this rate, it'll be years before we get the next book, stop playing Smash and get writing*—but can you believe it?—Volume 12 is going to be coming out within months of this one. It's true, please believe me. That's because I actually wrote over five hundred pages for this book, and since it was clearly too long, it was separated into two, so I've already written quite a bit of the next draft. This is based in fact, so it's pretty trustworthy.

And so this series is approaching the end. People who have been following since Volume 1 have told me things like *"I was a student then, but now I'm a working adult,"* leaving me with the keen feeling that time changes many things. Thinking about the ending does bring this slow, welling feeling of loneliness—but that's exactly why there's just one thing I want you all to know before you read the climax in Volume 12.

And that is the fact, which is clear from looking at Hinami on the cover this time, that "the flowers themselves are Aoi Hinami."

I can hear some of you saying, *Stop doing the usual thing in a somber moment—it's rude to use even an emotional moment as a*

lead-in to a joke, but I will explain one thing at a time, so please sit down for a second.

When you saw the cover for this volume, I'm sure your eyes first went to Hinami's expression of ennui, and then to the vividly colored flowers that she's holding. Speaking in terms of past covers in this series, it's unusual for a meaningful motif like this to be on the cover, and combined with how incredibly attractive Fly-san's floral drawings are, the image has a lot of impact.

However, once you settle down and examine the overall picture, then what? It's fair to say this is the first time such meaningful items have appeared, and the composition is quite irregular, with very saturated petals. Yet the image nevertheless maintains harmony overall, with no sense of the flowers clashing.

And the secret to that is what I stated at the start: that the flowers themselves are Aoi Hinami.

The position and distribution of all the flowers and their different colors should draw your attention. The red petals are the most vivid, so it's most straightforward if you consider them first. The red color stands out—so why is it they are in harmony on the screen? To investigate this question, observe their position and what's around them, and there, you'll find your answer.

The red flowers are positioned at Aoi Hinami's chest, as if corresponding to her necktie, which is also red.

That puts red next to red, and despite the clear contrast in shape and meaning, the contrast of colors is actually mild. This is what creates the complex composition interwoven by this multilayered contrast.

Now then, at this point, the rest is practically just verifying answers you already have. Where are the purple flowers? There are three drawn near the blazer, which is a shade between navy blue and violet, as if acting in concert with the broad area of the uniform.

What about the white flowers? They're placed near the white background, but considering their surface area and position atop the purple of the blazer, it may be natural to interpret their meaning as corresponding to her shirt. The harmony brought about thus keeps the whole from feeling incoherent—in fact, it has a sense of unity.

The flowers each represent the red of her necktie, the purple of her blazer, and the white of her shirt. And they are positioned in a vertical line… After this much consideration, don't you now understand what I mean by "the flowers themselves are Aoi Hinami"?

Based on this, please look at the flowers on the cover one more time.

They are not simply flowers that Hinami is holding—your impression should have changed to thinking they somehow are an aspect of Aoi Hinami herself.

And what sort of flowers are these? When you think that far, the phrase *the flowers themselves are Aoi Hinami* gains another meaning.

But hold on a minute—then what does the green of the leaves and stems correspond to? Does your interpretation count only the petals, and the leaves are the exception? To all of you perceptive people who've thought this—please try *meeting eyes* with Aoi Hinami to speak with her. I believe the answer will be found naturally.

And now, the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Fly-san. I love Hinami on the cover so much; while I was writing, I had my phone on a stand displaying this illustration the whole time, muttering, *"Hinami… I'll save you…"* I'm doing that right now with this afterword, too. Actually, I might be the one who needs saving. I'm a fan.

To my editor, Iwaasa-san. When I see you saying things like *"I don't want to increase the workload any more, but this one was interesting, so I have no choice…"* as you start a new series despite being so busy dealing with multiple anime, I think every day, *Man, what a crazy person*. Thank you for your efforts on this volume as well.

And to all my readers. The anime adaptation, the IRL event in Saitama, and the second season of the anime—I'm so glad that I could share these sights with you as they slowly change and move forward. By the time this book comes out, it will already be the New Year, and Omiya will soon become the capital. Thank you very much for your support as always.

Well then, I hope that you will follow me to the next book as well.

Yuki Yaku

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