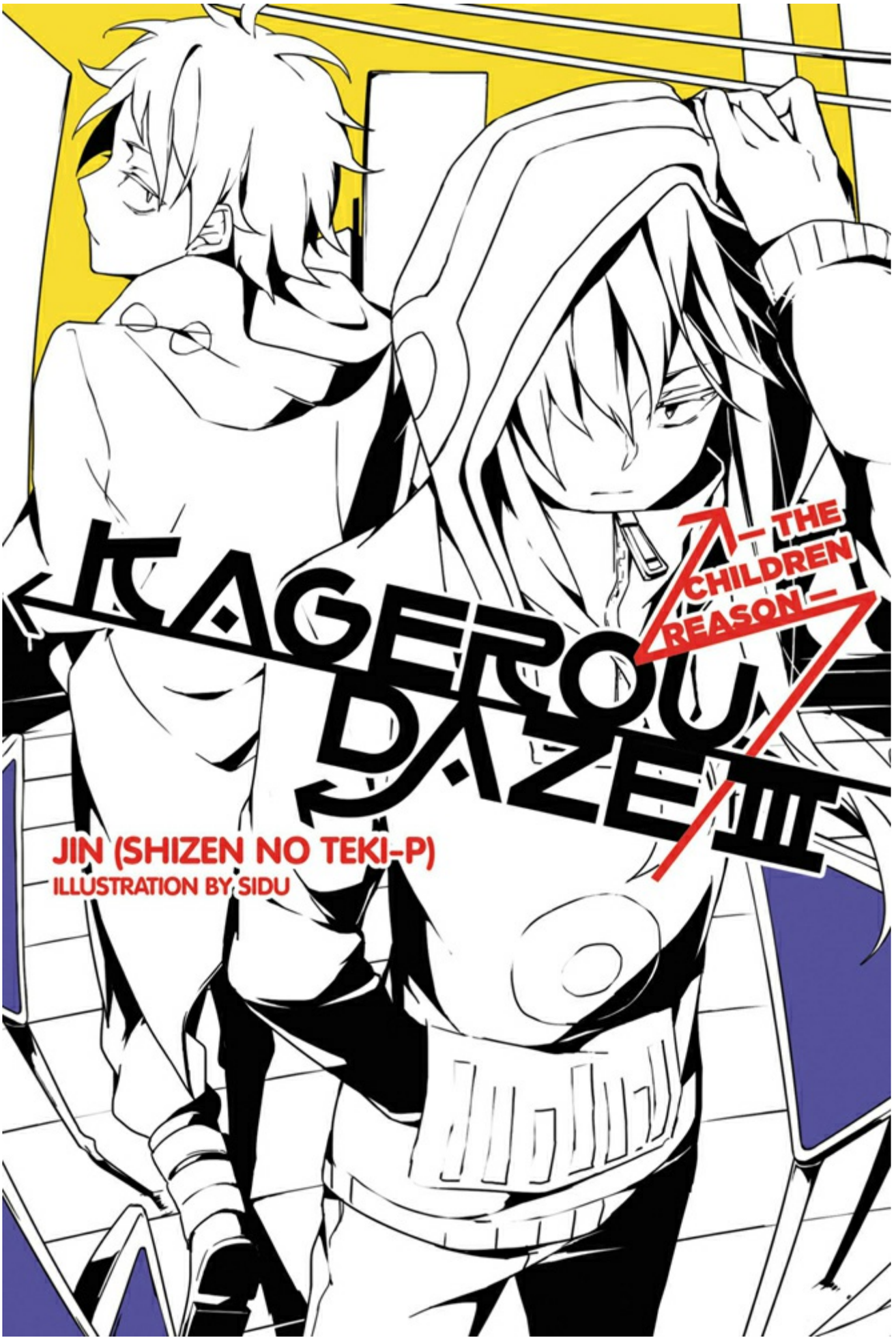

KAGEROU DAZE III
– THE CHILDREN REASON –
JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)
ILLUSTRATION BY SIDU



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MEKAKUSHI-DAN









KAGEROU DAZE

VOLUME 3: **THE CHILDREN REASON**

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)
ILLUSTRATED BY SIDU

YEN ON
NEW YORK

KONOHA'S WORLD SITUATION

The white clouds seem tacked onto the sky, which itself is a deep, thickly daubed shade of blue.

It all looks terribly fake to me, perhaps because I refuse to admit it was ever real at all.

Rays of sunlight rain down, searing and blazing their way across the asphalt as they shimmer through the air.

But the heat, and the smell of the asphalt, is nothing that I can feel for myself.

"You must have realized it by now. You are incapable of remaining in this world. The queen is gone, and now, you are merely spent leftovers."

"Oh. You again. Wish I knew why you wanted to make it that way so badly…"

Is this a conversation? Or am I simply talking to myself?

Either way, it has been quite a long time since I last engaged in meaningful communication with anyone.

Once I go back There, I suppose I'll forget everything.

Forget talking on and on, endlessly jabbering even more than I used to. It's just embarrassing at this point.

At the intersection ahead, marked by a cut in the trees that line the road, a girl staggers her way across the crosswalk, a vacant stare on her face.

How many times have I watched this already? How many times did I just stand there and stare?

I raise an arm, just as I always do. It's easily within reach of her.

"Stop. This is not your world. It is 'theirs' now. Unless one of you can find the other, there is nothing you can do."

The signal is flashing, but the girl does not seem to notice it.

She is right in front of me. So close, I could embrace her.

But no matter what I do, I cannot touch her. My extended hand slips through the girl, grabbing at air, feeling nothing.

“Why?!”

That fateful moment was almost here, heralded by its blood-curdling scream.

Suddenly, my view of the scene twists and blurs, as if I’ve triggered some cosmic computer glitch that corrupted all the graphics.

Looking down, I discover that my body has already ceased to exist.

“He was the one decided upon. It is over. You may have strained, and stretched, and forced yourself in here. But do not be mistaken. Your continued existence is not a product of your own power.”

“…Yes, it’s yours, isn’t it? You’re the one who gave me all this strength in the first place. How nice of you.”

“It simply happened to be the body you desired. Pure and simple. Now, go back.”

“Um, hang on. Just one more thing. Can you relay a message over to me on the other side?”

“What is it?”

“xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.”

“…I can make no promises.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine. Thanks for everything.”

This is probably it, too. Right up to the last millisecond, I’ve acted like such a dumbass.

Ugh…If I could have one more wish come true…

I wish I could reach out to her again.

That girl who kicked my dumb ass all the time…

KAGEROU DAZE 01

From some indistinct, faraway loudspeaker, the old folk song “Sunrise and Sunset” echoed along, signifying the end of the school day.

The sky, which had seemed so lustrous a blue a moment ago, soon splashed itself in rich shades of orange and pink as if stirred to action by the simple, tinkling melody.

The distant green mountains, far beyond the glass window, projected the same air of unchanging, oppressive majesty they always did.

I was, unfortunately, currently the lone passenger on the bus, as it lurched ominously and creaked its way along the hilly, uneven road.

The classmate who got off at the last stop wasn’t a particularly close friend of mine, but the “Sunrise and Sunset” melody that always seemed to pitch up on cue with his departure never failed to stir up the familiar pangs of loneliness.

Picking at the exposed foam poking out invitingly from the seatback in front of me, I peered at the scene beyond the window one more time. I was rewarded with a steady stream of electric poles whizzing past my eyes, a field resplendent with a bumper crop of something-or-other in the background behind it.

It wasn’t the most effective way to make the time go.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

If only I could use my cell phone wantonly at times like this. Life would be *joyous*.

Apropos of nothing, my mind recalled a scene on a city train, which I once saw on my friend’s TV.

Everyone—man and woman, young and old—had been staring intently at their touchscreen phones, each person fully ensconced in their own little worlds.

The sight, as viewed through the old picture-tube TV set, was more than enough to make any elementary-age country kid swoon. Especially if they were *this* far out in the country. Those city women—really, not *that* much older than I am—freely wandering around that glorious urbanity, smartphone at the ready…

I bet they used those phones to contact each other, too, arranging meet-up times for their next big night out. They'd text and chat with their friends all night, share notes with each other over the 'Net—the fun never ending for them.

Occasionally, this fantasy would inspire me to wander into the electronics shop that lay along the way home from school.

Out this far from civilization, with hardly any kind of entertainment available with a price tag, the cash I received from my family as New Year's Day gifts piled up to dizzying heights.

Or by a kid's standards, it did. It was really just a pitiful wad of bills, and I had taken all of it to the store, eagerly chirping out "Gimme a smartphone, please!" as I skipped inside. I had to explain what a smartphone was to the guy running the shop. He didn't have much idea what one was, either.

This, as you'd expect, didn't bring me much closer to mobile bliss. The heavy, plastic, near-antique telephone receiver he showed me instead was, in a way, more character building of an experience than most of what I learned at school.

Which is great.

But right here, right now, "character building" was the last thing I needed.

I'd trade away all that dippy "life experience" for a cell phone in an instant. But who would make that offer to me in the first place?

If, for example, I tried asking those stubborn parents of mine, they'd call me impertinent. Ungrateful. They'd kick me out of the house long enough that I'd have to cower in fear of the stray dogs running around at night.

Fending for my hide in the great outdoors without any supplies was low on my list of priorities. And even if I dared attempt such a purchase without my parents' knowledge, there was no place selling them.

I didn't even have any opportunity to hit the city for one—we had no relatives there. City people ventured out to visit their hayseed relatives during New Year's, or maybe at the Obon holiday in August. Us, we stayed here.

Maybe I could convince someone to courier one over?

Or can you even *do* that, really, with a cell phone?

In terms of tech-gadget knowledge, all I really had to go on were that cell phones let you make voice calls, send text messages, and bump around on the Internet.

I had my parents to thank for that, too, of course.

Thanks to their misguided attempts at child rearing, and their Luddite habit of screaming at their only kid just for attempting to sneak a peek at a friend's TV, I never had anything to contribute to my classmates' conversations. Usually, I was the last to learn about trends, or fashion, or sometimes common sense.

But a cell phone, at least, was something I could keep in my pocket. It wouldn't draw my parents' ire that easily.

So, really, if I could just score one, I was set.

The problem was *how*, and on that score, I didn't have much to go on. The best idea was to ask someone.

But, well…about that…

"Yeah, if I could do *that*, this would be *so* much easier…"

With a sigh, the words slipped from my lips.

There *was* someone I could talk to.

Or, technically speaking, it was *possible* to speak with her. But she wasn't the kind of girl I could just sidle up and bare my soul to.

That was how difficult I found it to approach this girl, Hiyori Asahina, and interact with her.

Born into a fabulously rich family, easily among the top three powerbrokers in this stretch of our rural county, she had been learning things like piano, flower arranging, and ballet practically since she was in diapers. She was ferried off to

the city on regular occasions, attending whatever recital or showing she was involved with next.

Back a little while ago, I spotted her from a distance wielding a charmingly decorated cell phone, tapping away as if to symbolize her clear superiority over us all.

She must have bought it in the city. Along those lines, she was my go-to girl when it came to phone issues.

But I already knew that. That conclusion, I came to eons ago.

The big issue here was twofold: One, Hiyori Asahina was a shockingly, hopelessly moody girl. Two, I was shockingly, hopelessly in love with her.

“I know we live in this utter hellhole of a country backwater, but there’s one thing here better than anything you’ll find, anywhere else. That’s Hiyori Asahina. That’s you.”

Several weeks ago, a classmate of mine sent a love letter along those lines to Hiyori Asahina. Her response: “…*Gross*,” spoken with practiced, honed disdain. I’m not sure the classmate will ever recover.

But that demonstrated just how charming Hiyori Asahina was. It wasn’t a matter of outclassing the rest of the school. No, she was even a level above the child stars and models you saw in magazines and posters.

She was a hit with every male student in the school, of course, and you’d always hear things like “Hiyori Asahina’ll make men out of our boys ’round here yet” and “You can’t even spit without hitting one of Asahina’s secret admirers” among the bemused local adults.

Not that I was different. I was another Asahina admirer…or maybe Asahina addict, to be more accurate. Compared to the Johnny-come-lately Asahina casuals surrounding me, I was confident that no one could beat me in terms of faith, dedication, and amount of (unofficial) merchandise in possession.

To a top-level general in the Asahina Army, morning always came early.

Every morning at six, I greeted my fluffy, stuffed Hiyori doll (made by yours truly) with a smile before reporting to breakfast, poring over the timetable I

made of Hiyori's daily activities and figuring out where I had the best chance of "naturally" running into her that day.

Before leaving home, I always made sure to pick a selection from my carefully curated gallery of Hiyori Asahina instant photos, thrusting it into the holder for my bus pass as I smirked to myself the entire commute.



Once on school grounds, I took a deep breath to take in as much of Asahina's pheromones as I could—different people reacted in different ways to them, but to me, it was an unobtrusively pleasant scent, like bacon—and if I ever managed to spot her in the hall, I'd flash a smile and observe.

If I ever found myself approaching her, of course, I would never greet her with a rude, thoughtless "hey." That was how you could tell a wannabe casual from a true Asahina Army foot soldier.

A fresh recruit to the Army would always attempt to force a conversation, latching on in a barefaced attempt to curry her favor. That never had anything but the opposite effect on Hiyori Asahina.

Just this morning, in fact, I found myself gnashing my teeth as I witnessed just one such upstart make his doomed approach. A simple swipe from Asahina's jeweled dagger ("Ugh, *move*," as she put it) was enough to instantly KO him.

The unlucky suitor was apparently later dragged into the gym's storage room by a particularly radicalized member of the Asahina Royal Guard. It's better for the sake of one's moral character not to even try to imagine what happened to him next.

Thus, a true Asahina rank-and-filer would never attempt something so crassly brash. Instead, they would look on from afar, bathing in the radiant light of her beauty to gain the vitality to push them forward another day. It was a divine vocation, in other words.

So how could someone like myself, engaged in what was honestly God's work, bring up such a silly and pointless topic as mobile telephony with Hiyori Asahina herself? That's where the problem lay. I would never allow myself to as much as hope she would lift a finger for me.

Intellectually, I knew that.

But in my heart, I found baser desires constantly whispering their temptations.

Yes. The true desire secretly hidden underneath my lust for a cell phone:

"…I want to text with Hiyori Asahina."

No. Not just text. I want to voice with her. While we're on the bus, of course, but in the evening, too, unbeknownst to anyone, night after night.

"I gotta do it with her…"

The thoughts bubbled out from my mouth. I shut my eyes, balling my hands into fists, but the dream remained far away, reminding me yet again of how incapable I was of reaching it.

"Yeah, that's great, but this's your stop, kid."

The words suddenly thrust at me dragged my mind back into the real world in an instant.

I turned upward, seeking out the scoundrel who tossed this sharpened stone at my unguarded soul. As expected, the bus driver's gaze pounded down at me, accompanied by a grin that all but shouted, "Oh, this is *hilarious*!"

Shame coursed into my mind, faster than I could formulate any other thought.

"Agh…Uh. Sorry! I'm getting off!"

Hurrying myself off the bus would do nothing to alleviate this sordid state of affairs, but I shot up off my seat anyway, unable to withstand any more of it. I had to show my bus pass before departing, however, which meant more frantic fumbling and flailing through my backpack.

"Uhh, bus pass, bus pass…Ah, jeez, where is it…? No, I got it, I got it! Just gimme one second…"

I rifled through every pocket and pouch of my backpack, but the bus pass that I knew I placed inside this morning had disappeared without a trace.

"Oh, crap, did I leave it at home…?! But I couldn't have…"

Now things were even more sordid. The shame had already blanked my mind, like an eraser to a whiteboard.

"Huh? Aw, don' worry about it. I can let it slide one day; yer always showin' it to me erry day anyway."

The exasperated driver gave me a pat on the head as he smiled. A breeze of

relief wafted across my chest.

What a guy. He had every right in the world to haul me in for skipping out on my bus fare, and yet his kindheartedness saved my life.

“Uh, uh, are you sure?! I’m sorry, I *swear* I’ll have it tomorrow…”

“Sure, sure, ’s fine! But, hey, kid…?”

The driver took his hand off my head, his expression suddenly stern as his eyes sparkled.

“Buh? Ah! Yeah?”

The anxiety stabbed into my heart once more. I *knew* I shouldn’t have forgotten my pass…

“Oh, jus,’ y’know, the ‘I gotta do it with her.’ Hee-hee-hee! Boy, I tell you, kid, that’s all *I* thought about when I was your—”

“Thank you very much!! See you tomorrow!!!!”

Like a frightened jackrabbit, I sprang out of the bus before the driver could finish his painfully misinformed observation. The moment I hit terra firma, I hung a right, dodging the weather-beaten bus shelter.

Soon, I was tearing my way down the sidewalk, summer grass growing wild to the side.

I could hear “Have a good one!” faintly from behind me. That guy was bad news. *Really* bad news. I couldn’t articulate exactly how, but he was plainly bad news. I had to forget about him as soon as possible.

Slowing down, I stretched my upper body straight up. On the far end of a one-lane road that seemed to stretch on to infinity, the faintly dark mountains slowly began to consume the sun.

Sunset came pretty late into the evening this time of year.

The nights were still obstinately chilly, but the air was nonetheless infused with a reminder of the sun’s heat, letting you taste the incoming summer on your skin.

“Wonder what I’m gonna do this summer. They had me helpin’ out in the field

the whole time last year. Hope they give me a break this time…”

I had made it into my teenage years without making good on my intent to escape from this backwoods dump. The main thing I associated summer with was fieldwork, caked in mud, under the blistering sun.

“Wish we could go on a trip somewhere…not that we will. Not like we got the money for that. Man, I bet I know who does…”

I knew Hiyori Asahina had the free money to travel wherever she wanted, to enjoy a storybook summer in the exotic retreat of her choice. I had no way of confirming it, but the image came to mind too readily for my tastes.

She came from a different world, a different perspective, a different *everything*. She’s seen sights and done things a thick country hick like me couldn’t even imagine.

I knew that well enough. That was why I looked up to her. Why I fell for her.

Taking in the setting sun, I stole a glance at the nearby orange-tinted fields as I dwelled on my eternal conundrum. Then I spotted my house, a little ways away from the village itself, a single plume of smoke rising from its tiny chimney across the vast stretch of meadow.

When was the last time I left this village? I couldn’t recall, which I assume meant it was a while ago.

And I’m still just a teenager, too. That’s how boring and unmemorable it must have been.

When would I earn my next chance to ditch this village?

Suddenly, I conjured an image of my future self with Hiyori Asahina, glancing at the destination sign as we boarded a fancy sleeper train, smiling at each other.

I felt a twinge from somewhere near my chest. A warning, wordlessly telling me how ludicrous the idea was.

“But I can’t give up on it *that* easy…”

I sighed softly before embarking on the final short leg of my journey.

Amid the false bravado, I thought I heard a voice sneer “Running out of time, aren’t you?” at me from somewhere.

*

“Just a bit more…”

I focused carefully on my stitching, pouring my soul into each one.

“I’ll make you cuter than ever, okay…?”

It was just about ten at night.

Thankfully, this room, which my mother carefully and thoroughly cleaned on a daily basis, was just as neat as always.

Once I reached home, I sat down at my windowside study desk to stitch for a bit, stare at my work, stitch again, and all the while feel the stress slip from my shoulders. The process had repeated itself for the past four hours or so.

Now the time was near: My magnum opus, my very own Talking Hiyori, had neatly consumed at least three months of my free time. Now, I was a mere few stitches away from completion.

“This is going to change Asahina Army history…!”

The level of expertise, of artisanship, was enough to make me yell out in joy. Just looking at it gave me goose bumps.

Her face was unabashedly fetching but still retained an ominous tone that seemed to separate her from the rest of the human race. Her attractive, well-combed black hair was matched with a one-piece dress. I had kept careful records of her wardrobe, and here I opted for the outfit that (I imagined) she liked the best.

The icing on the cake was the miniature tape recorder I found at the electronics shop I tried and failed to buy a cell phone from.

Inside was a loop packed with recordings of Hiyori Asahina’s voice, painstakingly taken over a period of several weeks whenever I passed by her. The device fit inside the doll, inserted through a rear zipper, giving me the chance at a virtual conversation with my love.

The theme I settled on for her design was “Looking Good in the Big City!” and

throughout the entire development process, I never wavered from this concept. Once complete, it would shake the very foundations of our Asahina brotherhood.

And then it was one stitch. Just one stitch away from finishing my masterpiece.

I put my hands down for a moment and closed my eyes.

Looking back, these past three months may have been the most epic journey I'd made in my life.

A journey that stayed firmly shut within the boundaries of my mind, of course, but the cross-country tour of Japan's top sights I fantasized about taking with Hiyori Asahina had extended in my imagination to a good three laps around the virtual nation.

"…Okay."

I didn't surrender myself to reverie for long. There was one final stitch to sew. I shifted my focus to the doll in front of me.

"And now…here she is—!"

"Hibiyaaa! Phoooone!! Get *down* here!!"

My hands slipped at the sound of my mother's voice booming from down below, causing my needle to ominously embed itself into Talking Hiyori's torso.

"Gaaaaaahhhhhh!!"

I shouted out loud at this unexpected disaster. My cool, collected mind was now shattered by the sight of a thick iron bar thudding itself into Hiyori Asahina's chest.

"What did I…How…How…?!"

My hands quivered in horror as I covered my face with them.

In my imagination, Hiyori Asahina was in my arms, whispering her final words as I pleaded for her life. I had trouble with the dialogue, not having honestly spoken with her that often, but at least the atmosphere was right.

"Hibiyaaaa!! Get down here now!!"

My mother's cruel bellowing was starting to build steam. It was time to abandon the effort for now.

"All *right*! I'm *coming*!"

Carefully positioning my virtual Hiyori on the desk, I spun around on my chair, positioned myself opposite from the doorway, and hopped off.

Opening the door, I jumped down the creaky old staircase. A rotary-dial telephone sat unceremoniously on a shelf in the downstairs hallway.

"Who's even calling me at a time like…I mean, who *is* it, anyway? You coulda told me, Mom…"

Doubts still fresh in my mind, I picked up the receiver and began speaking. Someone calling at this time of the night couldn't be anyone decent. Might as well try to keep this short.

"Uh, hello? This is Hibiya, but who's—"

"*About* time."

I had tried to sound gruff and annoyed, but it was like a kid against a heavyweight fighter. I was floored.

The identity of the voice, regardless of what attitude it was trying to bring across, was enough to drown me in bewilderment.

"Huh? What—"

"Uh, I said, *about* time*? You know I'm standing up while I'm making this call? My legs are starting to, like, hurt?"*

There was no mistaking the voice, or the chip on her shoulder. There was no way you ever could.

Hiyori Asahina was on the other side—her usual overbearing, outrageously uncaring attitude all but thundering in through the receiver.

"Uh, like, can you hear *me? Hellooooooo? Are you deaf or something?"*

"Uh, Hiyori?! Y-yeah, I can hear you! Yeah! I hear you great!!"

My brain was too overloaded to function properly. Spinal reflex was all I had to offer in response to Hiyori Asahina's query.

“Why’re you acting so tense? Ugh*…Like, whatever. So I wanted to, uh, ask you about something?”*

“‘Ask’…?”

“Uh, yeah? ‘Ask’? Or maybe more like, uh, ‘negotiate,’ or something?”

Who could have ever predicted this turn of events? I knew how I acted on that bus. Talking about “doing it” to myself.

And now I’m *doing it*.

But what did she want, so close to midnight like this?

“Oh, dude, you’re always *totally* welcome to…uh. I mean, sure, no problem. What’s up?”

“Well, you know you, like, dropped your bus pass, right? I saw it in the hallway at school today and it, uh, had your name on it?”

That explained things well enough. No doubt I was lost in thought about my work on Talking Hiyori that I completely lost track of my pass. Never in a thousand years would I dream of finding it *this* way.

Though, in a twisted way, I suppose I had the bus driver to thank.

I had made such a mental effort to put that danger to society out of my mind that I removed the bus pass from memory entirely.

And that set the stage for this phone call, one that would undoubtedly change my life.

She was here to tell me she picked up my pass. What bliss. *So*, *so* kind of her. I always knew Hiyori Asahina was an angel in—

Wait a second.

I was struck by the distinct feeling I had forgotten something. Something vitally important…

—Before leaving home, I always made sure to pick a selection from my carefully curated gallery of Hiyori Asahina instant photos, thrusting it into the holder for my bus pass as I smirked to myself the entire commute—

“…Uh, are you even listening, *or…? ’Cause there’s all these, like, weird pauses*

whenever it's your turn to talk? So about your bus pass…"

"It's not mine!"

"Huh?"

I was sweating enough that I feared the puddle forming around my feet would somehow cause the telephone to electrocute me.

In my mind, the Apocalyptic Crap Festival was well under way. It chiefly consisted of myself, Hibiya Amamiya, uttering "crap crap crap crap crap crap crap *crap crap crap crap*" as rapidly as possible, as a gaggle of drunken parade-goers strapped me to a piece of plywood in the main tent and slowly hoisted the guillotine blade above my neck.

Crap.

This was *really* bad.

The photo I chose for today was particularly dangerous. Hiyori Asahina, her skirt flipped up a bit by a spring breeze. A tad naughty, but that was right up my alley. It couldn't have been a worse selection.

Just watch what happens when the girl herself discovers that I'm walking around in broad daylight with that photo in my bus-pass holder. It's all over. All gone. Take only pictures, leave only ashes.

And oh, *man*, I just spent three hours finishing up Talking Hiyori. I'm digging myself deeper and deeper into my grave.

I've got to do something…anything…

"Well, I mean, it's kind of got your name *on it, y'know? Like…How'd you even get off the bus, if you didn't notice it was gone?"*

"Uh, maybe it's someone with the same name? Probably that! There's got to be, like, a million people around here named Hibiya Amamiya!"

"With that *weird name? Like,* no*? I don't know anyone else, anyway. But, uh, I wanted to ask about what you had on the back of it?"*

There was nothing I could do. The Apocalyptic Crap Festival in my brain had reached a fever pitch.

The revelers pulled a black hood over my head as I helplessly squirmed. A strapping young man in a loincloth took a long knife to the rope holding the guillotine blade upward, slowly scraping the blade against it as he grinned.

There on the plywood sheet, Hibiya Amamiya smiled in apparent reverie, as if internally coming to terms with something.

I'm done for. There's nothing I can do that'll help weasel me out of this. If this is how I go out, I might as well do it with a bang.

"Like, is this—"

"All right! All right, all right! Look, I know it's never gonna happen, but you could at least let a guy dream, okay?!"

I told her the truth, or at least attempted to. It failed to come out quite as intended.

It's only human, I suppose: You've resigned yourself to your fate, but there's still *something* inside you, telling you to keep fighting.

"Uh, I dunno what you're freaking out over, okay? It's weird.*"*

That urge shattered to pieces. I expected nothing less.

It was no doubt my final day as an Asahina Army general. Hot tears ran down my cheeks.

I closed my eyes. In the darkness, I could see all her other would-be suitors descending from the heavens to greet me, in all their naked glory.

I'm sorry I treated you all like idiots. I'm ready to go with you now.

I hope you won't mind if I bring some photos and my Talking Hiyori with me, at least.

As I stood there in silence, feverishly trying to glorify my tragic death, Hiyori Asahina gave me yet another unexpected shock.

"Like, who said you had to dream or anything? I, uh, called you because I wanna, like, help make it come true, okay?"

"Huehh?"

I had trouble understanding Hiyori Asahina's statement, enough so that my

response easily ranked within the Top Three Dumbest Things I've Said All Year.

But she definitely said it. She wanted to make it come true. What was she *talking* about?!

"Come true…? Did you mean…?"

"Uh, I mean exactly what I said, okay? I know you're, like, serious about it? So I wanna help make it come true."

The hastily constructed altar at the center of the Apocalyptic Crap Festival in my mind exploded, splintering into a million pieces.

Hibiya Amamiya, suddenly awakened to a new and awesome force, stood up and crushed the guillotine's blade in his palm, like it was made of cake icing.

"R-r-really?! I mean, uh, *seriously*?! You really *feel* that way?! I mean… Whaaaaa?! Really?!!"

*"*Ugh*! Quit being so loud! I'm not gonna, like, say it again?"*

"O-okay!"



“Okay? Good. So, like, great, but did you really wannit that bad? I mean, I guess you’ve been, like, thinking about it forever, right?”

The near-endless stream of volatile questions began to make my heart palpitate. Today was putting a terrible burden on my blood pressure.

Do I “want it”?! Is it even okay for her to *say* that?! Is that how loose standards have gotten with our generation?!

No, no, no. What are you thinking? Take your mind out of the gutter.

I’m acting like some kind of wild ape. This isn’t the right thing to do.

“Oh, I *super* want it.”

After careful consideration, Hibiya Amamiya opted for full-on wild ape mode.

I’d like to meet the guy who wouldn’t, given this kind of chance.

Go ahead! Call me disgusting! Watch me *care!*

“Yeah, uh, I guess so, if you had that in your holder and everything? I, like, kinda figured it was like that? So how ’bout I make it come, uh, true?”

“Are…are you sure…? Really…?!”

The sweat pouring off my forehead neatly converted itself into a nosebleed.

The horde of naked men descending toward me just a moment ago now glared wistfully. I ignored them. Filthy monsters. Go away.

“But I got, like, one condition, okay? The ‘negotiation’ thing I talked about? I want you to, like, make a wish come true for me, too.”

Hiyori Asahina’s voice was calm as she carried the conversation forward. One would expect a woman to act at least a tad embarrassed, discussing things like these. But maybe this is my lack of experience making itself embarrassingly obvious again. Maybe it was normal these days for couples to “negotiate” this, like some pro athlete’s contract.

But I wasn’t in the market for theatrics. I don’t play around, and I doubt she did, either. This was just her way of shyly courting me. But I’m a man. I have to take the lead.

“Well, of course! Of course! I’ll do anything I can! What did you need from me?!”

“Wh-whoa, someone’s sure, uh, rarin’ to go, huh? Well, like, it kinda connects with your ‘request,’ too, so…Like, are you free during summer break?”

“Of course! Totally free! I’m helping out around the farm a little bit, but no, no special plans!”

“Oh? Wow, good. Okay, could you, like, keep your whole summer vacation free? ’Cause we’re going to the city. Oh, and just the two of us, okay?”

“Uehhm?”

I was preparing myself for something difficult or physically demanding. Humiliating, perhaps. What I didn’t expect was Hiyori Asahina offering something on such a grand scale.

“Let’s go on a date somewhere nearby” was one thing, but once you got to the level of “Let’s go to the city,” that was simply unheard of around here. Even the high-school-age kids in this county rarely went beyond something like “I know this really secluded pond; why don’t we head over there and bring some sushi rolls to eat?”

And where did “just the two of us” come from? Was she treating me to some kind of grand, epic adventure? If she was expecting me to fire right back with an instant answer, she was gonna be disappointed.

“I…uh, why the city? And why…alone…?”

“Um, like, I wanted to go there? Because there’s something I want over there? So I thought I’d invite you to, you know, help hold my things, and stuff. What, don’t you like being with me?”

“N-no! No! Of course I do! You kidding me?! I just…My parents are superstrict, so I dunno if I can get the money to…”

“Oh, that’s fine. We’re, like, totally loaded, so I can cover for you. I’m kind of keeping this, you know, a secret from my parents, so…Oh! But you gotta keep quiet about it too, okay? Don’t, like, tell a soul, okay?”

“You’re keeping it secret from *your* parents?”

“Uh, yeah? I mean, that’ll help make your ‘dream’ come true easier, right? You know, ’cause of your ‘superstrict’ parents?”

She was right. The mere thought of reporting my romantic trysts to them made me erupt in primal fear. But a trip with my beloved without my parents’ knowledge? It was everything I needed to make my fantasy a reality.

That, and as she undoubtedly knew by now, it was hardly a secret around the local county that Hiyori Asahina’s family was practically rolling in cash. She could cover travel expenses for two kids without batting an eye.

But something nagged at me.

If she was going through all this trouble just for some shopping in the city, why didn’t she just ask her parents?

And something about her phrasing—the whole “make my dreams come true” thing—didn’t seem quite right to me. My dreams didn’t involve grand vacations with her. Not very often. Okay, they did. But, really, an afternoon walking around the village would have been more than enough to keep me happy.

Why was she going out of her way, crossing this rickety, dangerous bridge, to travel the city alone with me? The only possible answer, one as obvious as it was plainly proven, sprung to my mind.

“…You’re really that into me?”

“Huh? What’d you say?”

“Uhh, uh, nothing! Sorry!”

I snapped my head upward, breaking out of my self-engineered episode of egotism.

To make a long story short, Hiyori Asahina had clearly fallen in love with me. She had fallen in love so badly, she didn’t know what to do with herself.

And as she so bravely struggled with her emotions, she picked up a bus-pass holder with my name on it, accompanied by a picture of herself. She was seizing that as a chance to approach me, using terms like “discussion” and “negotiation” to disguise what was so blatantly plain to us both.

She was taking the noble route, couching her intentions by speaking of my

dreams, and making them reality. But perhaps, deep down, she wanted to embrace me with her arms this very minute.

The evidence presented to me was clear enough. She wanted to go somewhere far away with me, and only me. As her luggage boy, is how she put it. But, again, that was no doubt her way of smoothing over the torrential desire gushing through her body.

“But…all right. I know how you feel, and I’m ready to answer that!”

“Ugh, that sounds soooo lame…Look, I’m expecting you to, like, help me get what I want, okay? ’Cause if you don’t, I’ll send you right back home.”

The icy chill behind Hiyori Asahina’s voice still stung as frigidly as ever. But now I knew. This was how she showed affection. And the more I realized that, the more it sounded like sweet honey to me.

But what did she want, exactly?

It may all be just a big excuse. It may not even exist. But…

“Oh, uh, sure! Naturally…but what’re you looking for, anyway?”

“Huh? Uh, you know, there’s this new pop-idol singer, right? And I’m kinda looking for her autograph? I mean, you saw the ads, right? ‘The sixteen-year-old phenom who’ll steal your heart away!’ and stuff? I, like, totally *love her. She’s* so *adorable!”*

“Oh! Oh. Yeah, I don’t really watch a lot of TV, so…Wow, though. Neat.”

I could feel my heart freeze over at teeth-clattering speed.

The warmth that manifested itself the moment Hiyori Asahina began talking about that singer was more than enough to show me and my wild fantasies of a chic urban getaway with my new partner where the chips really lay.

It should have been obvious from the start. There’s no way her main goal was to spend time with *me*. I had my head way too far into the clouds.

And I didn’t know which pop idol she was talking about, but if she was charming enough to make Hiyori Asahina’s heart melt, she was truly someone to fear.

“But…but, uh, if she’s that famous, wouldn’t it be hard to get her autograph…?”

“Hee-hee! You think so? Well, guess what! I’m gonna have a chance at it.”

She all but trumpeted the words, the “rich heiress” side of her exposed for all to see.

“A chance? Is she doing an autograph event, or?”

“Uh, no? I mean, she, like, never *does stuff like that. Like, she’s so famous, it always turns into a mob scene wherever she show up.”*

A new pop idol who’s already too famous for one-on-one fan events? What kind of world-beating beauty was this?

No. She couldn’t be that beautiful.

After all, there wasn’t a woman in the world who could outclass Hiyori Asahina. There *couldn’t* be.

But if this star wasn’t into public appearances, then an autograph seemed out of the question.

She wasn’t expecting *me* to come up with some harebrained scheme to trick this celebrity into whipping out a pen for her, was she?

“But I kind of have an in, you know? My sister’s husband is a schoolteacher, and that girl is one of his students! I was chatting with her on the phone, and she was like ‘Come on down for Obon, I can probably get a signature for you.’ So I figured I’d, like, do a little sightseeing while I was over there, but my parents… You know, they freaked? They were all like ‘Oooh, how can you say *that, you need to* study, *blah blah blah.’”*

“So that’s why you aren’t telling them?”

“Right. Yeah. But, like, I haven’t been to the city by myself before, so I figured I’d invite you to help carry my stuff. You know?”

I knew. It explained why she was so gung-ho about a trip with me, or at least anyone available and breathing.

If she had a local relative who knew that pop idol, there was a pretty good

chance an autograph was in her future. We wouldn't have to pay for a hotel, either.

Given the level of respect Hiyori Asahina generally had for others—which is to say, zero—a long lecture from her parents was a surefire way to make her run away from home, even if it meant going it alone. That made the meaning behind "let's go away and keep it a secret" all the more clear.

Which brought another nagging question to the forefront:

"Uh…so, so why did you need me to come along at all?"

"Why? No reason. I just figured, like, you'd listen to what I'd say, you know?"

I felt something sharp thud unto my heart. Faced with the overwhelming presence of Hiyori Asahina's sheer indifference, the smile of Hibiya Amamiya—the same pair of lips that accused her just a moment ago of being "that into" him—evaporated into a wisp of dust.

I should have expected it. All Hiyori Asahina cared about was this airhead pop singer's autograph. Nothing else captured so much as a moment of her interest.

In conclusion, then, there was no particular romantic motivation behind tonight's phone call.

The Level-3 Super Hibiya in my mind, previously dismembering the hordes of masked men that stalked the charred remains of the Apocalyptic Crap Festival, suddenly fell to his knees, a shriveled version of himself.

"But…you said you'd make my dreams come true. What was *that* supposed to mean?! I mean, it's not that easy to—"

"Uh, what are you going on *about? I'll help you buy a cell phone. It's not supposed to, like,* mean *anything, okay?"*

Cell phone?

Why did the conversation make a sudden swerve toward portable technology? I didn't remember the topic coming up once this entire phone call.

Wait up.

Let's pick our way back through this conversation.

Hiyori Asahina noticed my bus pass on the floor. She picked it up, discovering the photo I had inside. She saw that, and she quite loudly articulated her wish to “make my dreams come true.” Because I was clearly “serious about this.”

Then she asked if I “wanted it.” Two words I’d never forget. Ever.

Where did mobile phones fit into this?

That didn’t have anything to do with—

“…Ohhhgh.”

A sudden nightmare scenario popping into my brain made me audibly groan.

Like a long-lost puzzle piece, it made all the discomfort lurking behind the scenes a suddenly complete, eerily dreadful picture of doom.

I turned toward the full-length mirror placed on one wall of the downstairs corridor. It reflected my image back, of course, just as I was when I returned home earlier.

Thrusting a harried hand into the breast pocket where I always put my bus pass, I realized that something else I always kept in there was missing.

“Uh, you did *want a cell phone, right? You, like, stuck part of a sales flyer for one in your bus-pass holder. I’m* trying *to help you come with me so you can make that dream come true. Why’re you acting all, like, suspicious of me?”*

At that moment, my foolish misunderstanding became clear as day, the ecstasy in my heart crashing to earth at terminal speed.

Hiyori Asahina hadn’t spotted my photo of her at all.

It was a department-store flyer advertising a sale on mobile devices. I had a habit of sticking it in my breast pocket so I could use it as conversation fodder, just in case I ran into Hiyori Asahina sometime.

How did that escape my notice until now?

This sudden call from Hiyori Asahina herself shook me, no doubt.

But that didn’t excuse the megaton-level mistake I just made.

She was “shyly courting me.” I “*super* want it.” Why don’t you just *die*, you stupid, depraved freak?

Just recalling the events of a moment ago made me want to run around the hall, screaming and bashing my head against the wall panels. Then I realized that another question—the biggest one of all, actually—still remained unanswered.

I gingerly asked:

"…Uh, was there anything else inside my pass holder?"

Hiyori Asahina sighed an exasperated, gruff sigh.

"What, did you lose something else? That was, like, all I *saw in there, but… What? Was there something important?"*

"No. Not, um, really."

I knew it. Hiyori Asahina didn't have the photo.

She couldn't have. If she did, she'd call the youth detention center, not me.

But, after thinking about it a moment, it made sense. Around school, especially in the school years around Hiyori Asahina's, there was a huge population of card-holding Asahina Army members.

—You can't even spit without hitting one of Asahina's secret admirers—

It wasn't much of an exaggeration.

If one of those half-starved hyenas picked up my pass holder, graced with the presence of one of my favorite self-made trading cards, before Hiyori Asahina did—what would he (and it'd definitely be "he") do?

The answer was evident.

He'd swipe the photo and toss the holder back where he found it. A bus pass around this county—especially one that brought the rider out as far into the sticks as I lived—wasn't worth much.

It even had my name on it, too. Stealing something that left such a clear trail of footprints provided little benefit to any would-be thief.

The photo by itself, though…Talk about the ultimate in opportunity crimes. If I reported to the police that I was searching for something so blatantly gray-area, it'd be straight to happy-delinquent land for me.

It’s not like I could ask anyone else about it, either. The criminal who made off with it probably figured he’d face zero punishment whatsoever. The flyer was folded right in there, too, so the photo was probably stuck somewhere in between.

But maybe I needed to thank the Asahina Army scavenger behind this theft. The act made me boil with anger, of course, but he kept my deviant and totally actionable sexual desires a secret from Hiyori Asahina. He saved my life, in a way. It made me nauseated, imagining her laying eyes on that photo. It’d be nothing but prison food for the rest of my teenage years.

“But…wow, that’s really great…”

I leaned against the shelf the phone was poised on, slowly collapsing down to the floor.

“Uh, hello? You’re acting, like, really weird again?”

“Oh. Sorry. I guess I am, kinda, huh?”

So, in the end, I misread her intentions and let myself wallow in a fantastical realm of fantasy for several minutes.

The gap from my previous euphoria made it difficult to remain upright, but I still felt a strange sense of serenity.

It was all an impossible dream. A lone flower, atop a high mountain peak, never possibly within my grasp. I let myself dream about it nonetheless, but having this enormous chance presented before me and then promptly burned to the ground made the truth all the more stark.

There was no reason left to expect things would improve with—

“Uh, so are you going, *or what?”*

“Huh?”

She sounded ready to lecture at me, but still seemed open to my response. My pulse, almost slowed back to normal, leapt back into action.

Oh. Right. This wasn’t over yet.

In fact, I was still being presented with an unbelievable chance, wasn’t I?

Even if it was all a ridiculous fever dream on my part, even if this was just another one of Hiyori Asahina's selfish whims, she was still *this* close to me.

She initiated an entire conversation with me. She's inviting me to come along with her. Even if it meant nothing at all, could I have been any more blessed?

I used my free hand to prop myself back up to a standing position.

"Well, of *course* I'm going. We can make this a great summer break together."

Yes. There's no reason it can't start like this. The gears are all in motion.

Whether it's destiny at work or just some dumb coincidence, it didn't matter. Regardless of what happens, as long as I didn't give up, I'm sure I could communicate my true feelings to her.

"Pfft. Well, like, you're gonna work *for it, okay? I'll figure out a schedule and stuff tomorrow. All right?"*

"Sure thing! Looking forward to it!"

"Mm. Good. Talk to you later."

There was a click, and then Hiyori Asahina's voice was gone.

I sighed deeply, letting my body relax a little.

Then I shot a look toward the front door, suddenly taken by an impulse to run out and breathe some fresh air. Walking down the hall, I put on a threadbare pair of shoes and slipped out. A chill wind, scented with summer grass, greeted me by the door.

A large full moon shone in the dark blue sky as I walked down the road, gazing at it. There weren't too many lights along this street, but the moon was all I needed to see the way.

Summer was about to begin, and an adventure that only we were privy to.

I looked to the moon in anticipation, the past euphoria not quite drained from my body.

It was a season we'd likely never forget.

CHILDREN RECORD 1

An emergency stretcher wheels its way past me, clattering loudly as it goes.

I was surprised at how close it was, but it was clear that now was no time to be concerned about that.

That bed was transporting what may be the heaviest thing in the world, not to mention the most fleeting.

That was why I was never good with hospitals: Because if I went to one, I had to face that.

Because it reminded you, no matter how much you were numbed to it in your daily life, that this, *this*, is the inescapable fear of death.

There was no way to tell how much time passed after that.

Thanks to my sudden sprint earlier, my legs, generally about as resilient as a particularly strong dandelion, were trembling. I doubted I could rely on them much for a while.

Of course I couldn't. I generally never used my legs at all, except to transport myself to the shower and/or toilet. And yet here I am, having kicked off my journey with a shopping trip, continued by a day I was forced to spend in an amusement park, and capping it off with a full-on footrace. Nobody could keep up with that.

What was she even thinking, though? I had no idea. I had constant trouble reading her thoughts in general, but deep down, I didn't really want to know what that impish, malicious virus was thinking anyway.

But something about her behavior today bothered me. On the way from the amusement park, she begged me to chase an ambulance. When we finally made it to the hospital, she made me hand over her cell phone to a total stranger. "I need to be alone with him for a bit," she told me, and then she was taken away. I have no idea what's going on.

So here I find myself, sitting bewildered in front of an examination room occupied by some unknown boy, no place to go really, waiting around for Ene after handing her off to the kid's apparent guardian.

I felt like a beach ball in the river, tossed around from place to place before settling down here, and the more I thought about it, the more horribly out of place I felt. I knew nothing about the boy brought into that room. I didn't have any business with him. I'm just sitting here, and that's all.

And what if this boy's parents showed up and asked me who I was? All I'd be able to do was grin awkwardly and say, "Uh, just this guy, you know…?"

These past two days have been *hideous*. I was used to Ene's antics throwing me for a loop, but she's been going *way* too far lately. Once she's back in my hands, I wanted to march straight home and back to my normal life. Assuming these Mekakushi-dan dudes will let me.

All these irritations jumbled together before me at the same time; even attempting to think about them was starting to be too much.

"This makes absolutely no sense to me…"

I sighed heavily.

"If *you* think it doesn't, what about *me?"*

The voice to my side, interlaced with the equally somber sigh of a third person, startled me out of my seat.

I yelped and whipped around. "S-since when were *you* there?!"

The white-haired young man I handed Ene to a moment ago sat there, looking blankly up at me from his chair, phone in hand.

"I'm sorry…I…" The man's voice shook as he apologized. He must have thought I was angry at him.

The thing was, though, that his expression barely changed at all from his blank stare. There was a twinge of concern to it, maybe, if you squinted hard enough. But otherwise, nothing. I paused, taking a moment to figure out what he had said.

"Uh…Oh, no, not you. The girl in there."

I snatched the phone out of his hand and peered at it. A familiar blue-haired girl was floating around onscreen, cheeks puffed up in irritation.

“Mm? What is it, master?”

She kept floating, her voice irritated, not even bothering to look at me.

“What is it? Well, for one, when did *you* get back here? And who *was* that guy, anyway? You must know him or something, right?”

Ene had batted me around from place to place all day with zero explanation. I figured I was entitled to ask why.

That was what inspired the question, but for some reason, it made Ene glare angrily at me, giving the phone two quick blurps of vibration to drive the point home.

For a moment, the glare took on a threatening sort of rage, a vast difference from her usual affable insanity. It was strange to see, yet something I could have sworn I saw before from her, somewhere, for some reason.

After confirming that her display of dominance put me in my place, Ene puffed up her cheeks once more.

“I had the wrong person. I don’t know this guy at all. Sorry I made you run around like that. Let’s just go home.”

As Ene’s words so clearly expressed her annoyed rage, the white-haired man seated adjacent let a hint of sorrow cross his stare a second time, apparently feeling at fault for this somehow.

“Dude, look…,” I began at Ene. “I mean, if it was your mistake, then oh well, but you can’t just butt in with people like that. This is an emergency!”

“I know, but…I…Ugghhh!! I *told* you, I just made a mistake!! This is why you’re so unpopular with people, master!”

The white-haired man’s eyebrows twitched a little at this tirade. Otherwise his face remained blank.

Was that how he expressed surprise, maybe? There was something unnatural to his blithe, unreadable face, like he was a cyborg waiting for a software upgrade.

The young man turned his barren countenance toward mine.

“Um…I’m sorry. I think it’s my fault that she’s angry. Probably.”

His voice was a whisper.

“She kept talking to me. Crying. Things like ‘I wanted to see you for so long’ and ‘I thought you had died.’ But I didn’t know what she was talking about at all…I think I may have kind of given her the wrong idea or something.”

It seemed like a good twenty seconds passed between the white-haired youth opening his mouth and finishing his thoughts. Considering Ene’s usual breakneck speaking pace, I felt like time slowed gradually to a crawl as he meandered his way toward the end of his speech.

So there was *part* of the story. This guy looked like one of Ene’s former friends.

There was definitely something distinctive to how the young man looked—something unusual. No wonder he captured the attention of someone like Ene. It seemed to add up.

But for the time being, I was far more concerned about how the phone in my hand wouldn’t stop vibrating after the man fell silent.

Slowly, reluctantly, I shot it a look. There I saw a trembling Ene, her usual light-blue tones now replaced by a crimson red, right up to her earlobes.

“Whoa, what’s up with—”

“Dahhhhhh!! Yeaaaggghhhh!! Just stop! It’s nothing! Don’t talk to me!!”

For a moment, the room froze. I noticed the man pulsate for a moment, startled, in the edge of my vision. Not even that was enough to change his expression.

Even for someone as used to her behavior as I was, watching Ene’s emotions bubble so bluntly to the surface like this was a first. It riveted me to the spot.

Ene was lying down onscreen, hands on her head and legs flailing furiously in the air. Then, suddenly noticing my gaze, she looked up, plastering a pained, sweaty smile on her face.

“…Please? Master?”

She was trying to compose herself, but the result was just an awkward silence. I didn’t know if this was her attempt to act like everything was normal or not, but it didn’t really work.

It was just as awkward for her, judging by the red tones that gradually reappeared on Ene’s face.

“Uh, is this a program bug or something…?”

I tried whacking my cell phone a few times. It sullenly whirred in response.

“Who do you think I am, master?! I’m not *like* that!!”

Watching Ene loudly bellow her surprise and shock convinced me she was in decent enough health. But if it wasn’t a bug, then what? Some kind of cold…? Okay, not a cold with *her*, but…

She was always more than a little weird, but today she was diving into completely new depths of weird.

“It, it’s a free country! Everyone’s got a right to get upset sometimes, right?! He looks a little bit like someone I knew, so I…Okay, I guess I said some weird things, or remembered them or…*anticipated* something…?”

“I don’t get what you’re saying, Ene, but is this, like, you getting all excited ’cause he looks like one of *your* kind?”

My observation was enough to quell her mumbled ramblings. She looked dumbfounded, or exasperated, or something else I couldn’t even gauge.

“Dahh…It’s getting so obvious why nobody ever wants to hang with you, master. You’ll probably be like that for the rest of your life. Well done.”

“Huh?! Did I really say something that bad?! And why am I that unpopular? Tell me why!”

“Um, could you just not talk for a while, m(dis)aster?”

“Hey! You just called me a disaster! You tried to kind of mix it into the end of the sentence, but I still heard it!”

“Shut up! You know I have ways of making you not talk to me—”

Just as Ene wrapped up her latest puffed-cheek threat, a loud *clang!* echoed from the examination room, the one with the boy who the white-haired young man had been cradling at the park.

It was accompanied by the sound of assorted medical equipment crashing down on the floor.

“Gah! Master! That sounds bad!”

“Yeah, I know…!”

I strode across the hall with a single step and opened the door, only to find the boy carted in earlier on the floor.

He had rumpled brown hair and a white vest, and judging by his size, I surmised him to be eleven or so. Thermometers and other medical equipment were strewn around him, and even as he tried to stand, lifting his torso up from all fours, he was having a rough time stringing the required motions together.

“Hey…Hey! What’re you doing?! I dunno what your problem is, but you gotta stay in bed…!”

I crouched next to him, extending a hand of support. He slapped it away, trembling in fear.

Taking a clear look at his face for the first time, I saw that it was covered in tears. His eyes were dark and flushed, as if faced with some unspeakable catastrophe, and were a deep jet-black in color.

“Who the hell’re you…? Stay out…of my way…!”

The boy wobbled a bit as he stood up but finally managed the feat as he turned toward the door.

“Whoa, wait a second! You can’t just go out by yourself!”

“Hiyori…I gotta get to Hiyori…”

The boy sounded delirious as he muttered to himself, paying my warning no mind as he left the room.

I followed him out, only to find him face-to-face with the white-haired youth beyond the door.

“This is *your* fault…It never would’ve happened without you…”

He stared the young man down as he spoke. Tears began to fall down his face anew.

It was finally enough to make the white-haired guy betray at least an attempt at emotion. He looked confused, unsure what to do next and unable to articulate a response.

“That’s it. I’m going…I have to go…”

The moment he stopped speaking, the boy turned his body around and tore off, running full-bore down the hospital corridor. With the lights dimmed for the night, it wasn’t long before he began to blend into the darkness.

“M-master, what’re you doing?! He’s gonna be in serious trouble if you don’t follow him!”

“Uh, y-yeeaaahhh, I know, but my legs are…”

My legs, now about as sturdy as a pair of day-old celery stalks, picked this exact moment to cramp up on me.

“Daahhh!! Come *on*, master! What are you, a newborn deer or something?! How can you be so useless at a time like this…?!”

“Hey, lay the hell off! This is all you guys’ fault anyway! I’m not some gofer, you know! I’m more *delicate* than that!”

The boy fell totally out of sight as we continued our inane debate.

If he kept running like that, he would be beyond the hospital grounds in a few minutes. Once he did, that was it. There was no guessing where he’d go.

“We’re probably too late for the nurse-call button…Look, man, could you at least try to help out a little, too?! I don’t know what’s up between the two of you, but you’re related to him, right?! You wanna see him just run away like that?!”

The white-haired man nodded to himself, chastised, as he spoke in his usual slow-paced monotone.

“Yeah…I made Hibiya really angry…I gotta do something…Can, can you come

with me?”

The constant tempo changes to his voice were starting to aggravate me, but at least I knew that boy’s name now. That, and this guy seemed to appreciate, at long last, the danger in the situation. There was even a slight suggestion of suspense to his slack-jawed expression from before.

“Uh, yeah, sure, I don’t mind, but my legs aren’t in very good shape right—”

“Come on, master, you’re acting like you need a handicapped license plate or something. You’re just not getting enough exercise, is all.”

“—but I guess I could run a little more, if you…Uh?”

The white-haired young man very efficiently cut me off midsentence as he drew right up to me and gave me an overwhelming feeling of weightlessness, the likes of which I hadn’t felt in years.

“Wh-whoooaaa?!”

The man, picking me up as easily as a mother playing upsy-daisy with her toddler, propped me over a shoulder.

“Sorry…This might hurt a little.”

The moment he finished, there was an explosion, a shock wave, then the sight of the hospital hallway whizzing past my eyes.

It took about half a second for me to realize that the man had planted his feet down and sprung forward a good several dozen yards in one bound.

“Yaaaaggghhhh!!”

I lost my voice for a moment, but soon after, I found a scream leaping out from the pit of my stomach.

“L-l-let…let…me…Ooof!”

My feeble attempts at forming intelligible speech were silenced by the ensuing touchdown, leaving me gasping for air instead.

“S-sorry! Hang on just a bit more.”

The next moment, the scene jarringly shifted again. This time, instead of high-speed forward motion, I noticed the floor zooming away from me. He was

jumping straight upward this time. The realization almost made me faint.

I turned toward the phone I clutched in my hand in an attempt to stay conscious. Ene was onscreen, holding a cushion over her head in preparation for the next landing as she kept her eyes tightly shut.

“What’s the point of *thaaaaaaaaat*?!!”

Just as I shouted, I heard a sudden whoosh of air as we soared into someplace notably chillier. The roof of the hospital was now below us, the open skylight we zipped through already small and distant.

This must be what skydiving feels like. Or, actually, it felt more like that roller coaster I lost my lunch on a few scant hours ago. They were roughly the same in that, once we reached our next landing point, I was undoubtedly going to be slingshotted back up, or down, or sideways toward more dazed nausea.

“Found him…!”

The man readjusted his grip on my waist as he whispered to himself, moving me from above his shoulders to underneath one side to brace me for the landing.

I was greeted by another zero-gravity experience for a moment. Then, the ground began to approach us.

“We’re gonna die if we fall from this high up,” I prayed to myself. “Thanks for everything, world.”

Then I shut my eyes, copying Ene’s pointless act.

Then, with a violent bang, I felt an impact—one far lighter than the *splat* I expected. It was nonetheless more than enough to bring my thoroughly agitated stomach to its knees. Once he recovered from the landing, the young man flashed me an ever-so-slightly concerned look.

“You okay?”

“Pfaaahh!!” I whooped loudly in response, still cradled by his arm.

“Ur…urrgghhh…”

…Then I got an inside look at my stomach contents. So much for dinner.

“Aagghh!! Watch your aim, master! That’s gross!!”

“*Huff*…*huff*…You could at least *pretend* you’re worried about me…”

“I’m sorry. I figured we needed to hurry. I must have scared you…”

How many people were there in the world capable of leaping the length of a football field into the air just because they were a bit pressed for time?

I removed myself from his grasp and gave the young man a sideways look as I attempted to regain my balance. The eyes on his desolate face shone a very light pink color.

“Those eyes…There’s something up with you, too, isn’t there? This is just getting ridiculous…”

I had suspected something even before this performance, but between his eye color and that shockingly unadvised behavior, he must be “special” the way Momo and the Mekakushi-dan guys were.

My previous experiences with Momo and Ene had given me a false sense of security. I figured I could deal with well near anything by now. But running into all these “special” cases in a single twenty-four-hour period? This was nuts.

And what is *with* those eyes, anyway? I know I shouldn’t let my idle curiosity make me even further involved with him, but…

“Who…*are* you…?”

“Master! That kid’s getting away!”

My attention hurriedly turned toward the direction Ene pointed. At the end of the long path between the hospital’s main gate and front entrance, I could see the boy from earlier running away.

He was far enough that he’d easily make it through the gate before very long.



“Hibiya…I’m going to lose you again…!”

The young man placed a hand on my shoulder as he spoke. I knew what was coming next.

“Aaahhhh!! No, no, no! I can’t *do* that anymore! Seriously, stop!”

“Ah…sorry. I won’t.”

The youth, startled by my outburst, removed his hand. I was freed from another ride on his one-man scream machine, which I appreciated, but he was right—we were about to lose the boy. Once he made it to the city streets, we’d have some serious issues.

“Look, just stop him yourself! We’ll catch up with you afterward!”

“I, I can’t! I’m too scared to do it by myself…nngh…”

The movie-star man of action I knew a second ago was gone, replaced by an indecisive, namby-pamby coward.

“Yeah, but if he gets away…”

I flashed another look at the front gate as I attempted to give chase. My legs, as expected, refused to cooperate.

Just as I was ready to give up, a certain fact popped into mind. My eyes shot back toward the phone in my hand.

“Hey, Ene! Call up Momo for me!”

“Eh? Your sister? …Oh! I gotcha! Comin’ right up!”

With an “Aha!” clap of the hands, Ene made a cross in the air with her fingers. The screen switched over to phone mode.

After about two-and-a-half rings, the screen flashed “Connected” in green.

“Uh, hello? Shintaro? Did Ene wrap up whatever she had to do?”

“Yeah, but, uh, we’re kinda in the middle of some other crap right now. Where are you right now, Momo?”

“Me? Uhh…Hey, boss, where are we at the moment? Oh, thanks. Um, Shintaro? So, uh, we’re under this tree that’s right next to the front gate of this

hospital…Whoa, who's that kid? Man, look at him run."

Momo's boneheadedness notwithstanding, I saw that my hunch was right.

"Yeah, him! Stop that kid for me! Now!"

"What?! Why?!"

"It's urgent, all right?! Just do it!"

"Urgent?! Ummm…All right! I'll try!"

CALL COMPLETE flashed in red onscreen. Momo had shut off on her end.

"Do you think your sister will be all right?"

"Well, she's kind of an idiot, but once she moves, she *really* moves."

"Really…? I suppose we have something in common."

Squinting, I could see the boy right by the gate, just about through. Then, just before reaching it, he lost his balance, as if tripping over something.

The next moment, I saw Momo appear, practically out of nowhere. The boy, stunned by this sudden development, attempted to wriggle his way out of her grasp, but Momo's grip was too much for him to escape.

"Whoa! Nice job, Momo! Ooh, man, she's practically smothering him…"

"Yeah, looks like she roadblocked him right when she had to. Better get over there quick, though…"

"I *would* if you weren't so slow, master."

Ignoring Ene's hushed stab at me, I made my way to the gate, where I saw my sister all but suffocating the child as she struggled to keep hold of him.

"Ah! Shintaro! Who is this kid…Ow! Will you stop squirming like that…!"

"Thanks, Momo. Hey! Kid! I don't know what's going on, but you've got to calm down, all right?! What do you think the hospital's gonna do when they find you missing?"

"Whaaa? This kid's a hospital patient?!"

Momo's surprise made her relax her iron grip just enough for the boy to slip out. He took a deep breath, the redness still evident on his face, but his

breathing was still ragged as he stared Momo down.

"What are you *doing*, you fat old granny?! Why're you gettin' in my way?!"

Momo stared back blankly for a moment as her brain went through the slow process of parsing the boy's words. Once it completed the program and output the results, her face turned just as red as his.

"H-huhhh?! F-fat old…*What* was that?!"

"What, am I speakin' a foreign language?! I *said*, you're a fat! Old! Granny!! I'm in a hurry right—"

Before the boy could take off again, Momo reacted before anyone else, grabbing him by the hood and thrusting him back toward her.

"Look…you're sick, all right?! You can't just run from the hospital like this!! That and I'm not a…f-fat…"

Momo was shaking, her breathing audibly quicker. That blow must have hit home.

Flashing another glare at Momo, the boy pulled his hood back up and turned back toward her.

"I *told* you…!! Stay out of my way! I'm not sick, and I'm *not* a patient here!! If anyone needs a doctor, it's *you*, gran! You look like a cow! That's gotta be some kinda disease!"

The boy attempted to point toward Momo's chest. I heard Ene snicker "Pfft! …Uh, sorry," from the phone in my hand, not to mention the sound of Momo's brain literally crackling with rage.

"I, I stopped you because I was *worried* about you!! You stupid little…!"

Momo, her face bright red as the grade-school kid brought her to the brink of tears, made another grab at the boy. This time, the back of Momo's own hoodie was pulled back by some invisible force, stopping her bull rush before it started.

"L-lemme go, boss! This kid's a villain! A *total* villain! The Mekakushi-dan needs to take action! Let me *goooooo*…!!"

The effect of the boy's verbal barrage, coupled by the sight of Momo bucking

like a rodeo bull, made me snort despite myself. Momo must have heard it. Instantly, her eyes bore into my face.

“What are *you* laughing about, Shintaro?! Who *is* this freak?! Why do *I* have to put up with all this crap?!”

“Uh…Okay, okay. I’m sorry, all right? Chill out. Hey…your name’s Hibiya, right? What are you in such a hurry for, anyway? Do you have to go right now?”

Hibiya stared at me. He showed no signs of running now, but it was clear by his sneer that he still viewed us as the enemy. He spoke in a calm deadpan.

“…There’s this girl. I think she may have died. She’s really important to me… but I was the only one who got away. I have to go help her, now!”

Everyone within earshot gasped.

Even Momo, seething with primal rage a second ago, looked on in shock, her mouth still half-open.

“Um…hang on a sec. She’s dead…? Were you both in some kind of accident? ’Cause if so, you should really talk to the police or a doctor or something first, right? Where were you planning to go by yourself?”

Before Ene forced me toward the hospital, I saw no sign of an auto accident at the site where we first came across Hibiya. He had no noticeable injuries, and if you looked at him, it didn’t seem like he suffered from anything more serious than heat exhaustion. That was my take, at least.

But from the way he was talking, it didn’t sound like some unexpected fainting spell. It sounded like the shell-shocked drone of a boy who had Seen Things. Which made it all the more important that he went to the police.

“It’s not like anyone would believe me. If you’re that curious, why don’t you ask him? He spent the whole damn time just *looking* at us.”

The boy pointed at the white-haired youth, who nervously grabbed at his sleeve in response.

“What, am I wrong? You just stood there and watched! If you couldn’t do anything then, you could at least tell them about it now!”

“N-no! That’s not how it was! I tried to help you guys…but…but there was

nothing I could do…!”

The boy gritted his teeth, all but baring his fangs toward the young man.

The young man’s eyes floated downward in response, no longer able to withstand the withering, accusing gaze.

After a short sigh, the boy turned toward the hospital gate again.

“…Whatever. If you can’t do anything, I’m going by myself. Stay out of my… way…”

Just as he took a step forward, the boy’s body lurched to the side, hurtling rapidly toward the ground.

“H-hey!”

I tried to lend a hand of support, but I was too far to reach him. The guy who exhibited superherolike powers just a bit ago reacted even later than I did, so dazed was he by the boy’s abuse.

There was no sign that the boy was preparing for the fall. His head hung lower than the rest of his body as it hurtled to the ground.

“Dammit…!”

Just as I prepared for the worst, Hibiya’s body stopped in midair on its back, as if hanging by a set of strings.

It took a moment to figure out what had happened, but by the time I spotted Momo falling on her rear end out of the corner of my eye, the force keeping her in place no longer there, everything was making sense.

“Shintaro, this guy…I don’t think he should go back in there.”

The air around Hibiya seemed to shimmer a bit before Kido appeared, her face obscured by the purple hood she drew over her head.

Her expression, underneath the long hair snaking out from the sides of her hood, was a mixture of surprise and panic.

“Huh. Nice catch. But what’re you talking about? He’s kind of falling apart on us. I know he’s involved in some crazy junk, but shouldn’t we leave this to the hospital? Or the cops?”

“…I don’t think either of them are gonna be much use. The way he is now, we’re probably the ones who can help him out the most.”

Kido, her eyes fixed on Hibiya as she held him up, looked like she was chewing on something bitter and disagreeable as she spoke.

I approached Kido, looking at the boy’s face as I attempted to see what concerned her. The color in his glassy, half-open eyes was beginning to acquire a red tinge, as if filling with blood.

“Whoa…What’s…”

“Yeah. I heard the story. This is kind of gonna be a pain.”

Now Kido sounded like she was recalling some kind of bad memory.

The change to the boy’s eye color was familiar to all of us. The Mekakushi-dan’s eyes all did the same thing whenever they used their “abilities.”

That’s what Kido probably meant when she said the authorities would be no use. None of them would be much interested in a supernatural phenomenon like this.

“W-well…so, what now? Is this guy even okay?!”

“I don’t know what kind of ability this boy has…but it’s too dangerous to put him back in there. Let’s take him back to the hideout.”

Lifting the hand she was using to support Hibiya’s hips, Kido hoisted the boy upward, bringing his face by her shoulder.

“Right. Kisaragi, tell Kano to get a bed ready for him. Oh, and I don’t want Marie freaking out, so have her stay in her room with Seto for me, okay?”

Momo, still on the ground, shot upward in response to Kido’s orders. She saluted.

“R-right! Roger that!”

“Ha-ha…You don’t have to act so stiff like that.”

Kido looked confused for a moment, then flashed an extremely uncharacteristic smile. Her eyes were as sharp and searching as they always were, but her grin brought some level of warmth to them, like a mother with

her child.

“Oh—right. What’s your name?”

As if suddenly recalling something, Kido turned toward the white-haired young man, Hibiya still in her arms.

“M-me? …Konoha. I think.”

It may not have been intentional, but the guy’s self-introduction, delivered in his now-trademark warble, didn’t exactly exude confidence.

The moment he gave his name, the phone in my hand vibrated. Ene was flailing around onscreen again, clearly in an agitated state.

“Huh. Konoha? Listen, judging by what I heard, I think we can help you guys out with…whatever happened to you. Or at least we can watch over this kid until he’s stable again. Would you mind coming along? Just so we could learn a little more about this?”

Konoha nodded deeply, his face as resolute as I had seen it up to now.

“Great. Let’s get going…I’m kinda hungry, though. Maybe I could have Kano make some dinner…Hey, Kisaragi, did you contact Kano yet?”



“Uh, Kano didn’t pick up, so I’m calling Seto right now…Oh! Hello? This is Momo!”

Even though no one was physically there, Momo suddenly stood straight as a board as she began speaking.

“Hey, sorry to bother you, but we’ve got this sick young boy we’re taking in there, so we were hoping Kano could get a bed set up for…He’s not there? Umm…Okay! That works! Also, if we could get dinner going…And once that’s done, she wanted you to go on standby with Marie in her room! Sound good? See you soon!”

Momo’s pace noticeably accelerated toward the second half. I pondered over whether Seto comprehended it all.

Putting her phone away, Momo breathed a sigh of relief, as if just completing some perilous high-stakes mission.

“Thanks, Kisaragi. Did Kano go somewhere?”

“Uh, yeah. I guess he told Seto he wouldn’t be back today.”

“Ugh…Every time you need him, he’s just useless.”

My heart stung a bit. Ene said the exact same thing to me earlier.

What kind of errand would Kano be running at a time like this? Given his aloof, easygoing personality, I could picture him having a lot of friends. Out partying the night away? Oof. I *hate* seeing people younger than me be so much more successful at life.

“Okay, let’s go back. It shouldn’t be too far from here. Let’s try to hurry.”

With that, Kido’s eyes turned red: Turning on her ability for Momo’s sake, I figured.

Thanks to Kido, none of us were visible to the outside world. This, despite the fact that everything looked normal to me. It was weird.

“Uh, master?”

As I passed under the hospital gate and marched behind Kido, my phone suddenly gave me a faint buzz.

“Mm? What?”

Looking at the screen, I saw Ene standing there, her face serene—a total one-eighty from a moment ago.

“Um…do you think maybe we could go home now? Along with Momo, too? I’m kind of worried. I feel like something bad’s gonna happen…”

It was rare for Ene to act so shy and passive, rubbing the oversize sleeves of her top together as she spoke.

If I went to a circus and there was a ring of fire in front of me, she was the sort of girl who’d shout, “C’mon, let’s try hopping that go-kart through it, master!” She was undeniably off her game today.

“What? This is all kind of your doing in the first place, man. I mean, I wanna go home just as bad as you, but…”

“Well…why not…?!”

“I dunno, I’m kind of wondering about that boy. That, and I doubt Momo’s in any hurry to leave. Besides, no way the ‘boss’ is gonna let us go just like that.”

“You…don’t think?”

The disappointment was written on her face. I racked my brain, trying to figure out what she was trying to hint at, before I noticed something else.

“Wait, are you…”

“What? What, what?! No! No no no! I’m Ene, all right?! I’m not any kind of girl like *that*! You get the craziest ideas sometimes, master…”

“Are you running out of battery juice?”

“…Huh?”

I wasn’t sure what Ene was shouting about for a moment, but my question immediately froze her in her tracks.

Then, she hurriedly erupted into a smile, batting her arms around in joy.

“…Ohhh! Oh! Right! The battery! Exactly! Once it runs down, *boy*, does that take the wind outta my sails!”

“Yeah! Yeah, that’s what I figured! I’ll plug you in once we make it to the hideout, okay? So cheer up a little!”

It was the battery all along. The battery display in the corner was looking pretty feeble; she must have expended a lot of power at the amusement park.

I couldn’t say *how* she was running around in my phone, to be exact, but given her unpredictable behavior over the past few hours, it’d be great if a little charging was all it took to fix her up.

If it didn’t, and she started going even crazier on me, I didn’t know what I’d do.

“Ah-ha-ha…Ughh. You know, though…I think you’ve changed a lot, master.”

“Oh? You think so? I can’t really tell, myself.”

“I dunno, you just look like you’re having fun. It’s nice, isn’t it? You’re making friends, too.”

“Uhh? You call these guys ‘friends’? It feels more like they’re dragging me halfway across Japan and back, pretty much.”

The idea of referring to these weirdos I met just a few hours ago as “friends” was something I was reluctant to warm to.

Certainly, though, they seemed like nice enough folks.

Seeing them extend a hand to a boy they never met before, trying to help him through his problems…You don’t see that kind of Good Samaritan stuff much these days.

“But that’s good, though, isn’t it? Having people boss you around kind of suits you, I think, master.”

Ene gave me a gentle, but somewhat forlorn, smile.

Suddenly, my mind unexpectedly flashed up a smiling face from my past. A smile I lost some time ago. A smile that always rattled around somewhere in my skull.

“Yeah, maybe so.”

I placed the smile back in the mental file cabinet I kept it in. It wasn’t that I

was trying to forget it. Not *that*, exactly.

“Oh, absolutely so! And, you know, I think I’m kinda like that, too. A girl who keeps pushing people forward, to bigger and better things. What do you think? Kinda startin’ to fall for me, maybe?”

“Uh, before that, could I technically even call you a ‘girl’?”

“Whaaaat?! That’s *awful*, master! I’m *totally* a girl, okay? All girl, all the time!”

Faced with regular old Ene, shouting and carrying on in the palm of my hand, I hurried my stride a bit, figuring I’d better transport her to an AC adapter pronto.

KAGEROU DAZE 02

In the swaying train car, a slightly humid, yet comfortable breeze blew through the cracked-open window.

The view beyond it was morphing from the earlier endless string of mountains. Now it was mountains of gray asphalt and metal—the signs of civilization.

“Woww…This is great. Really great.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Who could blame me? Has there ever been a more exciting summer vacation for anyone, anywhere in the world?

The world outside the rural wasteland I was born and raised in was far larger, and far more charming, than anything I conjured in my mind.

The views that flashed by the window, things I had only seen on TV before now, stoked my curiosity like a well-stocked toy store’s window.

And the one thing that excited me the most was sitting right before my eyes.

“Uh, *gross*? Why’re you so, like, enthralled by that view? Are you crazy or something?”

“Hee-hee-hee! Well, what, it’s exciting, isn’t it? Whoa! Look how huge that building is! Hey, did you see that, Hiyori?!”

“Ugh, can you just shut up for a sec? I *used* to act like that, but this is, like, so *boring* now.”

Hiyori, facing me in the opposite seat, stared out the window with me, her attitude as frigid and off-putting as always.

Oooh, I just *wish* I could capture this in a photograph.

Before we left, I fell on my knees and begged my father to lend me that which I longed for most—a digital SLR camera.

I could hear it whispering at me now, from underneath my seat. “If not now,”

it muttered at me, “when?” That was how picture-perfect Hiyori was, every instant that she lived and breathed.

“This is gonna be so great, though. I mean, there’re so many places I want to check out! What should I see first?”

“First…? Uh, how ’bout you just, like, walk around town a little? If *this* is enough to floor you, wait’ll you’re all *walking* in it and stuff.”

Hiyori didn’t offer so much as a glance at me, making the distracted proposal as she kept staring at the vista she just described as “boring.”

“Y-you mean, uh, together…?”

“Huh? Uh, who said anything about being together? Just, like, go out yourself whenever I’m not doing anything.”

“Oh. Okay…”

The conversation was over. And I never captured her attention even once.

The day after the phone call, I loudly greeted her in the school hallway, laboring under the mistaken notion that we enjoyed a closer relationship now. “Good morning!” I yelled. “Isn’t this weather great?!” She walked right past me, making me the laughingstock of the school and reminding me of my position on her totem pole.

No, Hiyori held no special appreciation for my presence. I looked potentially useful to her, and that was quite literally it. That was the only reason she invited me on her summer vacation trip.

Perhaps due to that, the frequency of our conversations was the same as always, *i.e.* zilch. Right up until the day we left, the only communication we shared came through spontaneous, patchwork phone calls from Hiyori. It was oppressive.

For my part, I always loyally sat by our hallway telephone, on vigilant guard duty to ensure I never missed a single call.

Sometimes a week would go by with no contact. Sometimes, she’d call me twice on the same day.

All the conversations were purely business, but every one of our exchanges

were burnt photographically into my memory, to the point that I could close my eyes and recite every word.

This quiet warfare dragged on, heaping incalculable strain and exhaustion on my shoulders as it did. I could go on about it for ages. But I fought bravely—to the point where even my mother, worried over my health at first, was soon pouring me tea in the hallway and wishing me a good night.

And convincing my parents took just as much of an effort. If not more.

On the evening I told my parents "I want to see the city on my summer break" for the first time, they locked me out of the house and I had to sit there, trembling in fear after every howl from a distant mongrel. *This'll never work*, I thought. I had to come up with some kind of believable reason. So I concocted what I thought was the perfect excuse—a special summer school session I could attend.

But they kicked me out again. "You wanna study that much," they said, "do it at home!" I was forced to fend for myself against the raccoons that lurked around the farm, always ready for a free meal.

So I went back to the drawing board, reading through whatever relevant resources I could find. Soon, I had another test balloon to toss their way:

"There's this culture from someplace in India (I don't recall exactly where) that I want to study, and there's this school holding a special course about them, but they're only holding it in this one region of Japan, and this summer only; they're having a famous researcher from India run the course, and they don't sell the textbooks or anything here either, so I've *got* to go, you see?"

Nobody could accuse me of not trying.

Final negotiations with my parents extended to three in the morning, to the point where I was forced to make outrageous declarations like "All I can think about is India" and "If you wanna stop me, you're gonna have to wipe India off the map first." In the end—and with a final "Where did I go wrong with you" deathblow from my father—they agreed to my trip.

So here I am, a weird kid obsessed with studying the culture of a certain region of India (I'll need to look up where sometime), willing to go at least

halfway toward cutting off ties with my parents to earn a seat on this train.

I had all but abandoned myself to the fates for this, completely through my own doing, but the real surprise to me was Hiyori.

I was far too ashamed, of course, to tell Hiyori I slogged through all of that for her sake. “It just so happened there’s this seminar where I could study Indian culture happening at the same time,” I told her, “so my parents gave me permission.” I was expecting the full bore of her quiet scorn in response, but when I told her, she gave me the most positive response I heard from her yet. “That’s pretty neat,” she said. “I just love, you know, researching and stuff?”

You can never guess what kind of things people are into. After everything I went through, her appraisal was easily enough to change my life. I made sure to record and edit up the “I…love, you” bits, of course, saving it to make an all-important upgrade to Talking Hiyori holding down the fort in my bedroom.

As I recalled my past glories, I noticed our train sliding past a long platform.

It was packed with people scurrying to and fro, like some of the bigger county fairs I attended.

“Oh, uh, we’re getting off next stop, Hibiya.”

“Huh? Oh! Oh, okay!”

I stood up to prepare.

Struggling to fetch Hiyori’s shockingly huge suitcase from the upper shelf, I hoisted my comparatively minuscule backpack up on my shoulder.

“Okay, ready to go!”

The train rapidly decelerated, taking my legs with it.

I threw my leg forward, trying to keep from falling, but then the train halted, throwing my momentum dangerously in the other direction.

“Whoa whoa whoa…”

“Ugh. What you, like, *doing*? Come *onnn*.”

With an embarrassed sigh, Hiyori brought herself up and briskly strode toward the exit.

“Hey! Whoa, wait up!”

Flustered, I tugged at Hiyori’s wheeled suitcase as I followed behind her.

The world that greeted me beyond the sliding doors was filled with seemingly endless, teeming masses of people. I felt pushed about and constricted, to the point where a moment’s inattention seemed enough to squash me.

Hiyori, the very picture of ease, kept her quick pace unchecked as she walked down the platform. I made a solemn effort to keep up.

The bumpy yellow line of tiles on the floor, meant to help blind people navigate the platform, made the suitcase jostle this way and that as I somehow fought my way to the escalator, my breathing already a little hurried.

“Um…Hiyori? Is there some kind of big event today, or…?”

“Hmm? Uh, no? I don’t think so? I think the big summer fest isn’t for another week or two.”

Hiyori’s eyes, and hands, were focused on her cell phone.

“F-for real? Oh man…”

So that was my baptism to the big city.

I remember snickering at the TV whenever they talked about the morning rush-hour traffic on public transit. I figured they were just exaggerating for effect. But judging by this scene, apparently all of that was real.

A chill ran down my spine. What if, I thought to myself, the next train we board is like one of *those* peak-traffic jobs?

As our journey down the escalator approached its end, I found myself almost overcome with nerves. The unfamiliarity of it all was nagging at me. I decided some mental prep was necessary.

“Here we go…I’m getting off…”

Yes. That’s right. I’m getting off. I was resolved to make this work, no matter what. But my timing was a tad early. I was forced to make a couple of baby steps at the very end to retain my balance.

“Nice try.”

Hiyori, already off the escalator, grinned at me. I was too abashed to look her in the eye. Some practice was definitely in order before I went on one with Hiyori again.

We pressed on, only to find the crowd around the turnstiles even thicker than the throng on the platform. Navigating this maze was starting to feel like a vast, high-budget adventure film.

Hiyori, as I expected, briskly proceeded on without giving me a first glance, much less a second. But I had my ticket, anyway. I could probably just follow the guy in front of me, and it'd all work itself out.

The first computer-controlled automatic turnstile I ever laid eyes on in my life was letting people through at breakneck speed.

Does this thing really check your ticket and everything? From my perspective, it *had* to be letting at least one or two people slip by undetected.

My turn was almost here. I stared intently at the hands of the man in front, doing everything humanly possible to keep from screwing this up.

He took something out of his pocket, lightly tapped it against the side of the machine, then simply strolled on by, seemingly oblivious to the multitudes surrounding him.

Huh. So *that's* how it worked. Back home, I'd have my ticket punched by a doddering old pensioner seated by the platform. But this is the *city*. It's got *technology*. Technology I didn't really understand, per se, but that didn't matter.

Here we go. My turn. After a quick rearward glance to ensure Hiyori's suitcase wouldn't hit anything, I copied the man in front of me, placing my ticket on the machine, and walked forward.

It didn't go well. With a shrill electronic beep, a pair of gate doors suddenly closed in, as if trying to pinch my legs off.

"Whoa—Aggghh…!!"

It traumatized me so much that I screamed. Falling into a panic, I shot my head backward. A thundering herd of commuters stared at me in sour silence.

“I, I don’t…Hiyoriii! H-Help meee!”

As a station agent scampered up, frantically waving his arms at me, I noticed Hiyori a bit of a ways ahead, a look of pure contempt on her face. She turned bright crimson when I called her name, eyes averted to the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha! You all right there? You put the ticket in here, okay?”

I inserted my ticket, meekly following the agent’s directions. The gates, so engorged with murderous rage a minute ago, meekly opened the way for me.

“Uh, thank you very much…!”

My release filled me with relief as I pressed on past the countless disapproving scorners around me. Hiyori, waiting for me up ahead, was the most menacing one of all.

“Are you, like, here just to embarrass me, or…?”

I could almost feel the ground rumble as her tranquil rage unfolded. It was enough to make me audibly squeak.

“No, I…the guy in front of me, he just…Uh, I’m *sorry*, okay? I’ll try not to do it again, so…”

I apologized for dear life. But Hiyori, who must have concluded that bursting into tirades against me all day was a waste of energy, simply stated “Just get it together” and bustled away once more.

Did I have any chance of making it wherever we were going in one piece?

Hiyori’s face as she shot another icy stare from over her shoulder all but shouted, “Try to catch me!”

“I’m gonna get you…I promise!”

Gripping the suitcase handle tightly, I kept my eyes on Hiyori, all but lost in the human melee up ahead, as I strode forward.

*

Underneath the punishing sun, I was cooked and scalded by beams of solar vengeance from every direction like nothing I’d ever experienced before. Just before my hit points began to flirt with zero, I found myself face-to-face with a small brick house.

“Is this it…? Are we really here…?!”

“Uh, yeah? What are you, stupid?”

After making it through that demon turnstile, I was first mobbed by seemingly endless crowds of people inside a sweltering subway car, then left to the mercy of the rush-hour commute once we finally made it to the surface. Even crossing the street was a harrowing experience. These pedestrian signals may as well have been written in another language.

And this sun!

The heat was oppressive, like nothing I could imagine back home, and it depleted my vitality with worrying speed.

“I…I’m not too sure I like this city.”

“No? Well, you’re kind of *here*, so…try to, uh, live with it?”

Hiyori’s face was completely blank as she held a parasol in the air, the very picture of sweat-free faultlessness.

So this was my baptism to the big city…It must have been the fourth or fifth time the thought crossed my head today.

But if I was going to whine and pout my way through my Fabulous Fun-Time City Adventure with Hiyori, she wouldn’t just turn her back to me—I doubt she’d even let me return alive.

Yes, I just had to clamber out of this pit of negative thinking. *Once we open this door, we’ll be diving headfirst into a shared-living experience that neither of us will ever forget!*

If I couldn’t draw Hiyori’s attention in the two weeks-ish we were due to spend here, though, I doubt I’d ever be granted another chance.

In fact, if I failed, I was faced with the distasteful idea of wasting the rest of my years on the outer edges of indigenous Indian culture. That was something I preferred to avoid at all costs.

No matter what it took, in the limited time I had to work with, I had to win Hiyori’s heart—and, someday, make her my lawfully wedded wife. Then I’d gladly live out life as a monk in Mumbai.

“Um, hello?”

Hiyori, paying no attention to my frivolous flights of fancy, began jabbing away at the intercom button.

“Hey, you don’t need to ring it that much…”

“Huh? Uh, I wouldn’t *have* to if they’d, like, *answer*? What do you want me to do? …Hellooooo?!”

Watching her doggedly hammer her finger against the intercom button reminded me of a mobster trying to collect protection money.

Too bad the yakuza didn’t tend to hire such beautiful, radiant henchmen. Then I’d pay them whatever they wanted. *Mi casa es su casa.*

“You, um, you think he might be out, Hiyori?”

“Uh, of *course* not? I told him we’d be here today, right now. He wouldn’t mess that up. He’s not *you*.”

“Hey, what do I have to do with—”

Undeterred by my dispirited defense, Hiyori kept abusing the button until, finally, we heard someone trying to unlock a latch on the other side of the door.

“There, see? I told you. You know, though…I haven’t seen my brother-in-law in, like, forever.”

“Really? Wow. I feel kinda nervous.”

My first encounter with a man who might become family to *me* someday.

It went without saying that my heartbeat began to accelerate. I had to make the manliest, most macho impression I could.

Stretching my back straight, I waited a good half minute for the door to open, my body tensed right up to my fingertips.

The sounds of someone fumbling with the lock continued unabated. The door itself showed no sign of budging.

“…What’s he up to?”

I couldn’t keep my muscles clenched like this for much longer. I began to

visibly shiver.

It must have shown on my face, because from the side of my eye, I could see Hiyori give me a questioning stare, as if to say “Oh, God, what *now*?”

Stay cool. *Stay cool*. I couldn’t afford to give my lady’s brother-in-law the wrong idea. I had to put my best face forward.

With a satisfying clunk, the door slowly began to open.

“Wow, it’s about *time* you got that opened up. What were you even…”

On the other side of the open door was a white-haired young man, forehead caked in sweat, wearing a look of supreme achievement.

He looked quite a bit younger than how he was described to me.

I thought he’d be far older than either Hiyori or her sister. If *this* guy was her sister’s husband, there must have been a pretty major age difference.

“I…I’m sorry, I didn’t know how to undo the lock…”

Didn’t know how to undo the lock? What was that supposed to mean? Someone living here this long shouldn’t be having *that* kind of problem.

A litany of questions popped into my mind. *No, no, hang on—I can’t let myself think about that stuff.*

What if this guy really *was* family to Hiyori?

If I did anything rude around him, it’d pose major consequences for my future.

“W-wow, Hiyori, your brother-in-law’s pretty young—”

I turned and smiled at Hiyori, only to find a look on her face unlike anything I’d seen from her before.

Her eyes shone brightly, like two sparkling jewels installed in her head, and her cheeks were a vermilion red, the color of a fresh, ripe plum.

“So hot…”

It was clear that the look of pure desire that accompanied Hiyori’s appraisal was aimed at the white-haired man in front of us.

“Wh-whoa, what’s going on, Hiyori? Uh…like, what do you mean, ‘so hot’?! He’s your sister’s husband, isn’t he?!”

Hiyori shook her head, her eyes still enthralled by the guy.

“No, like…We’ve never met before. This is…Wow, I can’t even…”

I could hear something shatter within me, like a Ming vase tossed against asphalt.

The Asahina Army, the horde I thought I extinguished from my imagination long ago, plunged down again from the heavens, not a stitch of clothing among them, ready to carry me home once more. What the hell was going on here?

There was no mistaking this for anything other than Hiyori’s sister’s house.

But why was this total stranger to both of us answering the door? He had to be some kind of burglar, didn’t he? *Please* let him be a burglar.

Either way, I had to cart this man out of Hiyori’s sight as soon as I could…!

“Hey, who *are* you, anyway? This is your brother-in-law’s house, right, Hiyori?! Why are *you* here?”

I tried to look as sinister as possible as I confronted the young man. He flashed me a deer-in-headlights stare.

Between his tall frame and sculpted facial features, I was starting to dislike him more with every passing moment.

“Huh? Hiyori? …Oh. Yeah. Mr. Tateyama told me about you.”

The guy, his face more focused now, cheerfully padded out the front door toward Hiyori, not bothering to put shoes on.

“It’s good to meet you. My name is…um, Konoha, probably.”

“Oh, I…Oooh, man…! I’m Hiyori Asahina! But…wow, ‘Mr. Tateyama’? Are you one of his students?”

“Erm? I, uh…I guess?”

“Ohhhh! Okay! You must be, like, watching the house for him or something? He’s always so busy with, uh, this and that…”

“Yeah…He said to let you in when you show up.”

This was out of hand now. Why’s she acting so lovey-dovey out of the blue? Watching her talk to this guy calling himself Konoha, I could see a consistent gleam to Hiyori’s eyes. Like she had just run into her goddamn Prince Charming or something.

I doubted I even registered in her mind by this point.

The sound of my heart bubbling and seething in abject fury roared in my ears.

“Hey, uh…Hiyori? I think this guy’s kind of…weird, you know? He might not be telling the truth…”

“Huhh?! Uh, like, what are you *talking* about?! He’s, like, *such* a hottie. How could he be lying to me? What are you, stupid?!”

“Eep…!”

Each one of Hiyori’s words ripped my heart to ribbons, making mincemeat out of my admittedly egocentric argument.

My flimsy logic proved worthless in the face of her behemothlike aggression. All I could do was ball up and lay myself bare against the assault.

“So, uh…Konoha? Let’s just, like, forget about this kid and go inside, okay?”

“Uhm? Uh, he told me to let him in too, so…”

Then the young man lurched his way in front of me.

“Hi, um, my name is Konoha. Uh, nice to meet you?”

“…Hibiya Amamiya. You, too…!!”

It was all the response I could muster as I scrambled to smother the advancing flames of jealousy in my chest.

“Wow, guess he likes you too, huh, Hibiya? Great! So how about we, like, go inside, okay, Konoha?”

“Um, okay.”

I didn’t bother hiding my sneer as I glared at Konoha, his arms flailing as Hiyori pushed him inside from behind.

Who the hell does he think *he* is?

Judging from what he and Hiyori said, he must have been one of the students in the school where her brother-in-law teaches.

But that didn't matter.

The most pressing issue right now was how to throw him out of the picture and make Hiyori turn her eyes back toward me.

I raised a middle finger at the shattered remains of the Asahina Army, howling in laughter at me from up on high, as I went through the door and slammed it behind me.

CHILDREN RECORD 2

The room's clock seemed to echo as it ticked away.

The time was just about to reach nine p.m.

Naked lightbulbs hung down from the unfinished ceiling, giving the room an unexpectedly homey, bright-but-not-too-bright feel.

Kido had been standing in the kitchen for the past few minutes, vigorously scrubbing away at six sets of dishes. The cabinets were beginning to fill with sets of neatly organized plates and utensils.

Konoha, seated on the sofa opposite from me on the table, was engaged in a regular cycle of closing his eyes, drifting off for a moment, then snapping back to attention.

"Nnmmhh…I can't eat any more…Ooh, but I'd be rude if I didn't…"

My sister, meanwhile, had already descended into a deep sleep over to my left, spittle drooling pathetically from the side of her mouth.

…Look at us. What are we? Children? Or does Kido really seem like that much of a "mother" to us by now?

Somewhere along the line, this whole evening began to feel like some kind of sleepover with our playground pals.

Just this morning, I was furrowing my eyebrows at the Mekakushi-dan, suspecting them of leading some kind of subversive cult. Half a day later, I'd grown remarkably used to them all.

Even someone like me, someone who's barely kept a person-to-person conversation going in the past year, was part of the gang now. That's how damn friendly they all were.

"I gotta hand it to Momo. Only a girl like her could dream about eating after all that food. Why'd she go to sleep so fast, though, master?"

“I dunno. Maybe she’s training to be a cow or something.”

Out of fatigue, or for whatever other reason, Momo fell fast asleep just a few scant minutes after gorging herself.

“And right after she about crapped herself when that kid called her fat. Crazy!”

I doubted she even remembered that exchange by now. I often marveled at how much like a frumpy, middle-aged housewife she acted at times. It no longer surprised me much.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure she’s just tired and stuff. Hey, Kisaragi, get up. If you’re gonna sleep, do it in my room.”

The washing-up complete, Kido approached Momo as she removed her professional-grade apron, the Chinese character for “technique” written across the chest.

She gave Momo a couple of light slaps across the cheek. “Uunnngh, you sure can put it away,” she replied, still lost in her idyllic dreamland feast.

“Oh, sorry. You can just leave her there. Once she conks out, there’s no getting her up ’til morning.”

“I can’t just let her crash here, though. Guess I’ll try to carry her…Ngh?!”

Kido’s face twisted a bit in wonderment as she attempted to lift Momo with her arms.

“Y-you got…a lot on you, Kisaragi…!”

She managed to heave her up off the sofa, but the effort made her breathing noticeably labored. This, from the same girl who manhandled Hibiya like he was an inflatable pool toy.

Come to think of it, I remembered looking up Momo’s weight in one of the pop-idol sites she’s listed in and chortling to myself.

As I idly watched Kido lug her out of the room, Konoha began to snore loudly across from me.

That guy was kind of out-there, too; that blank stare of his made it impossible

to guess what was running through his mind.

And now he was here, sleeping like a baby in a house he had never seen before. Utterly vulnerable.

…It's like a child who grew up without maturing at all.

Judging by how Hibiya acted, there had to be a lot of complex drama between the two of them.

…No, not just them, either. Even Ene—even the Mekakushi-dan, for that matter—had some kind of history with him.

Ene's unnatural behavior reminded me, although I tended to overlook it pretty often, that she had a past like everyone else. The fact that this, shall we say, unique life-form(?) was holing up inside my computer hardware should have felt like a bigger deal than it did.

It wasn't that I never pondered what happened to her before she came to me. But whenever I asked, she would always dance around the subject.

I took a distracted glance at my phone screen. Ene, who couldn't have known my thought process right now, was busy making up a futon bed.

"…What're you doing?"

"Huh? I'm about to sleep, what do you think?"

"Oh…Huh."

I was pretty sure Ene bragged once about how she was "such a high-spec girl, I never have to sleep at all!"

But I let it drop. Needling her any further would just spell more trouble for me.

"Whew. Sorry to leave you alone."

Kido shut the door behind her, rubbing a sore shoulder as she spoke.

"Not that it's any of my business, but I think she may wanna try a little portion control."

"Ha-ha…Sorry about this, though. I mean, staying here two days in a row and all."

“Nah, it’s no biggie. It’s our fault anyway. Today, though…Man, we’re all just gassed, huh?”

Kido looked pretty spent herself as she plopped down on the sofa facing me.

Me, she, and Ene were the only conscious Mekakushi-dan members left. Konoha, who dropped out a few minutes ago, was now slumped on the sofa by Kido, arms loosely splayed out in both directions.

“Ooh, looks like Mr. Faker’s checked out for the night, hmm? Nice to see *someone* making himself at home.”

Ene, now burrowed into the futon she made up, stuck her face out from the side and gave Konoha’s sleeping face a disapproving grunt.

“What do you mean, ‘Mr. Faker’?”

“Mm? Just the nickname I gave him. It’s kinda tough to tell ’em apart otherwise.”

“Oh, right, he looks like someone you know, yeah? But what kind of guy is…”

Just as I was about to ask, Ene’s eyes swiveled toward mine.

“Oh, what? All right, all right. You don’t want me to ask? I won’t.”

Ene flashed a cheerful smile at me.

“*There’s* a good master! I mean, I’m kind of in the dark here, too. But I’ll try to explain it to you…sooner or later. You know, master, in terms *you’d* understand.”

There was a bit of melancholy betrayed on her face.

She dodged the subject, like she always did. But this might have been the first time she promised to tell me anything.

Still, this is Ene we’re talking about. She might just be feeding me a line.

“Yeah, well, I guess we all got our own crap to deal with. Though, of course, I invited him here ’cause I kind of *need* to know some more about that…”

Kido looked to her side. Konoha was lost in slumber. I couldn’t guess why he so valiantly fought against Mr. Sandman a second ago. Whatever the reason, he didn’t win. Kido sighed, and as if on cue, Konoha finally lost his balance and

slumped to the floor.

“Though I guess he’s pretty useless now. Not that we’d be doing very much this late anyway.”

She sunk deeply into the sofa cushions, hanging her arms on the upper edge as she crossed her legs.

“Tomorrow, huh…? Hey, who *was* that kid, in the end?”

Kido stared at the ceiling.

“Hm? Oh. Hibiya, right? The way his eyes danced around like that…That’s probably a sign that he’s gonna gain an ‘ability.’ Like the ones we got.”

Hibiya had yet to come-to after that encounter, but apparently he was still in a pretty unstable condition. After being briefed on the situation, Seto volunteered to keep watch over/take care of him for the night…which brought us to now. I found myself gazing at one of the bare lightbulbs under the ceiling.

“Oh…I guess we can trust Seto to watch out for him, though. Seems like a pretty straight-up guy.”

Kido let out a soft chuckle.

“Yeah, well, he’s got a good head on his shoulders, but we all got our weaknesses, you know? Betcha anything he’s sleeping right now, actually.”

“A good head on his shoulders” is the main impression I carried of Seto myself, from the moment we met. To Kido, that appraisal was probably backed up with hard-earned experience.

I had only met the guy this morning, after all. No way would I have any kind of deep understanding of his psyche.

“Listen, uh…I mean, you guys…”

“Mm? What?”

Kido flashed a confused look as I stumbled over myself. Was this something I was safe in asking? Would asking take me on a one-way trip down a road I’d never return from again? I tried to weigh these doubts in my head, but my own fatigue helped ferry the question to my lips.

“Those eyes you all have…I mean, I dunno if I should be asking this or what, really, but…they’re not normal, you know? Momo’s, too. She said she doesn’t remember when she wound up like that, but I’m guessing she’s gotta be related to you guys somehow.”

The confusion remained written on Kido’s face as I asked her point-blank. But the moment I closed my mouth, a benign smile spread across her lips.

“…I probably shoulda talked to you before this guy showed up. Sorry about that.”

Kido hunched forward, palms clasped between her knees.

“Oh, no, I mean…That’s fine, but, you know, I guess I couldn’t stop wondering about it.”

I averted my eyes, feeling bizarrely ashamed over my hesitation.

“No, we really needed to talk. It’s just…You’re right. It’s a little off the beaten path, so it’s not like we can just bring it up in broad daylight. These abilities have caused a lot of grief for all of us, too. So explaining everything right away… It’s kind of a self-defense reflex, keeping us from doing that.”

I turned my face upward as Kido spoke.

Her expression bore no sadness. Her eyes were clear and unclouded, revealing the strong, driving will within.

“Y-yeah, I guess I can see that. It’s nothing I get at all, and…well, you know.”

That’s right. What am I trying to do, learning more about these guys? The heavy implications are why I stumbled over my words.

What would satisfying my curiosity accomplish?

What could I *do* once I knew?

Whatever “incident” Hibiya got wrapped up in, it was allegedly serious enough that somebody’s life was in danger.

It might be something we couldn’t even afford to involve the police with.

Hibiya is…growing *an ability*. The same kind Kido and her cohorts had. And now they’re keeping guard over him, trying to nurse him through it.

What about me, though?

Is this really something I should take the plunge and ask?

I could always clam up, return home like nothing ever happened, and go back to my Internet-playboy lifestyle.

Of course I could. *This has nothing to do with me. I have a—*

"You running again?"

For a single instant, a bracing chill ran down my spine. I felt like someone was crushing my heart with their gnarled talons. A cold sweat erupted across my forehead.

"Shintaro? Hey, you all right? You're not looking too well…"

"Oh, uh…no, I'm fine. Sorry. I'm okay now."

"…All right. You must be pretty beat, too. Wanna pick up this topic tomorrow, maybe?"

Tomorrow. Was I going to be here tomorrow? Ene all but asked me to head back home earlier. I couldn't know for sure, but she might have been concerned for my safety.

But I couldn't just…

"No, I…Could you keep going? Just a little is fine."

If I walked out of here and back into that bedroom, what would that achieve?

Maybe I didn't want to leave these guys after all. Maybe going back to self-imposed solitude scared me.

"All right. Great. So let me tell you about how I got this ability."

Kido smiled, perhaps noticing something I hadn't. She blinked, and then her eyes flooded with a deep crimson shade.

"My 'Concealing Eyes'…That's what Kano calls it, anyway, but basically it's the ability to make myself and the things around me less…detectable."

She reached for a magazine sitting on the table next to her, bringing it up to my eyes. From the edges inward, the magazine grew hazy, imprecise in the air,

before neatly disappearing into nothingness.

As I squinted into empty space, I realized all over again what an astonishing trick it was, thrust before me like this. I could understand why Kido was loath to discuss it much.

If word about this got out to the public, there'd be a huge media frenzy. She could have been trucked off to some government research facility. Or worse. One could imagine all manner of nightmare scenarios.

"I used to have parents, too, before I got…well, this. My mother wasn't related to me by blood, though. And my dad was horrible. He went screwing around with girls every single night. His company went totally bankrupt before long. And not even that was enough for him to lose. So he set fire to our house."

"Wh-what…?"

Considering the story took just a few seconds to relate, Kido's past lacked nothing in shock value. But recalling the memories didn't seem to pain her at all. Her voice remained calm, as if reminiscing over some silly little grade-school rivalry.

"Heh-heh. Pretty rough, huh? But that's not even the main story."

"Oh…"

"Me and the rest of my family were all in the house when my dad torched it. My sister and I, we couldn't get out of the bedroom."

"That…wouldn't that kill you…?"

I was pretty shaken by this point. Kido, no doubt noticing this, betrayed a mischievous smile.

"Mm-hmm. He killed me, all right. I couldn't breathe any longer, and then the fire consumed my body."

"Oof…"

"And then I saw it. The wall of our house split apart, and there was this giant, fanged mouth opening up!"

“Gagghh!”

Now Kido was riding the moment, like a counselor busting out her best ghost story by the campfire.

Given the late hour, her storytelling acumen was more than enough to keep me captivated by fear across the table.

It was more than a tad off-putting in a way, her giving me such a fright, considering her laughable performance at the amusement park–haunted house a few hours earlier.

But, despite her electrifying buildup, Kido refrained from continuing. She crossed her arms in defiance, a look of supreme victory on her face.

I grew unable to bear the silence.

“…And, and then what?”

Kido remained in the same position as she triumphantly replied:

“Hm? That’s all.”

“Huh?”

The expert feint was enough to make my jaw visibly drop.

Kido had woven this tale of a young girl burned alive from head to toe, then consumed alive by a huge, bizarre monster. But considering that experience, she looked remarkably healthy and undigested right now. Something didn’t add up.

“So…so what’s your ability all about, then?!”

“Oh, yeah, so when I woke up in the ruins of my home later on, it was already in me. All my burns disappeared, too, or at least most of ’em. It was a pretty weird night.”

“But what was that big evil mouth thing that you saw?”

“Well, I saw it, but my memory kind of totally blanks out after that. I’m guessing it must’ve swallowed me up, but I was the only survivor of that fire, and really, I just have no idea what happened.”

Kido raised her bent arms in the air, in the classic “search *me*” gesture.

Now I knew the entire story, such as it was. But the storyteller was a bit lacking in important details. Things just seemed stranger and stranger.

“Huh. So what I’m getting from that is…you guys don’t really understand any of this either. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Of course, I’m doing as much research as I can, but…Well, that’s kind of an ongoing process. I was still a kid back then, and I told the police about everything I could think of, but they never really investigated.”

No, they wouldn’t. Telling a story like that with a straight face wouldn’t build much trust in people. It’d cause serious trouble.

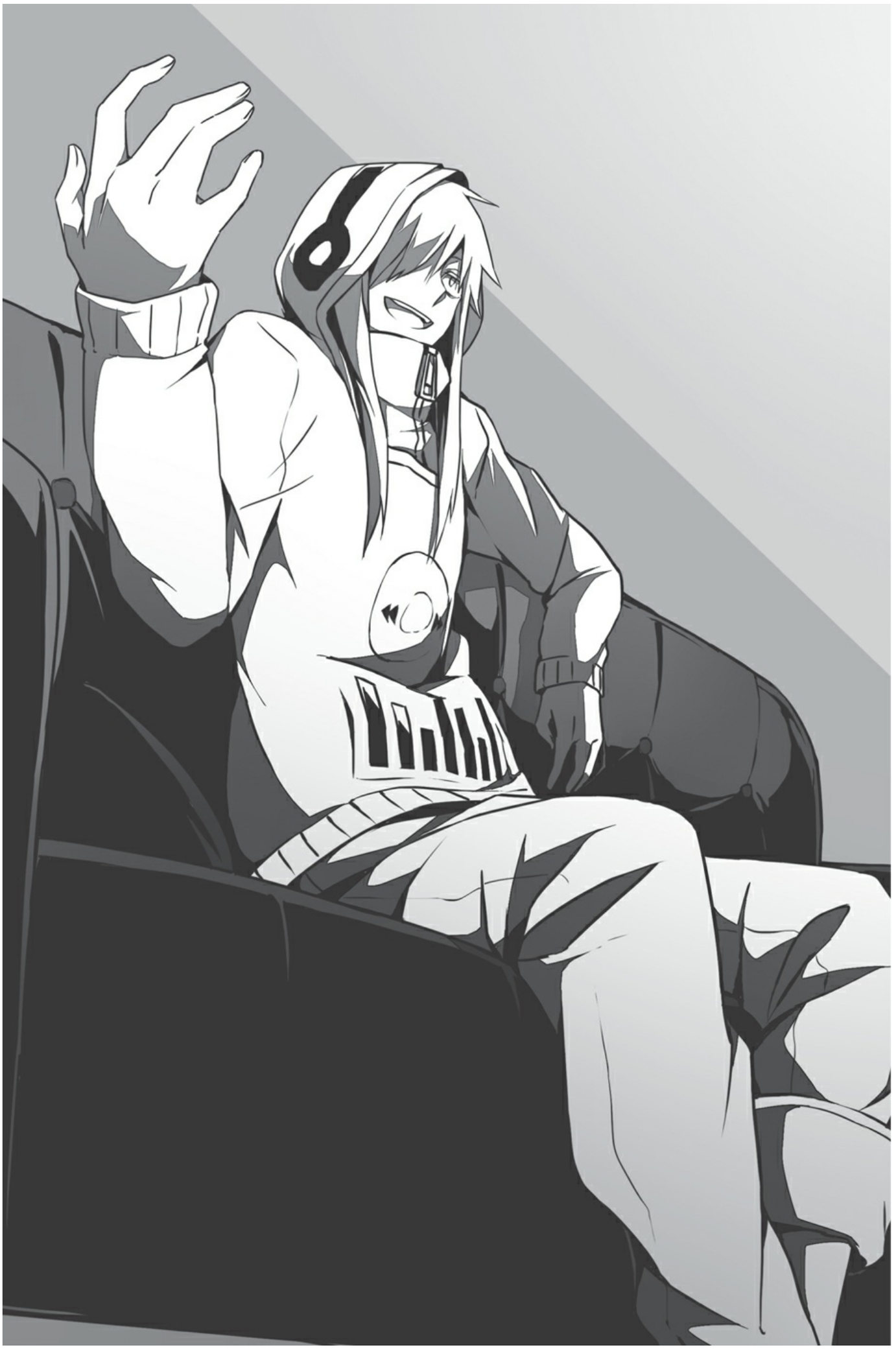
But if whatever happened to Hibiya was the same kind of thing that happened to Kido and the rest, it was probably in no one’s best interest to call the cops. Maybe that was why Kido offered a helping hand and brought him here. She saw a lot of herself in him.

My mind dwelled for a moment on the central issue. The part the police would never believe.

The strangest thing about Kido’s tale, by far, was the “huge mouth” that consumed her. The rest of the story was pretty morbid, too, but nothing you couldn’t imagine happening in real life. If anything to Kido’s past connected to her current “anomaly,” that was it.

“What about the rest of you guys? Did Kano and Seto get eaten by that ‘huge mouth,’ too?”

“Kano told me he saw ‘the exact same thing,’ but I guess his memory went blank right after that, too. With Seto, *his* memory went dark while he was drowning in a river, so he’s not too sure whether he saw it or not.”



Her mention of the word “drowned” instantly brought up memories from my own younger years, memories that existed only in a fog by now. It was something I recalled now and again, but suddenly Kido’s story was tinting those memories a far more ominous shade.

“…You know, I think that’s maybe when Momo started to be like that. After she drowned in the ocean.”

“Kisaragi?”

“Yeah…You know, um, I’d appreciate it if you don’t discuss this with her too much. But yeah, there she was…and our dad, too, trying to save her…”

There was apparently a whole crowd of people watching my dad diving in to help Momo after she got swept into the sea. Once he swam over to where Momo was, a giant wave swallowed them up.

I heard all about it from my mother afterward, once I got home from the test prep center I was attending. There was an immediate search-and-rescue effort, of course, but they never found my dad. The next day, somebody spotted Momo washed up on the beach. Miraculously alive, they said.

“Oh…I see. Yeah. Not the kind of thing you wanna bring up with Kisaragi around the breakfast table.”

“No, yeah, you see what I mean? But your story reminded me of something else, too.”

There was something in common between Kido’s tale and Momo’s drowning.

Kido said she woke up in the burnt-out shell of her house. Which meant that, for the entire time that place was burning to the ground, she was there.

Momo wasn’t found until the next day. Which meant that, between that wave and her discovery, she was there in the water.

Thinking about it rationally, would someone have any chance of survival in those conditions?

No. They couldn’t have. Yes, miracles happen every day in our blessed, beautiful world, and all of that. But you couldn’t explain all this away with trite aphorisms like that.

Why not? Because once you add Kido's "huge mouth" to the mix, everything suddenly made sense.

What if that mouth swallowed up Kido just as she succumbed to the flames, and swallowed up Momo just as she took her first lungful of water? They could've been inside there that whole time, before being "spit out" just before their respective miraculous rescues.

It was kind of a wild story, yes. But Kido's and Momo's "abilities" with their eyes might provide all the evidence needed to prove it.

"I was just thinking, if that 'huge mouth' you saw was the reason why you all got those abilities with your eyes, then maybe that mouth swallowed up Momo back then, too. I know that's pretty off-the-wall, but…"

Pretty off-the-wall, but something told me that the common-sense rules of planet Earth were powerless in the unexplainable face of these "abilities."

And behind these unexplainable skills, an unexplainable common presence…

"Hmm. Yeah. We were kind of thinking along similar lines ourselves. And if Kisaragi had that same thing happen to her, I guess we can pin the blame on that…*thing* for our abilities. She'll have Kano backing her up on that too, so…For now, that sounds like the safe bet to make. I guess. You know, though…"

"What?"

Kido brought a hand to her lips, suddenly stumbling across something in her mind.

Her eyes focused on a single point atop the adjacent desk, as if scanning some invisible jigsaw puzzle for the one piece that'd lock everything together.

"I just…you know, there's something else. It was in Kisaragi's story, too. All of us, we nearly lost our lives while *someone else* was nearby. Kano was with his mom, and Seto said he was with his friend."

Kido's gaze remained transfixed on the table as she fumbled with something in her mind.

"And yet *we* were the ones who survived. And the people with us…and I don't know if it's a result of that or not…but they all *vanished*."

The observation startled me.

“So…when your house was on fire, did…um, did they find your family’s bodies in there?”

“Yep. My mother and father’s…Just them. They never found a trace of my sister, and I was the only one who survived.”

“But then…”

Two separate disasters, two different abilities instilled in their eyes, and the “huge mouth” linking them together.

And then Hibiya babbling. “I think this girl may have died. I have to help her.” A theory started to take form in my head.

“So maybe both you and whoever you were with got eaten by that…something. And then you were the only ones that came back out. With those abilities…”

Kido picked up the thread before I could finish the thought.

“And not one of our companions has ever been found. Which means that, after they got swallowed, they’re still over at…wherever they got sent to.”

It was a twisty, frenzied tale, but—whether coincidence or not—it worked as an explanation. Between Momo’s nascent ability, our missing father, and a “truth” we never would have found alone, it felt like we were slowly building a path to some ultimate answer.

“And, you know, we kinda thought about that, too. Like, what if each of those people we cared about is still alive, inside that ‘mouth’ or whatever? We’re trying to investigate everything we can about it, ’cause…I mean, we care about them, inside of there. But given how all the memories of the time we spent in there are wiped…”

Kido sighed midsentence, immersing herself back into the cushions. There was little imagining the kind of hardships they had between losing their parents, their families, the people important to them, and making it here.

Being all alone, with those bizarre superpowers, may have caused them all kinds of grief.

I began to wonder what they even thought about life, about living in a state like this.

It was hard to imagine. And that made me all the more aware of how much of a self-centered, totally carefree life I had been leading.

What else would you call it? I gave up on everything so I could live an empty life of seclusion. What would I ever understand about these guys?

They were so eager to help Hibiya because they knew what kind of “pain” he was going through. They knew it all too well themselves.

“So, that’s the long and short of it.”

Kido was first to break the tense silence.

“Basically, we kind of know how we got these abilities, but we really don’t, either. What I’m thinking, though, is that we can at least take care of Hibiya until he gains some control over his own skills. We’re kind of used to that process by now, so…I don’t know what happened to the girl he said was with him when he got, you know, swallowed or whatever, but I’d like to do what we can to search for—”

“W-wait a sec.”

Kido seemed just about done with her story. I wasn’t ready for that.

The path forward was now perfectly obvious, as if somebody carefully laid out every brick of it for me.

“You said you don’t remember anything from when you were in there, right? You, and everyone else?”

“Y-yeah. Yeah, nothing. Nothing until I opened my eyes again.”

Kido was cagey with her reply, unaware of what direction I was taking this.

“I just remembered. Hibiya told Konoha that he ‘just stood there and watched.’ Maybe *he* would…”

Kido’s eyes opened wide as she realized the portent behind my words.

“Maybe he remembers, you know? What’s on the other side of that mouth?”

In an instant, Kido shot to her feet and began walking away from the sofa.

“Hey…Hey, where’re you going?! He’s sleeping right now, remember?”

She twitched a bit again, then slumped back into the sofa.

Her eyes were averted, her cheeks a little red, ashamed at her sudden, impulsive behavior.

An impartial witness to that scene, a far cry from our grave conversation of a moment ago, probably would observe, “Oh, yeah, you’re a girl, I guess I kinda forget sometimes.” Luckily, I didn’t say that. Otherwise, I would’ve rag-dolled farther than Kano whenever *he* mouthed off within earshot of her.

“Yeah, I…I mean, I know why you’d be in a hurry. I’m kinda a victim here, too. I haven’t seen my dad in years, but if I ever saw him again…”

If I ever saw him again, what would *that* do for me?

What’d I even *say* to him?

What would my dad think when presented with this son of his who spent the past several years rotting away, alone in his bedroom?

“Shintaro?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry…But anyway, let’s keep going with this tomorrow. Guess Kano’s not gettin’ back anytime soon, anyway.”

The walls of the hideout were festooned with clocks of every variety, from digital LCD to German cuckoo. For all I knew, that machine with the weird, colored liquid dripping down inside of it, perched atop a small shelf, could have been a clock, too. Every one of them, each with their own methodology and style, unerringly pointed to half past ten.

“Yeah, probably not. Who could guess what *he’s* doing…? Man, today has just exhausted me. I don’t think we’ve ever hosted so many people in here at once.”

Kido stared at the front door as she spoke, her voice interspersed with a touch of exasperation and more than a hint of readily noticeable excitement.

“Being the boss of *this* gang would tire anyone out.”

Maybe it was a bit embarrassing for her all along. Her cheeks turned redder than before.

“Oh, shut up! You don’t have to poke at me like that! I…I’m going to bed, all right?”

With that, Kido zoomed back to her feet, just as she did before in the last impulsive fit, and began walking to her room.

Then, as I watched on in confusion, she turned around. “I got some sheets out for you,” she said, pointing at a stack of blankets piled up toward the front. “You and Konoha can use those.” Then, with a slam, she disappeared behind her door.

“What was up with that…?”

She could act as tough as she wanted, I reasoned. But she was still a girl, deep down. I never had half a chance of understanding her. There was no point lingering on it.

Just as I decided to switch off my brain for the night, I felt an immense fatigue swarm over my body. I must have hit the wall myself.

“Eesh, I’m exhausted…”

I rose up, the springs of the sofa creaking in response. My body felt like a chunk of lead.

Somehow, I dragged myself over to the blankets, choosing a couple at random off the top before returning to my bed for the night.

Placing a blanket on Konoha, currently sleeping the sleep of the dead in a rumpled mess on the floor, I suddenly realized I had no idea how to turn off the lights.

“Umm…Switch…Where’s the switch?”

I glanced around the room, but nothing switchlike made itself known.

This must have been what purgatory was like. Right when I needed to sleep the most, I run into *this*. What should I do? I couldn’t just leave them on…

As I puttered around the room in a blind search, pondering over the injustice of it all, I felt someone’s presence behind me.

Surprised, I whirled around to find Marie, her springy white hair framing her

equally white, fluffy pajamas. She stared at me like I was an intruder.

"…What're you doing, Shintaro?"

Suddenly, I realized that I had a special ability of my own. The ability, when eyed by an innocent little girl, to sweat profusely on command. I hadn't done anything particularly suspicious, but despite the smile I attempted to put on, my perspiration wasn't helping my case much.

"Ohhh! Uhh, Marie! I was just, uh, trying to turn off the lights, but I don't see where the light switch is!"

The agitated explanation was enough to soften Marie's face back to normal. She pointed at a dartboard hanging on the wall.

"It's over there. You push it right in the middle."

I breathed a sigh of relief as I pressed on the bull's-eye as directed. With a click, all the bare lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling blacked out in unison.

The moment they did, Marie's scream made my heart leap out of my throat.

"E-eeeeeeek! Don't just turn them *off* like that!"

I frantically pushed the button again, only to find Marie back to her previous "why did you *do* that" face, this time with some tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

"…Why did you *do* that?"

"N-no! I was just making sure it worked, okay?! I…Ughh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

This is such a pain in the ass. All I want is some sleep. Why do I have to go through all this mental anguish?

"It's all right…"

Apparently placated, Marie turned around and returned to her room.

What did she come out here for? I thought about asking, but if she was leaving of her own volition, I figured it best not to prod her any further.

"Um, good night!"

I gave a couple of distracted waves, watched Marie disappear into her room,

and turned out the lights.

With a heavy sigh, I shuffled toward where I thought the sofa was.

Lying down on it and pulling the blanket over my body, I gave my cell phone a quick peek. Ene was still curled up in her futon.

“She is *such* a pain…”

I said it out loud. The futon didn’t so much as twitch.

That was enough for the night. I put the phone on the table and closed my eyes.

The hum of the air conditioner dominated the darkness.

Looking back, today had been an insufferably long day, one that was hard to believe took only twenty-four hours.

I was introduced to the Mekakushi-dan only this morning…Well, technically, I ran into them at the department store yesterday. But they were good guys. I found myself taking a shine to them almost immediately, despite myself. It might be the first time I’ve experienced anything like that, actually.

I was invited over by some people, had a meal with them, discussed what was going on with our lives, and set up informal plans for tomorrow.

That, by itself, sounds like how any group of friends interacts with each other.

Our conversation was a notch eerier than your typical chat among friends, but never in a million years did I think I’d be blessed with an opportunity like this.

…Is this really the right thing for me? Really?

The more people I encountered, the more I laughed with them, the more it felt like it was fading away that much more quickly.

But, still, even for just a little while—even if it was just for whatever remained of the summer—I had a right to see some greater meaning behind running into these guys. Right?

I asked the question into the darkness. Not to myself; to somebody who could never have been there with me, but who still remained clear in my mind.

⁂

“Hey, Shintaro?”

“…What?”

“It’s great that you made all those friends. Is it fun being with them all?”

“Hell no. This hasn’t even been a shred of fun for me.”

“Oh, you big liar! You were acting like you had a blast today, Shintaro. That might be the first time I’ve ever seen you smile so much, in fact.”

“No, seriously, I’m not. They’re just bossing me around all day. I feel like I’m gonna die from exhaustion.”

“Hey, Shintaro? Do you remember me?”

“What’re you talking about? Of course I do.”

“So can you say what my name is?”

“Uh…Where’d that *come from? What’s up with you?”*

“Come on, Shintaro, can you say my name?”

“H-hey, knock that off…Knock it off, okay?”

“I…I guess you can’t, huh? You can’t remember anything about me?”

“Please…just stop. Please, I’m asking you here…”

“Can you, Shintaro?”

⁂

“Aaaaaagghh!!”

“Wraagghh?!!”

I propelled myself off the sofa, my body covered in sweat. My mind was hazy, as if had been tossed into a blender and pureed for ten minutes.

Darkness surrounded me. The low whir of the air conditioner was the only sound.

It took me a little while before I realized that this was the Mekakushi-dan’s hideout, and that I was attempting to sleep on their sofa.

“You scared the crap outta me! What’s *wrong* with you?!”

Suddenly, light flooded into my eyes. The scene around the hideout returned to focus, just as I left it a moment ago.

Turning around, I saw Momo, her finger on the dartboard switch, looking concerned.

“Oh. Hey, Momo. I’m okay. Just having a dream.”

“What kind of dream made you do *that*? You look terrible.”

Momo took a sheepish step closer, peering intently into my face.

“I told you, I’m fine. But what’s up with you? Aren’t you sleeping?”

“Huh? Oh, I kinda woke up, so…I figured I’d go see how he was doing in the meantime.”

She chuckled nervously to herself, as if ashamed to disturb me.

“…Oh. Okay. Well, you didn’t wake me up or anything, so don’t worry.”

“No? Well, I know you gotta be tired after everything that happened the past two days. Sleep tight, okay?”

“Sure…Oh, right.”

I stood up to face Momo, still crouched down next to the sofa.

“Hmm…? What’s up, big bro?”

“Listen, uh, why’re you going through this whole charade?”

The question made Momo's face erupt in a mixture of panic and fear.

"Um…Huh? I don't really know what you mean…"

I kept my eyes on her. She turned hers to the floor.

"I know you, Momo. Once you fall asleep, I could take a baseball bat to you and you still wouldn't wake up. That's always been a huge issue for you, right? That, and you just had a massive fight with Hibiya. Why would you want to check up on him in the middle of the night? That, and—"

I didn't have to go on. It was already enough to silence Momo for good. Her gaze was still on the floor, so I couldn't read her face very well.

"Momo calls me 'Shintaro,' not 'big bro'…Kano."

The air shimmered. The next instant, Kano stood back up, staring at me with that huge, simpering grin that never left his lips.

"…Man, you are just a total gas, Shintaro, you know that? I can't get enough of it."

"Yeah, thanks. So you mind filling me in? Why are you transformed into Momo at *this* time of night?"

Even as I stood there, as resolutely as I could, that eerie grin remained painted on his face.

"Hah-hah…Guess I'm in the doghouse with you tonight, huh? Well, I suppose I can't blame you. Not after I disguised myself as your dear, dear sister…yeah?"

The wink he aimed at my direction confirmed my suspicion that he was deliberately playing me for a fool.

Not the way Ene always did, though. *This* was brimming with sadism, making a calculated effort to stab me right where I didn't want to be touched the most.

"Not exactly, no. I mean, it's your house; you can impersonate anybody you want to. I'm just asking you *why*."

"Mmmm, well, not just for no reason at all, no. But what would telling you accomplish? Like, what would you even do if you knew, Shintaro?"

Kano swiveled around, turning his back to me, then spread his arms wide.

“I mean, it’s kinda weird, isn’t it? You’re acting so freakishly tense over *this*, of all things. I’m just thinking, you know, you might be forgetting something pretty *important*, huh?”

I couldn’t gauge his face where I was standing.

But his words seemed to form a vise around my heart. It was like his eyes were sifting through every secret I kept in the nether regions of my soul.

“…What are you trying to tell me?”

“Hmm? Well, just *that*, pretty much. You know? I mean, Shintaro, it’s written all over your face. You’re about to forget something reeeeeeeally important for all time, you know?”

One of the lightbulbs above Kano’s head began to flicker.

Every flash seemed to illuminate his back like a strobe light.

“What the hell could *you* ever understand…!”

“Oh, was I right? Eesh, you don’t have to get all hot under the collar like that. I mean, you *did* forget, didn’t you, Shintaro?”

His sneering attitude brought my rage to the boiling point.

“For eff’s sake, I haven’t forgotten *anything*!!”

I grabbed at Kano as I fired back, forcing him to face me. The lightbulb shut off entirely for a moment.

When it came back on a second later, I felt my rapidly beating heart tear itself apart.

“So how come you never try to help me?”

There, I saw Ayano, her shoulder-length black hair a sharp contrast with her crimson-red scarf. There was no way I could ever mistake it. She smiled.

“Ah…ahh…”

My legs began to quiver. I was liable to collapse at any moment.

My brain abandoned all hope of comprehending reality any longer, channeling meaningless syllables into my mouth instead.

“Come on, Shintaro. Answer me. Or have you forgotten all about me by now?”

Ayano, her artificial smile now practically touching my face, stared at me with glassy, lifeless eyes. I began to have trouble breathing.

“N-no…I…”

All the thoughts dancing around in my mind for the past few years tried to bubble up to the surface en masse. But I couldn’t give voice to them. I couldn’t bring a single one of them across.

Ayano didn’t wait for me. Just like that day. And I couldn’t tell her anything then, either.

“It’s all right now. Farewell, Shintaro. Be well.”

The next moment, every bulb in the room went dark. Another instant, and they were back on. Ayano was gone without a trace.

My legs gave way, and I fell knees-first onto the ground.

I planted a shaky pair of hands on the floor for support, but like a dam giving way to a flood of emotions, my eyes welled with tears that fell helplessly below.

As if marching right behind them, all the feelings I had locked away swarmed to the surface, paralyzing me to the spot.

…Is this my punishment? For never lending an ear to her, for never being able to reach out and give her a hand to hold, this is my punishment?

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry…”

The words finally took form, softly echoing across the room, then disappeared, never knowing who they were destined for.



KAGEROU DAZE 03

The buzz of the cicadas echoed, raucous.

I stared at a tree next to the sidewalk, astonished that insects would have even considered city life. But I couldn't see any up there.

You hear all the time that a cicada has an average lifespan of just one week. But it's more complex than that: The larva can actually burrow into the ground and live for years and years down there, making their actual life expectancy quite a bit longer.

Maybe that meant the droning cry I was hearing now was the product of the reservoir of strength they amassed during all those years underground. One final release after all that buildup.

For someone like me—growing and building himself up deep under the surface my whole life, only to find myself squished on the sidewalk the moment I dared to crawl onto the surface—I found the concept both purely beautiful and purely envious.

"Um, we're here."

Hiyori's arm, currently supporting a shopping bag from the nearby supermarket, pointed toward a cemetery on the other side of a low-hung stone wall. It was our next stop.

"By the way, are you, like, all right? 'Cause your face is, uhm, a total wreck?"

"Huh? Really?"

"Uh, yeah? You got these huge rings around your eyes. And have you even, like, *eaten* and stuff?"

The main culprit behind the emaciated look that Hiyori so expertly described involved the girl herself, mostly. But judging by her act, the thought had yet to so much as occur to her.

After all, the stress from everything that took place yesterday was far too

much for someone with my physical stamina to take.

First off, Hiyori, who had gone head over heels for Konoha the moment we arrived at her house, was demonstrating less interest in me than ever. To her, I was nothing but an utter pest.

Yesterday was *supposed* to be the day Hiyori would help me choose a cell phone. No longer. *He* was the only appointment in her mind now. I pleaded with her to come along anyway, and after several dozen "What a pain" type of complaints from her, we finally set off…only to find that the department store we chose was closed due to "unexpected circumstances." To my intense chagrin, I was forced to retreat from the scene.

We could have visited any phone store on the street, of course, but it turns out that you can't sign a phone contract by yourself if you're underage. The plan was to hit this department store—apparently Hiyori's dad knew one of the executives who ran it—and have them make a special friends-and-family exception for me. Too bad it ended in bitter failure.

"Well," Hiyori quickly interjected, "guess the phone's gonna have to wait, huh?"

So I wound up spending all of yesterday in that accursed house, the sight of her flirting with the one thing I wanted out of my sight thrust before me for hours on end.

My only remaining question: Why am I being forced to live together with a freak like that?

The way she put it back home, Hiyori's brother-in-law lived in another house. We were meant to have the whole place to ourselves. Just the two of us.

Turns out this brother-in-law is a pretty flighty dude. Judging by Konoha claiming he's "lived here for a while" and being "taken care of by Mr. Tateyama," I suppose he's a more-or-less permanent boarder.

If he's letting random students crash at his house, I'd like to think I'm entitled to some kind of explanation as to why.

Although maybe Hiyori *did* hear about this before…and just didn't think to tell me. It was plausible.

Either way, it meant that my Glamorous Couple's Summer in the City was now thoroughly a thing of the past.

I couldn't keep much of my dinner down, and the burning pyres of jealousy in my soul made a decent night's sleep a tall order. Hence, Hiyori's appraisal of my frail, run-down visage.

"Hey, Hiyori? Why are we visiting a cemetery right now? I thought you were all amped up to go shopping…"

"Mmm, I dunno. Just kind of, like, felt like it? I mean, yesterday, when we went in my sister's house, it was like 'Oh, crap, I better visit here too.'"

Today was day two of our trip.

Earlier, Hiyori gave me an ultimatum: *I'm shopping today*, she said, *and you're coming along*. Then, this morning, the story did an about-face. *Shopping's canceled*, she explained. *I got a gravesite to visit.*

Konoha, the ultimate thorn in my side, wasn't with us. He showed no sign of waking up this morning. "I wish he coulda, like, come with us?" Hiyori lamented. For me, it was an unexpected windfall.

Come to think of it, Konoha didn't join us for the cell-phone shopping trip, either. "Mr. Tateyama said I couldn't leave the house while he was gone," he explained. What is he, five years old? That's why we didn't bother waking him—he wouldn't have left with us anyway.

"Oh…huh. I guess it's the Obon holiday, huh?"

Inside this cemetery, not too far away from our house, I could see a few other visitors. Considering this graveyard was on the small side, though, we didn't have the big crowds you'd expect to see visiting family graves during the holiday.

"Uh, yeah? That, and today's the anniversary of my sister's death, you know? My family never told me a lot about her, but…like, I guess they wouldn't? She probably never knew I was even born."

Hiyori's sister was apparently a pretty rebellious girl from a young age. One day she told her parents "I'm going out to see the world," ran away from home,

and that was that.

The family cut off all ties with her after that. By the time Hiyori finally met her sister, she was lying in a casket.

“My brother-in-law looked, like, *super* broken up about it at the funeral. I totally remember everything about that day.”

We walked down the narrow path, checking each grave marker as we did.

Many of them were lined with fresh offerings for the deceased—flowers, traditional sweets, even things like toy cars. I tried not to stare at any of them for too long.

“I mean, the guy was, like, really polite to my mom and dad and stuff. But get this: He wouldn’t talk to me at all! It’s like, *wow*, thanks a lot! You were with my sister the whole time after she ran off, and *that’s* what you do to me? It’s like, man, grown-ups are such a pain in the ass.”

Hiyori drawled on, her face expressionless, betraying nothing in the way of anger or sadness.

Maybe she resented her parents back then for being so stubborn.

But when I thought about it—how Hiyori’s parents bottled their anger up, with no place to unleash it now that she was out of their grasp—I found myself unable to say anything.

“Oh, speaking of, my brother-in-law was too busy to come home yesterday, but he told me to be there this afternoon ’cause he’ll bring my autograph over. So once we’re, like, done here, we’re gonna have to run back to…Um?”

Suddenly, Hiyori stopped.

Ahead of her was a young man in a black, short-sleeved hoodie, palms held together as he piously observed a certain gravestone.

“Uh, that’s my sister’s grave?”

Hiyori started walking again.

I hurried on behind. The man, finally taking notice of us, swung around.

His hair was a pale shade of brown, and his eyes noticeably large, as he stared

at us.

“Um, I’m sorry…That grave belongs to my older sister. I’m, uh, glad she has company today.”

Hiyori bowed politely at the man. He studied her face for a moment, and his face tensed up.

“Wh-wha? Whaaa? Your *sister*?!”

“Right. Did, um, did you know her very well…?”

The man’s face instantly brightened, an innocent smile sprouting upon it as he excitedly ran up to us.

“Oh, wowww, you totally remind me of her! Did I *know* her? Dude, you gotta be *kidding* me! She was a *huuuuuuuuuuge* part of my life!”

After he finished expressing his abject joy at this encounter, the man stopped himself for a moment, suddenly realizing something. He brought a hand to his mouth, coughing once as he arched his back upward.

“Um, I’m sorry, I guess I got a little carried away. Are, uh, are you this girl’s companion or something?”

He was talking to me.

“Yeah. Well, really more like her errand boy, but…heh-heh…”

I felt like a fool the moment it escaped my lips. I turned my eyes away, scratching a cheek in distracted shame.

“Errand boy…Oof. Must be rough, man.”

Surprised by the response, I turned back to him. He looked distressed, as if honestly saddened by my plight.

“I mean…Well, you know, I mean, I *reeeeally* know what you mean. Totally. I got this scary dude bossing *me* around all day, too. Man, all the abuse I get…”

The man spread his arms out in front of him to emphasize the extent of his daily torment.

“Oh…That’s terrible. I guess we both got some problems…huh…?”

“Yeah…Gotta stay strong, you know…?”

We slapped our hands together in a firm handshake. We apparently shared a lot in common.

I thought I heard Hiyori say, “What is *with* you?” in the background, but I had other priorities at the moment.

“Anyway, I better get going now, so I hope you’ll excuse me. Are you guys busy later on?”

“Huh? No…Not, like, busy or anything, but we have to be home before too late in the afternoon, so…”

“Oh…”

Suddenly, in response to Hiyori’s refusal, I thought I saw a darker shadow emerge behind the man’s smile, a smile that seemed like a permanent part of his face until now.

But when I took another look, it was gone. The same smile as before. I worried for a moment that yesterday was so depressing for me that I was passing my pathos on like a disease, but quickly dismissed the thought.

Besides, if I was gonna gain a superpower, it’d better be a hell of a lot more useful than that. Invisibility, for example. That’s *my* first pick.

“Well, gee, that’s too bad! Would’ve been nice if we could relax together a little. The weather’s so lovely, too!”

The man clasped his hands behind his head as he pouted at us. Hiyori rewarded the act with a light chuckle.

“Ha-ha-ha…Uh, yeah. Maybe that’d be nice for a little bit.”

“Well, anyway, take care! I better get a move on. See you!”

The man beamed at us one more time before turning around and hurrying off somewhere.

“Seemed like kind of a nice guy, huh, Hiyori?”

“Yeah. Kind of, uh, weird, though. Like, my sister was way older than me. What’d she be doing with someone so young…?”

Hiyori's face turned stern as she thought about all sorts of unthinkable things. Considering we were right in front of her grave, it seemed awfully inappropriate.

"Heh. Nice one, sis!"

But then she directed that at the grave marker. Was this really the kind of younger sister that woman deserved? If I could ask her, I would.

As I debated with myself over it, Hiyori placed some candy she purchased earlier by the gravestone.

The two had never met. There wasn't much way Hiyori could have known what her preference was at all.

No, what Hiyori laid out by the grave was all of her own favorites.

She was giving what she liked to someone else. Something that I (at least) knew represented the epitome of affection, by her standards.

Once she had her offerings lined up, Hiyori placed her palms against each other and closed her eyes in front of the grave.

I followed after, copying her ritual.

What kind of woman was she? The man from before said Hiyori "totally reminded" him of her. I began to wonder if her personality was just as poison-tipped and fanglike.

"Uh, you gonna be doing that all day, or?"

Hiyori's voice snapped my eyes back open.

"You aren't, like, trying to ask my sister something weird in your mind, are you?"

"Wh-what? No! I, um, I was just wondering what she was like, and all."

The accusation was totally false, but her sudden jab made me grope for words anyway.

Hiyori's quizzical look soon melted back into her usual inscrutable stare. "I dunno," she said. "She was just…*normal*, I bet."

The sun began to quietly pound upon us as it cranked up the heat.

It wouldn't be long before the appointed time Hiyori mentioned.

"Hey, so should we be getting back home, or? It sounds like that guy wanted to get to know us more, but…"

"Hmm…Well, I don't see why we gotta, like, zoom back home. Maybe we should, uh, do some shopping after all? I mean, that shoe store over there looks nice…Ooh, but maybe I should, like, hit up that accessory shop by the rail station…"

She was firmly in her own world now.

"Wait, *what*?! We don't have *that* much time, do we? Shouldn't we say hi to your brother-in-law and get that autograph from him first…?"

"…Okay, uh, just one place. Follow me."

Her mind made up, she briskly strolled away.

I had exhausted my arsenal. Nothing I could say would stop her now. I should consider it an honor that she even bothered commanding me to join her.

Once she exited the cemetery, Hiyori cut a quick right onto the sidewalk.

That was something else I discovered on this trip: Hiyori was blessed with an uncannily good sense of direction. Yesterday and today, she never once slowed her speedy walking pace, confidently and unerringly striding from point A to point B with ease.

Even on the sort of side paths I'd lose my way in even if I had a map, she never made a single wrong turn. I had to hand it to her.

For the next fifteen minutes, all I did was follow behind her. There was nothing for me to think about, nothing to ask her.

The crowds began to swell, giving me at least half a clue that our destination was somewhere close to the center of town.

It began to dawn on me yesterday, but now I was sure of it: I was starting to doubt I'd ever become used to the big city.

All these billboards, all the cars whizzing to and fro, all the laughing and conversation overlapping with each other…It all formed a vast cacophony in my

ears, a flood of stimulation that whirled and eddied around me.

That, and this heat.

And I idolized life in the city just a scant few days ago. Reflecting on this stupidity on my part made me sick to my stomach.

If I tried living here alone, I doubt I'd make it half a day, even.

In fact, I was starting to question my ability to survive the summer at all.

"Oh, *there* it is. You wait here for me."

We were on a street lined with colorful storefronts. Hiyori stopped in front of one with no advance warning.

Judging by how she strolled inside without any further confirmation, this must have been the spot.

"Wow. Pretty fancy place."

Meekly obeying Hiyori's command, I stared up at the store entrance.

The wall was painted a shocking shade of pink, festooned with cookie-and candy-themed decorations. The store sign, blaring the name of the place in bright-yellow characters, was covered in neon that no doubt made the shop an even more formidable presence at night.

It was a feast for the eyes, one far too rich for my tastes. It, and the heat, began to make me nauseated.

We should buy something to drink once she comes back…Otherwise, I'm gonna dry up like a prune and they'll probably make more of those stupid cookie ornaments out of me.

With a recorded "Come back again soon!" the automatic doors opened to reveal Hiyori, a pair of small bags in her hand.

"Oh, hey. You find what you want?"

Hiyori sneered victoriously as she nodded an emphatic yes.

It was so cute, I thought my heart would jump out of my throat.

I'm so glad I'm here. Watching her do that made the whole day worth the

trouble.

“This’ll be the perfect gift for Konoha!”

I take that back. I wish I’d never left my room.

Not *him* again. Seriously, what was her *deal* with him?

A gift?! What the hell?!

“A gift, huh…? What kind of…?”

“Um? Like, why do *you* care?”

My ego sliced neatly in two, I found myself unable to respond.

Apparently this entire trip to the city was a kind of emotional boot camp devised to build up my immunity to mental anguish.

“Oh, uh, but I got something for you, too.”

“Oh, neat…Wait, *huh*?! For *me*?!”

“Uh, yeah? Here.”

Hiyori brought an apathetic arm forward, offering me one of the bags.

The moment I took it in hand, I saw my entire life flash before my eyes. It moved me to tears.

“Th-thank you…so much…”

“Uh, why’re you crying? *Gross*…”

I know I took it back just a second ago, but I’m *so* glad I came here. Never in my dreams did I expect such a pleasant surprise to be lying in wait for me.

“No, I…I really appreciate this. Um, can I open it up?!”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, I guess?”

Judging by the weight, the light pink polka-dot bag in my hand contained…a key chain, maybe? Or maybe some kind of writing tool?

Radiant with anticipation, I smiled my biggest smile of the day as I opened the bag.

I was rewarded with a smell akin to rotted fish.

“Urghh! It *stinks*!”

I shouted it out despite myself, so perplexing this whole sequence had become.

And no one would chide me for it. I’m sure of that. How *else* would you respond to a girl exiting a fancy designer shop and handing you a bag that smelled like the inside of a fish cannery?

No. *Nobody* could’ve predicted this.

Gingerly, I used two fingers to reach into the bag and pull out its contents. It was a key chain, all right—a key chain of some freaky monster, one that looked like a slice of raw salmon with a pair of legs attached to it.

“Uh? What? You got, like, a problem with it?”

Hiyori’s expressionless face bore down upon mine.

“No, I mean…*Huh*?! I mean, not a problem, but…what *is* this, this…*thing*?”

I could understand a key chain with some kind of fruity scent. This…well, all I could assume was that some manufacturer tried something a little funky with the idea. Emphasis on *funky*.

“It’s a Benishake-chan strap. I figured, you know, you’d probably like that kinda stuff?”

“No, uh, I mean, why would I ever…? I mean, when did I ever act like I would’ve, even?!”

“I just thought…like, you’d probably like that smell, you know?”

Hiyori’s gaze beat down upon me as she emitted a short, nasal chuckle. Ugh. *She’s just harassing me now.* Still, somehow, the joy at receiving the present won out in my mind.

“Nggg…gghh…Well, thank you very much…”

I had no way to fight her.

Hiyori, watching me wriggle pathetically under her gaze, chuckled again.

“Okay, uh, how about we head home…? We’re kind of short on time.”

“Oh. Yeah. So, like, we just take this road down until—”

Hiyori placed one foot forward, ready to dive headlong through the labyrinthine streets once again, but something made her freeze.

Glancing at her feet, I found that the criminal accosting the self-centered Hiyori was a black cat.

I couldn’t say where it came from, but the moment I spotted it, it rubbed its head against her leg, purring.

“Oh, wow, a cat. Guess it really likes you, Hiyori.”

After the show of affection, the well-groomed feline walked off a short distance, paused, and continued on into a narrow alleyway.

“Oop, there he goes. Wish I coulda gotten to pet ’im at least, huh, Hiyo—”

“I *want* that cat…!”

Hiyori’s face went flush—even more than it did upon meeting Konoha yesterday—as her breathing quickened.

“What did you…?”

“We’re chasing him down, Hibiya!”

She half-shouted the words at me as she flung herself into the alleyway after her new desire.

My mind came up with a litany of snappy retorts, but I nonetheless basked in the glory of being called by name as I followed behind.

We pushed our way past the steel garbage cans lined up next to each entryway, thundering our way up a small, moss-ridden set of stairs, before finding ourselves in the middle of a wide, crowded boulevard.

“Whoa…I, I don’t think we’re gonna find ’im now, Hiyori…”

“No. I saw his tail just a sec ago. Over here.”

Hiyori darted to the left, all but sprinting down the street.

The idea of storming down such a packed street without even flinching filled me with abject wonder.

And thanks to me running in her empty wake, I didn't have to dodge anyone as we coursed down the boulevard sidewalk.

"*Huff*…*huff*…There! Over there!!"

The next corner Hiyori took on a dime brought her steamrolling toward a children's outdoor park, one mostly dominated by playground equipment.

I dove in behind her, and there it was—the same black cat, seated behind one of the metal poles holding up a light blue swing set.

"Got 'im!"

The elation was clear in her voice as she edged closer and closer to her prey.

"Hee-hee-hee…Who's a good kitty, hmmm? Just sit tight and let me pet every inch of your body…"

Edging closer, breathing heavily from her nostrils, Hiyori emitted an aura that, if I were a cat, would make me flee at maximum speed.

But this cat stayed put, not betraying any discomfort as it blithely gazed at this advancing cat burglar.

I was marveling at how unexpected its reaction was when, suddenly, I noticed something that made my spine freeze solid.

The eyes of the cat as it stared Hiyori down were blazing a crimson red, like perfect marbles of liquid blood.

Hiyori must not have noticed.

From my point of view, this bizarre animal was attracting her to it, possessing her with its spirit. I sensed a primal danger.

"H-Hiyori! Wait a sec! There's something wrong with that cat!"

"Wh-what?!"

Hiyori looked back in surprise at my instinctual yelp. The cat turned toward me and paused, as if about to say something, and then it darted off somewhere.

"Aaahhhh!! *Look* at that! *Look!* He got away!"

Turning her eyes back, Hiyori noticed the fleeing cat. It must have made her pretty sore, because now she was marching right in my direction.

“N-no, I, uh, that cat was acting kind of weird, you know? So I…I was just worried, so…”

“I didn’t *ask* you! I don’t *need* you, like, worrying about me at *all*! That’s even *worse*!”

Her eyes remained fixed upon mine as she spat out the words, her voice rising with her anger level.

“I can’t even rely on you for, like, *anything*! I wish I had Konoha worrying about me instead! And why have you been acting like such a mopey idiot the past two days?! Are you, like, *stupid* or something?!”

This economy-size barrage of abuse was enough to make even my blood pressure rise.

I knew it was selfish of me to feel that way, but there had to be such a thing as too much sooner or later.

“Am I stupid…? I mean, why…Why don’t you understand me at all?! It’s not like I’m moping around because I *want* to…”

“Oh, really? Well it sure looked like you were to me, okay? So, like, why *are* you, then?”

“Because…”

I knew it all too well by now. Hiyori could make me shut up with a single look. And here it was now. Happening again.

And now that I thought about it, had I ever managed to take what I had in mind and put it perfectly into words before?

I didn’t think so. And if I ever *did* speak those words, I couldn’t guess what would happen.

My mind went blank. I felt a pain in my chest, my ears ringing.

“Because what…?”

“Because I…Hiyori, I want to…”

“Wait, stop that…”

“Ever since I met you…!”

“No, like, seriously, *stop*!”

The sound of Hiyori’s scream ferried me back to reality.

I reluctantly returned her gaze, only to find Hiyori about ready to cry.

As if on cue, the insects in the trees around us began to chitter and whine, the call of the cicadas sounding like a caustic insult directed straight at me.

The moment seemed to last an eternity, more than long enough to make me regret ever acting on the heat of the moment like this.

“You’re *horrible*.”

Once she finally deigned to let me hear her voice again, Hiyori stabbed me through the heart, more viciously than ever before.

“I, um…”

There was no way I could say anything else, but my stupid mouth still kept trying to form syllables on me.

“I’m going home. *Don’t* follow me.”

I turned to the side, no longer able to face her, and noticed a dead fly legs-up on the ground.

I wonder if *he* managed to bring across what he really felt to anyone. I wonder if *I* ever would.

The tears that unconsciously streamed down my cheek dripped down, one by one, forming little black splotches on the ground.

Just as nothing seemed to matter any longer, I heard Hiyori’s distant footsteps come to a halt.

“Uh…Since when were *you* here…?”

Judging by the tone of her voice, I could guess who she was directing it toward. It pained me to admit it, but it was a simple conclusion to make.

I raised my head upward to see Hiyori. There, next to the park gate, I saw

Konoha. That, I expected. The way he was covered in sweat, I didn't.

"Uh…Since a little bit ago. You guys weren't around when I woke up, so…so I figured I'd better look for you…"

Konoha's reply came in patchwork between breaths. It apparently startled Hiyori.

"…Did you hear us just now?"

Her voice was shaking. But Konoha, his expression enigmatic as always, kept the reply deadpan.

"Huh? Yeah, I did, but…"

The moment I heard it, I instantly imagined Hiyori fleeing in horror to points unknown.

Thanks to that, I had a head start on Hiyori the instant before she took off.

…What did I even want to do?

Did I want to make more excuses?

Did I want to keep Hiyori from being all alone?

Did I want to take Hiyori's hand before Konoha could?

Hiyori ran, just as I expected her to, but not the light, nimble dance she exhibited out on the boulevard. This was a clumsy dash, her legs pumping as she tried to go anywhere but here, fast.

If I could catch up just a few steps, I'd be in range of her hand.

But just as I approached her, I was stunned by the sight that greeted me:

Ahead, as Hiyori stumbled out of the park, a red light shone at the end of the white line neatly painted on the street.

I didn't have to think about what that meant. It was clear at a glance.

It meant despair.

"Hiyori!! Red light!!"

Please, take me one step closer…No. It's already too late.

My final step was resolute, unwavering, enough so even to surprise me.

I don’t think I’ve ever planted my foot down and lunged so powerfully toward Hiyori before in my life.

I doubted Hiyori, surprised as she was, could imagine what would come next. I couldn’t myself, not yet. So we were even.

In front of the truck, advancing upon us with a deafening roar—

—at the very, very end, I finally held Hiyori’s long-coveted hand.



MOONSHINE RECITAL

A light, refreshing breeze blew across the vast field laid out before me.

My body felt light, like I had grown a pair of wings.

A light kick against the ground made me spring into the air, like I could soar right up to infinity.

I gleefully *sproinged* my way around the meadow for a bit. As I did, a herd of cattle began to gather around.

Must've been having some kind of conference. Maybe they were opening a Brazilian steakhouse.

I instinctively leaped into the air, hoping to float off to safety, but my body suddenly sunk like a stone, thudding helplessly against the grass.

"Oww! Why'd *that* happen…?"

A sharp pain throbbed against my rear.

I tried rubbing it in response, only to hear someone laughing at me from parts unknown.

"Bah-hah-hah-hah! What're you doing, Gran?"

Turning around, I saw Hibiya, rolling around and clutching his stomach as he roared in laughter.

"Wh-wh-what're you doing *here*?!"

I was embarrassed enough that anyone had to witness my pathetic fall from grace. But *that* kid? Of all the rotten luck.

"Well…I mean, you kinda made a ton of noise when you fell. It'd be weird if I *didn't* notice!"

I could feel hot flashes throb across my face. Being mocked by this kid was something I never, *ever* could have expected.

“Um…Look, kid, maybe you don’t realize it, but I’m kind of a big shot, all right? Like, a *huge* pop idol!”

I struck one of my trademark poses to drive the point home, the kind of boasting I almost never did.

This was all a little…all right, a *lot* embarrassing to me. But hopefully even this thickheaded brat will see what makes me so attractive.

“Huh? Uh, what’re you talking about? You’re a cow.”

“Y-you said that *again*…?!”

“No, I mean, *look*.”

Hibiya flashed a hand mirror in my direction, revealing…

A plump, adult cow, blissfully striking a pop-singer pose.

Shocked, I tried touching my face. The cow in the mirror performed the same motion, a hoof butting against its snout.

“See? I told you. You’re a cow, granny. A *huge* cow!”

“Yeaaaggghhhh!! Aaarrrrggggnnhh!!”

I practically woke up in midair.

My body was bathed in sweat, my mind hazy and disheveled, like someone threw it on a baker’s stone and kneaded it with a rolling pin.

I was surrounded by total darkness. I could see a spindly ray of light reaching in, peeking out from the edge of a curtain.

What was going *on* with me?

Slowly, deliberately, I tried to reorganize my brain’s memory banks. But, for some reason, I couldn’t piece together the events that brought me to my current stupor.

The light, springy thing I felt under me was a bed, I decided I was safe to assume.

But when did I go to bed, and how did I wind up here in the first place? *I don't remember anything…*

As my hands groped around blindly, the bouncing of the bedsprings was suddenly replaced with the slap of skin against skin, followed by a painful groan.

"Eep!" I chirped back in surprise. Then I realized it was Kido sleeping next to me.

A blaze of anxiety flew down my spine. I must have hit her pretty hard just now.

"Wh-why *you*, boss?! Wait…like, am I in your room?"

Slowly, gradually, my memory fell back into place.

Right. We brought Hibiya over from the hospital to our hideout, Seto cooked dinner for all of us, and then…

"…I fell asleep on the sofa."

A dramatic orchestral vamp played in my head.

I knew I was far from a pretty sight whenever I was sleeping. My brother used to grief me about it all the time. "If you ever wanna get married," he'd tell me, "make sure nobody ever records you grimacing and talking to yourself in bed, man."

I didn't believe him at first. "Yeah, sure," I'd always reply. "You're just too scared to let your cute li'l sister sleep with some strange man, aren't you?"

But after I got the notion to record myself one night, I saw the truth. There I was, spurting out witty observations like "Eww, it's coming out your *butt*!" and "This one's so funny, it's gonna make your sides split into a banana split! *Dee*-hee-hee!!" in my sleep. I vowed never to share a room again.

I burned the tape, of course.

The idea of revealing *that* side of me, in plain view, right in the middle of this living room, made me want to vomit.

But wait. I made my brother swear that if anyone ever saw that sordid state of affairs, he'd kill me on the spot. He obviously hasn't, and besides, I was on

top of a bed now. Maybe nothing happened after all.

I *really* needed to be more careful from now on. I wasn't expecting to fall asleep right after dinner like that…right after eating that huge…spread…

"What're you talking about? You're a cow."

My fists slammed against the comforter as I recalled the dream.

"Oooh…" Kido groaned in reaction.

"Oh, no…But, but it's that stupid brat's fault anyway, you know. Kids receive absolutely *no* discipline at home these days…"

I fell silent before I could complete the thought. The pangs of guilt were too much to stand.

That's right. Hibiya collapsed in front of that hospital yesterday. Me and Kido and everyone else took him into the hideout.

The way he acted last night wasn't something you could file away as the carrying on of a spoiled brat.

I couldn't imagine what he was feeling right now. I'd never glared at anyone like he did before.

"What was wrong with that kid, anyway? That was crazy…"

What was crazy was his "eyes."

The way they were slowly being doused in red like that…Maybe it really *was* a sign he was earning (growing?) an ability. One like me and Kido and the gang all have.

As a full-fledged member of the Mekakushi-dan, I was growing used to people like me. But I'd never seen an ability…*manifest* itself like that.

"What made us get these eyes, anyway? Some kind of…illness? No, that doesn't make sense…"

I absentmindedly focused my eyes on an empty spot in the air. Soon, I could gradually feel my eyes grow warmer and warmer.

"I thought I hated having this thing, but without it, I wouldn't have met all these guys. I guess harnessing it a little is making me like it a bit more, maybe."

I was still a long way from Kido and Kano, able to summon their latent abilities with ease.

Did it all come down to…practice? I guess I didn't really have control over it quite yet. All this running around from place to place, we kind of didn't have time.

And I didn't know what kind of ability he had yet, but I could guess that Hibiya had a long, tough road ahead of him, too.

"…Well. I can wait for him to apologize to *me* first. I'm not gonna budge 'til then."

I felt justified in that. Calling a pure-hearted maiden "granny" and a "cow" was a sin as deep as an ocean trench.

"Well, guess I better get up, huh? What time is it, anyway?"

I took my phone out from the pocket of my hoodie. It was just about seven in the morning.

"Ooh! Nice. I love it when I can get up this early. Maybe I could take a shower before everyone else wakes up."

I flipped the comforter to the side and carefully stepped over Kido and out of bed, giving her face a glance to ensure I didn't rouse her.

"…Man, she really *is* beautiful, isn't she?"

Kido, sleeping in a regular pair of women's pajamas, was attractive enough to make a fellow woman jealous.

"Too bad about that mouth of hers. She's *never* gonna find someone like that."

She acted so cool all the time, only to reveal a much more feminine side at the most unexpected of occasions. I remember hearing that about someone else once, too. Who, though? Not…

Wait! Wait up! That's dangerous thinking! If I can't remember who, I should just forget about the whole thing! Yep, that's the best thing for my sanity!

But enough about that. I needed to hop in the shower.

I couldn't open the curtains, of course, so I groped my way across the dim room.

I clunked against something, probably a table, on my way. It made me eject a soft "ow," but it still wasn't enough to bother Kido.

Funny how much of a sound sleeper the boss was.

Making it to the door, I found myself facing the brightly lit living room. It was finally starting to feel a little like morning.

The light was enough to rev me to action as I excitedly bounced toward the bathroom.

Turning downward for a moment, I saw both Konoha and my brother fast asleep, the former on the floor and the latter on the sofa across the table from him, clutching his phone.

"Hee-hee…All that fun he had outdoors must've exhausted the poor guy."

He seemed to be pretty chummy with the rest of the Mekakushi-dan, at least. And I suppose I was doing my part to make him a contributing member of society again.

And once he recovered, maybe I could have him build a cute little house for all of us. That would be just *darling*.

Walking across the living room, I turned on the bathroom light and opened up the lower cabinet, moving the clothes I brought with me from home to the empty space by the sink.

Taking out a towel, I locked the door, removed the outfit I had on, and headed for the bath. Just as I did, there was a loud, violent rapping on the door.

"Gagghh!!"

In a huff, I wrapped the towel around me and edged away from the door.

"Um, excuse me! It's Momo! I'm in the shower!"

But the loud knocking continued, completely ignoring my plea.

Something was starting to feel weird about this.

The gang who called this hideout home wouldn't act like this once they knew I

was in here. Dreadful images flashed across my mind.

“A, a break-in…?”

The person on the other side pounded on the door again. He must have heard me.

I was racked with surprised, startled fear.

“Aiiigh! I, I’m sorry! No, wait, I mean, ummmm, there’s nothing valuable in there, okay?! I’m serious! You know, one of them even called me a cow in broad daylight! Isn’t that just terrible…? Ha…ha-ha-ha…”

I slowly collapsed to the floor, administering last rites to myself, when I heard a familiar voice.

“Gran? …Wow, you’re awake?”

In an instant, I gave the door a board-splintering kick with all my might.

I could hear the voice on the other side yowl in surprise.

“…*What* are you doing out there?”

My voice noticeably shook as I seethed in disquietude. Why wouldn’t it? If *this* didn’t make me angry, what would?

“Whoa, whoa, chill out. I’m sorry…Um, is my vest in there?”

“Your vest?”

Looking at the topmost level of the cabinet I just took my clothes out from, I saw a white vest, neatly folded, that I assumed was Hibiya’s.

“Oh, yeah, I think this is it.”

“R-really?! Give it back! I got something important in there!”

“Something important? …Oho! So *that’s* what’s got you banging on the door, huh? That important to you…Gee, I wonder what could be in there, mmmmm?”

My pent-up resentment was probably pretty clear now, what with the spiteful tone of my voice. Hibiya, not picking up on this, gave me exactly the reaction I hoped for.

“Whoa, whoa, wait! Don’t steal it! That’s something really important I got

from someone! You *better* not take it!”

“Well, boy, that just makes me wanna take it all the more. Let’s seeeeee here…”

“No! Really! Stop it!”

Turning a deaf ear to Hibiya’s door pounding, I thrust a hand into a vest pocket. It felt like there was some kind of paper bag inside.

“Ooh, bingo! I wonder what could be inside this bag…”

“N-nooooooooooooo!!”

I don’t remember very much about what happened after I took out the bag’s contents.

What I do remember is: me bursting out of the bathroom, all but shouting, “Please! Can you give this to me?!”; Hibiya turning tomato red as he saw me, and the light, delicate scent of a fish market. I could’ve been more discreet, I suppose, but otherwise I have zero regrets.

*

“A-*haaa*! I see. So you got swallowed up there, huh…? Boy, that’s a bad break…”

“Uh, Gran, you’re really not making any sense.”

“Hah-hah! Well, I think I’ve got the gist of it, anyway…”

We were a pretty fair distance from the hideout. The tree-lined sidewalks along the way offered just the right amount of sunlight, making it perfect for some friendly, urban summer hiking.

After our little early morning episode, Hibiya predictably tried to bust out of the hideout as soon as possible.

I tried my best to stop him—Kido mentioned that sudden “ability” manifestations like this were dangerous—but he refused to listen to reason. He did eventually agree to let me come along with him, and the rest is history.

Hibiya began to open up a bit about the accident he got wrapped up in around the time we stopped by a convenience store and shared a sandwich for breakfast.

But something was odd about it.

The story, as Hibiya explained it, was something I had trouble comprehending.

First he was hit by a truck; then he suddenly found himself wandering around in another world.

And there, after witnessing his female friend die over and over again like a broken record, he got spat back out by himself.

Even figuring out this much required tracing through three forced repetitions of Hibiya's story. I had to applaud him for making all that effort for me.

That, and I suppose I'm a bit slower in the head than I thought. It happens to the best of us.

"All right. So to summarize, you're trying to track down that Hiyori girl you got separated from, right?"

"Unh?! Um…you kinda summarized a *lot* there."

Hibiya looked like he wanted to scream something to me, or to the world in general, but it never came out. Maybe he thought it wasn't worth the effort.

"So do you like her?"

"Yeah…Wait! Gah! Did you have to ask me *that*?!"

"Oooh, thought so! Aren't *you* quite the little man!"

That elementary-age innocence behind the reaction made me grin to myself. But not for long. Anything that made me seem any more grandmotherly around him, I hoped to avoid.

"Wha…! Ugh. Well, yeah, okay? I've always had a thing for her…but she kinda dumped me, so…"

"Huhh?! She *dumped* you?! Ooooh, bummer!"

"Knock that *off*, Gran! Why're you getting so all excited over this…?"

Even as he fired back, Hibiya turned his eyes downward in the most darling expression of embarrassment I'd ever seen.

Just a boy coming to age. That's all he seemed like to me.

But even though I only picked up bits and pieces of the story so far, there was no doubting that Hibiya was caught up in some pretty terrifying events. There was no way a boy his age could handle this crisis all by himself.

“But I still need to help her.”

Hibiya’s voice was hushed but resolute, despite my concern.

“Well, we gotta save her then, right?”

“…Yeah. We gotta.”

Was there something we could do to help him?

More to the point, why was Hibiya so obsessed with going it alone?

“So, uh, Hibiya? I’m just wondering…I’m assuming you ran out of that hospital so you could look for that girl, but…that’s gonna be kinda difficult, isn’t it? Wouldn’t it be better if we all looked together instead of you going around by yourself?”

Hibiya heaved a mighty, frustrated sign in response.

“I mean, didn’t you just see how much time it took for you to get my story, Grandma? I’m in, like, a *huge* hurry right now, so can you blame me if I figure doing this alone would work better?”

“Oof…”

I had nothing to say in response. My suggestion couldn’t have been refuted more thoroughly.

“Besides…”

“Besides?”

“Besides, I don’t care if you don’t believe me or whatever, but if you people start getting in my way, it’s gonna drive me nuts, okay? I mean, time is kinda of the essence. I gotta *help* her.”

Hibiya’s eyes, despite his youth, were pointed straight ahead, toward his own future. I felt like I could almost depend on them, somehow.

But along with that youth came an oversize suitcase full of fragility.

Hibiya, a fresh transplant from the countryside, didn't really know the lay of the land. He had hardly any cash to work with.

That, and no way could he have mastered whatever eye ability was coming to life. If that went out of control, he wouldn't be the only one in trouble.

"…Well, I'm still gonna be with you. I'm *worried*."

Hibiya stopped walking, disbelieving eyes pointed toward mine.

I could never figure out how to deal with a stare like that. I found myself grinning awkwardly, trying to pretend I said nothing.

"How would helping me help *you* at all, Gran? You and those other guys, too. Why are you all so hell-bent on hounding me like this? *That's* what I'm having trouble trusting in."

There were a few painful barbs to his reply, but that made him sound all the more darling to me.

Those feelings were probably the clearest reason I could give why I couldn't leave this kid to fend for himself.

"…Totally like my brother."

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"*Right!* Where were we? Okay. If that's your take, then how about we do this, Hibiya? I'll work with you, and if we manage to find that girl, you have to stop calling me 'Gran.' Oh, and 'cow,' too. Also, if you could avoid the…the whole f-f-'fat' thing…"

I stuttered a bit at the end, over a word that always seemed to present me with a serious mental block.

That's what I deserve for starting at such a breakneck clip. I have *got* to start picturing the whole sentence in my mind before I start blabbing away.

"Uh, what? What's that all about? Is *that* what you're getting out of this?"

"Yep! If I can make that happen, I'm happy as a clam! Oh, and it'd be nice if we became friends and stuff, too!"

I crossed my arms as I spoke, drumming up as much contrived confidence as I

could. Hibiya, for the first time, offered me a smile.

"…You are *so* weird, Gran. What if I still can't find her, even with you around? What're you gonna do for me then?"

"Hmm…Well…"

I thought I would spout something off the top of my head again. But I didn't need to. It was such a simple question: What would the Mekakushi-dan do?

All I had to do was channel that thought, and the answer would make itself obvious.

Looking into Hibiya's eyes, I spoke as clearly as I could.

"…I'll give you support until we do."

The members of the Mekakushi-dan knew all too well how hard it was to sit in anguish by yourself.

That's why they helped me out…and why I'm able to smile a little now.

So now it's my turn to support somebody else.

As a rookie member of the Gang, I knew that had to be my most important assignment right now.

"Uh, Gran, do you even *realize* how embarrassing that sounds?"

When he finished talking, Hibiya turned his quickly reddening face to the side.

I found myself doing the same thing, turning downward as I began to feel my head grow warm. I wasn't deaf. I could hear how embarrassing it was, too, to be brutally honest with myself.

Why was I letting myself act all ashamed around this *grade-schooler*?

As I dwelled on it, I saw Hibiya stagger on the sidewalk.

I shot an arm out to support his back, helping him regain his balance as he held a hand against his head.

"Um, I…I'm getting all light-headed…"

"Wh-what's going on…Ah!"

Peering into Hibiya's face, I noticed that, while his right eye was hidden

behind his palm, his left was now a bright shade of red.

Oh, no. That color. Crystal-clear evidence that Hibiya's ability was grinding into motion.

None of the abilities I'd personally witnessed before were the kind of things that seriously hurt anyone. But they were all so different, so unrelated to one another, there was no way I could begin to predict what Hibiya wielded power over.

This sudden development quickly fanned the flames of terror burning in my heart.

So much for that. And right after I said I'd support him, too. *I have to do better than this…!*

"Hibiya! Do you feel anything strange going on with your body anywhere?!"

"N-no. I feel okay, but…it's like I'm seeing this weird thing. What's…Is that a clock tower…? It's like a four-story building or something. Maybe a…school? I think I see some guys in gym clothes."

Hibiya stared into empty space as he described the features of the building he perceived.



And the more details he gave, the more I realized that his description matched a place I knew pretty well myself.

“Th-that’s the school I go to, isn’t it?”

“What?! *Here?!* Oh, wait…Wow, it is. One of the shoe lockers has ‘Momo Kisaragi’ written on it. And is this…the teacher’s office? Oh, here’s one of your geography tests…Jeez, you got a one?! That’s not seriously out of one hundred, is it?”

“Aaghghhhhh!! W-why do *you* know that, Hibiya?!”

The test so suddenly rearing its ugly head into the conversation definitely belonged to me. There was no doubting it. I still remembered how badly I bombed that exam.

But why would Hibiya know about that? Between his red eyes and his testimony, even an idiot like me could figure out what his ability was.

“So you got…like, remote vision, or…?”

“…I think so.”

When our gazes met, the red faded from Hibiya’s eyes as they returned to their regular color.

“W-whoa! It’s gone, but…Why?!”

“Eesh…It’s just anything goes with these eyes, isn’t it?”

It looked like the ability birthed within Hibiya’s eyes was the power to see things from far away.

He accurately described my school, right down to my paltry test scores. Judging by that, he could control what he saw to some extent.

“That is so awesome…”

I couldn’t even hide my childish disappointment.

If there was some kind of Top Ten Wacky Eye Skills Today’s Youth Are Clamoring For list, Hibiya’s ability would definitely make it into the top three or so.

And look at *my* ability. Ooh, I stick out a lot. Yippeeeee. For the first time in my life, I wished my eyes could've done something more practical for me.

"Huh? What? What do you mean?!"

Hibiya's head darted around, unable to comprehend what just happened.

I couldn't blame him. With my ability, it took me a while to notice I even had it at all.

"Okay, well…Long story short, Hibiya, when your eyes turn red like that, you gain the ability to see faraway things…Probably."

"Turn red…?"

"Yep. Your eyes were bright red just a second ago."

Hibiya froze for a moment. Then, his face beamed brighter than anything I'd seen from him before.

"So it's like ESP or something?!"

"Uh…yeah. I think so, probably."

It wasn't like I understood every nook and cranny of it, but I felt safe in confirming that much to him.

But why was Hibiya poking around my high school, anyway? Why would he—
"So, uh, I dunno if it'll work or not, but do you think I could use this to find Hiyori?!"

Hibiya's words brought me back to reality.

He was right. That was the *perfect* skill to track someone down with.

If we could harness it to figure out where Hiyori was…

"We *totally* could, Hibiya! That's great! Here, try doing it again!"

"Um, okay! All right. Nnnnnnngh…c'mon, looooooooook…"

Hibiya planted both feet on the ground and tensed his body, like a certain anime superhero trying to make his hairdo turn all blond and spiky.

"Rrrrrrnnnhh…"

"Right, right! Keep it going!"

“Grrrhh…aaaaahhhhhhh…”

“Hang in there! You *got* this!”

“Hsssskkkhhh…nrrraaaaahhhh…!!”

This went on for three minutes or so.

The sight of Hibiya flexing his muscles on the sidewalk was starting to seem a bit awkward.

“…Nothing yet?”

“Orrrrrggghhh…Nothiiiiiiing…yeeeeeettttt…!!”

The ability must have been too new for Hibiya to control at will quite yet.

It was kind of a shame. The perfect ability to make Hibiya’s most fervent wish come true, but it didn’t mean much if he couldn’t summon it.

I wish I could have done something to trigger it for him, but I surmised that it wasn’t the kind of thing that required intense concentration or anything.

“Well, that’s rough…Wish I could get it back, ’cause I think I was really on to something there…Uh?”

As Hibiya tensed his upper body one more time, a woman in a miniskirt passed by his side down the sidewalk. Then, everything fell into place.

A sudden breeze tossed the fringes of the skirt into the air. For a single instant, Hibiya’s gaze was transfixed on the sight.

“Agh! I, I think I can see it! A room…I think it’s that girl’s room? There’s a photo of her…A big pile of laundry, too…*Yeoww*!”

I punched Hibiya full-bore on the head, draining the red from his eyes in the process.

“Hey! Are you seriously *trying* here?! And *that’s* what triggers it?! You getting the hots for someone?!”

“What?! I don’t know! It just turned on by itself!”

“Yeah, that’s not all that got turned on, I bet…Guess you’re kind of an early starter, huh?”

“It’s not *that*! I swear! I have no idea what’s going on…”

Standing next to Hibiya as he vigorously attempted to defend himself, I felt a theory take form in my head.

Oh, dear. If *that* was the case, this wasn’t better at all. It was very, very bad.

“Hey, uh, Gran? How do you think I can see where Hiyori is…?”

The first time Hibiya’s ability appeared was when he looked at me. He all but gave himself the grand tour of the school I went to.

The second time was when he looked at that girl’s…um, when he looked at that girl. That time, he rummaged around her room like a sex offender.

We had only two examples to go on, so I couldn’t say anything with too much confidence, but based on what we have so far…

“If you look at someone with your eyes, you can see into someplace that’s related to them…?”

“Huh? What do you mean by—”

As Hibiya asked me to clarify, a car pulled up to the curb right next to us, letting out a short honk as it did.

Turning around, I saw a man in the driver’s seat that I really would prefer not having to look at during my time off.

“Yo, Kisaragi! Hittin’ the books hard, I hope?”

“You could *try* to act a little more friendly to me on the street, Mr. Tateyama…”

Mr. Tateyama, talking to me through an open window, looked as unkempt and off-kilter as always, a cigarette absentmindedly hanging from his lips.

“W-who’s this guy, Gran…?”

The sudden appearance of this odd stranger put Hibiya on guard.

“Oh, he’s fine. He’s a teacher at my school.”

“Oh. Really? He’s…kinda funky, isn’t he?”

I imagined Hibiya sifting through all the adjectives popping into his mind and

selecting the most benign one possible to go with.

If “funky” didn’t sound like a compliment, that was no doubt because all the other candidates he thought of to describe Mr. Tateyama were the kind of thing you’d see in the scratch-and-dent bin of the big-box store in his brain.

“Ooh, who’s that, Kisaragi? Out on a date, huh? Boy, you’ve got *allll* the luck! I’ll be expecting a wedding invite, okay?”

“It’s not a date, Mr. Tateyama. I was just helping this boy look for somebody.”

My teacher studied Hibiya intently for a moment, then smiled cheerfully and pointed a thumb toward the rear seat.

“Well, if you got somewhere you wanna go, lemme drive you there, huh? I’m a pretty mean chauffeur, y’know.”

“N-no, that’s fine, sir! I don’t think he’s really up for that kind of thing!”

I turned him down with the first thing that came to mind. Mr. Tateyama looked visibly deflated.

“Aw, come onnn…It’s not like I got anywhere to go, this Obon holiday…You like seeing me all alone like this…?”

That deflated look apparently wasn’t the end of the act, as Mr. Tateyama proceeded on with his plaintive, well-polished, woe-is-me appeal.

Nothing could be more awkward than someone Mr. Tateyama’s age putting on that act.

“Uhm…”

As I sighed to myself, Hibiya unexpectedly tried to capture my teacher’s attention.

“Oh? What’s up, kid?”

“I, um…I think there’s a park by the rail station, right by the intersection…It’d be great if you could take me there, but…”

I didn’t follow what Hibiya was saying for a moment. Then it suddenly made sense, as the story he had to repeat to me three times burst back into my head.

“Oh, that’s a good idea, maybe…! Could you do that for us, Mr. Tateyama?!”

He burst into a practically giddy smile before regaining his composure and thumbing at the backseat again.

He must get off on doing that thumb thing a lot. Probably thinks all the women melt when they see it.

“Heh. You got it. Hop on in, kids.”

“Hey, Hibiya, you think maybe we should take a taxi?”

“Daaahh! Sorry! Please, you two, just have a seat!”

I opened the door latch, only to be greeted with the subtle mix of stale tobacco and artificial air freshener you can only experience inside a smoker’s car.

Climbing in, I sidled to the far end of the seat. Hibiya followed after me, closing the door behind him.

“Um, thanks for the ride…”

“Sure thing! There’s only one park I can think of that’d be nearby the station. You guys mind if I head there for the time being?”

“N-no problem! Thank you!”

The air-conditioned interior felt remarkably refreshing as he put the car into gear and drove off.

Looking at the clock, I saw it was about to hit two in the afternoon.

I had been walking around discussing things with Hibiya for six hours, but we still only had a vague idea of what ability he had.

Still, if the theory I devised a moment ago was true, Hibiya’s skill had less to do with *people* and more to do with *places*.

Thus, if we wanted to figure out where Hiyori was, we’d need to have Hiyori here with us. The perfect Catch-22.

If that’s how it was, Hibiya was gonna have a lot of trouble with this search.

That, and not being able to figure out how to use your own ability was proving to be a major annoyance. It’s not like he could call some helpline and ask how to use it, and it didn’t exactly come with an instruction manual, either.

He was like an infant, in a way, with legs that he didn't quite know how to work yet.

With *my* ability, at least, I had it a lot easier.

When it came to attracting people's eyes, it was pretty much an on/off switch for me.

And here's Hibiya, meanwhile, nowhere near as afraid of his skill as I was of mine, trying to harness this incredibly complex ability to save his girl.

I'd love to do anything I can to help him out.

Hopefully we can discover something useful in the park up ahead— As I turned to Hibiya, I found myself face-to-face with a startling sight.

Hibiya, eyes drenched in red, were staring, captivated, at the seat back in front of him.

I leaned over, looking at what had him so transfixed. I should have guessed it. In the pocket was what I'll call a "men's-interest magazine," a bikini-clad woman gracing its cover.

In one smooth motion, I plucked out the magazine, rolled it up, and whapped Hibiya in the head with it.

"Oww! You…Agh! No! It just kinda came into sight, all right?!"

"Oh, just 'came into sight,' huh? You were staring all google-eyed right at it! Stop abusing it like that!"

My voice was louder than I meant. I shot a worried look at the front seat, only to find Mr. Tateyama's smiling reflection in the rearview mirror.

"Whoa there, Kisaragi. Men, you know…Sometimes they just can't help themselves, when it's right there like that. If you're gonna get all jealous over a bikini chick or two, that doesn't exactly bode well for your relationship, y'know?"

It took a moment to compose my thoughts before I understood what my teacher meant. Flames of anguish shot from my face.

To someone unfamiliar with Hibiya's ability, I was just some shrew physically

abusing my poor man for sneaking a quick look at an adult mag.

“Th-that’s not what the problem is!”

“All right, all right. Hey, you know, *my* wife’s always naggin’ me about this and that, too. I’m just saying, I know how you feel.”

“Daaahhhhh!! That’s it! We’re getting off! Please, just drop us off right here!”

Just as I stopped screaming, Mr. Tateyama flipped a turn signal and stopped by the side of the road.

“Huh? Wait, are you actually stopping for…?”

“Hah-hah-hah! Sorry to disappoint ya, but we’re here at the park. You little lovebirds keep the conversation going by yourselves, okay?”

Looking out the window, I saw a small, cozy park, the type you see on nearly every corner of the city.

There was nothing unusual about it in the slightest, to the point where I found it hard to imagine it being the scene of Hibiya’s supernatural adventures.

Hopefully we could find something that connected to Hiyori here, but…

Hibiya opened the door and hopped out, me following meekly behind.

We turned around to find Mr. Tateyama rolling the window down as he lit his cigarette. He was nice enough to wait until we left, at least.

“Well, thanks for helpin’ me kill some time! Best of luck with that manhunt or whatever you’re up to. I’m assuming I’ll see you in summer school, huh, Kisaragi?”

“Gehhh…Yeah. I can’t wait.”

“Um, thank you very much! I…oh, I never told you my name. I’m Hibiya.”

My teacher laughed—no doubt finding it amusing that Hibiya introduced himself just as he probably left his life forever.

“Oh yeah? I’m Tateyama. See you around, Hibiya.”

With that, Mr. Tateyama put the window up, gave a few distracted waves, and drove away.

“Ugh…I wish I didn’t have to be reminded about summer school during my days off, at least…Oh? What’s up, Hibiya?”

“Mm? Oh…I dunno, I feel like I heard that guy’s name before…”

“Did you? Well, worst-case scenario, maybe you know him. It’s not *that* common a last name.”

“Worst-case…?”

Hibiya grinned to himself before turning his attention to the park before him.

“So do you see anything, Hibiya?”

“I’m not gonna see anything *that* fast…but I’ll try.”

Hibiya steadied his eyes upon the park, focusing in an attempt to summon his skill.

The place was oddly devoid of children, despite the sunny weather. After listening to Hibiya’s story, it seemed almost eerie, like a park that greedily devoured any kid unlucky enough to step inside.

Hibiya kept up the effort, doing everything he could to have another vision. But even when the sun set, we couldn’t turn up a single trace of Hiyori.

❄

An oversize moon shone dully, just newly fully visible, as it hung in the navy blue night sky between the trees.

We sat there, on a park bench, for several hours.

I couldn’t guess how long Hibiya had been focusing all his mental powers on the task at hand. Judging by his face, he had reached the very limits of exhaustion.

Not only did we fail to grasp how his ability worked—we wasted all of this energy trying, and failing, to summon it. It was clear to both of us that we faced an ominous situation.

“Um…hey, Hibiya? It’s getting pretty late, so maybe we could give it another shot tomorrow?”

“Ah, you can go back home, Gran…I can do this by myself, so…”

“I can’t just leave you here! I mean, you’re about to fall over, Hibiya! You should get a good night’s sleep before you…”

Hibiya stopped me midsentence with his eyes.

They were cold, cruel, laced with hatred, the eyes he had when we first met yesterday.

The overwhelming, vengeful hatred behind them silenced me.

He was right—Hiyori’s fate was riding on every minute, every second. There was no way Hibiya would ever allow himself to rest.

He turned his face downward, focusing his consciousness on the ground nearby.

I watched him—I couldn’t do anything else—and then I noticed tears start to fall around his feet.

Before I could even comprehend what they were, I felt my chest tighten.

“What…what *is* this, even…? This ability’s completely useless…!”

I couldn’t find the words to address his tears with.

If anything was useless here, it was me. I acted all suave, promising to give him support, and look at what I’d accomplished…Nothing.

The tears even began to well in *my* eyes as I thought about it.

Soon they formed neat little droplets, running down and falling away from my face.

Without warning, Hibiya stood up and started walking toward the park exit.

“Wh-where’re you going?!” I called to him, my unsteady voice making it clear I was crying. Hibiya kept going, paying it no attention.

Unable to take it anymore, I stood up and grabbed his hand. It was quivering.

“If I try to rely on this thing, I’m never gonna find her. It’s a lot faster if I just keep searching like I did before.”

“But you’re not gonna accomplish anything if you start this late at night. Come on. We can invite everyone else to come help you search tomorrow.

What do you think?”

The moment I made the suggestion, Hibiya jerked his hand away from mine.

“I told you…I can’t trust any of them! I can’t even trust this ability anymore…”

He started walking again but stopped after a few steps.

Then he set off again, taking a few strides, before picking up something off the ground.

It was the same kind of paper bag as the one I saw in his vest pocket.

“Hiyori bought this…”

The moment he whispered the thought, Hibiya fell to his knees.

“Hibiya?!”

I ran up to him. By the time I reached him, he was all but passed out.

“Hang in there, all right? We can do this together…Okay?”

“I…I don’t even know if I can go on or not…I don’t…I don’t even know if she’s alive, or…”

“…Don’t say it!!”

That was the one thing he could absolutely *never* say.

If you don’t believe that somebody’s alive—if you don’t try to find them—they might really disappear on you. That’s the one fact I knew here.

“You…you can’t *say* that…You can’t give up…! I…I believe in you, Hibiya…!”

“So, so what should I *do*, then?! Hiyori isn’t here any longer…I can’t even *look* at her anymore!”

That, I couldn’t deny. His ability was meaningless without someone to look at. Meaningless unless Hiyori was actually here.

So what were we supposed to do…?

“…No.”

Then, a dull sense of discomfort that had taken up residence in my mind began to glow brightly.

Why couldn't I have noticed it sooner, something as bleedingly obvious as this?

"…Hibiya, that…that porn mag in Mr. Tateyama's car…What did you 'see' there?"

The beyond-inappropriate question made Hibiya freeze for a second before he meekly gave his answer.

"That…I wasn't using my ability at all! I *told* you, I just happened to put my eyes on it. That's it."

The theory building itself in my mind suddenly began to take on the shining halo of truth.

Hibiya *was* using it. I could tell.

But he claimed he wasn't. Put that together, and it meant he used that skill… but didn't see anything.

"I think we got something to work with…!"

"What?! Something *how?*!"

"So when you look at somebody, your vision takes you someplace else, right, Hibiya? But when you looked at that magazine, you 'couldn't see anything.'"

Hibiya tilted his head at me, clearly having issues understanding my gist.

"But when your eyes were on that mag, they went red. I saw it. We've spent the whole day trying to make it happen, and they just flicked right on in that car. I think you really *did* trigger it."

"But I couldn't see anything…"

"But that's the thing. You might *have* been seeing something. I mean, think about this. If a person triggers a vision of some *place*, what would watching an inanimate object bring you to?"

"…The owner?"

That was the crux of it. If Hibiya's skill let him look at an object and see a vision of its owner, then that mag in the back of my teacher's car would have triggered a vision of…well, my teacher. He mistakenly assumed he "couldn't see

anything” because Mr. Tateyama was in a position where Hibiya could see him just fine without his ability. Could that be it?

“This is still, like, a total theory on my part, but you know, if that was actually the case…”

Hibiya clutched the bag dropped by Hiyori tightly in his hand. Now he seemed to follow my drift.

“…Let me try it.”

Hibiya opened the bag. Inside was an elastic band for putting your hair back with.

“Huh. This has gotta be cheaper than what she got for me.”

After a short pause, Hibiya began to focus on his hand.

If my theory from earlier was correct, this might just give him a glimpse of Hiyori and her surroundings.

But nothing happened. Try as he did, Hibiya just couldn’t coax his new power back to life. Time began to creak by.

“Gran, I…I can’t get myself to concentrate…”

His eyes were glassy and unfocused. He looked ready to collapse at any moment.

I could see why. There was no telling how much stress the events of last night and today put on him.

Maybe we should pick this up tomorrow after all…

…No. He’d never let me.

Saying “Let’s go home” right now to Hibiya wouldn’t make him move an inch.

I wished there was some way I could use my own ability to help him, at least.

…And come to think of it, I felt like there was something I’d been forgetting this whole day. I wondered what it was.

Something really important, I thought. And something to do with my own “eyes”…

“Ahhh!”

“Whoa! What, Gran? You scared me…”

“I, I, I’ve been walking around by myself all day!”

“Uh? Um, I’m here too, but…”

“Woo-*hooooo*!! Awesome! I guess this means I can control it now!”

“Control what…?”

I felt waves of joy overcome me as I realized the extent of my progress, Hibiya staring coldly at me to the side.

Now I could have the one thing I’ve craved up to now—a normal life. If this didn’t make me want to shout for joy, nothing would.

That, and one other important fact:

Something about the ability in my body, and how to use it.

“Whew…Hee-hee! I’m sorry. I just remembered something. I can help you with this after all.”

“You can, Granny…?”

“Yeah. Can you give me that hair clip for a second?”

Accepting the band from Hibiya, I stood up and walked a slight distance away from him.

“…What are you trying to do?”

“You’ll see. Just keep your eyes right on me, okay?”

Holding the clip in my right hand, I raised it into the air, closed my eyes, and focused.

I needed to attract as many people’s eyes to this hair band as possible.

Just like I did at the department store. *Hibiya needs this. Full power,* now*!*

My body tensed, I threw my eyes open. Somehow, the park we were in seemed to bathe itself in sparkling light.

“Wow, Gran. Look at all this light you attracted…It’s like you’re a real pop idol

or something.”

“Well, yeah! I could sing a track or two if you like…once we find her, of course.”

“Let’s do it!” Hibiya shouted, his eyes now a shining crimson.

Once we find her, I have got *to make him stop calling me “Gran.”*

I looked upward into the sky as I had the thought. It felt like the moon itself was staring wide-eyed at me. As a newbie pop star, still not that used to being onstage—it all began to seem intensely embarrassing.

KAGEROU DAZE IV

“Hey! Hello? You there? Hey!”

“I can hear you, okay? …What is it?”

“Oh, you can? You know, I guess that guy really took a liking to you.”

“I guess so…but it’s still pretty frustrating.”

“Yeah, I know where you’re coming from there. But remember what I told you?”

“Huh?”

“There are things you can see with your ‘eyes.’ And things people on the outside can see, too, with their ‘eyes.’ So it’s all gonna be just fine.”

“Oh…Right. You did say that. I almost forgot.”

“Well, try not to do that. I told you not to, remember?”

“That I remember, yeah.”

“Oh? Well, good, then.”

“…Oh, right. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure. Not a problem.”

“How should I be searching for other people’s ‘eyes’…?”

“Oh, that’s simple. They’re going to have these bright red eyes. It’s almost too easy to spot them.”

“Bright red…? Does that happen to me, too?”

“Of course. It’s really cool, you know. The color of a hero.”

“Hopefully I’ve got what it takes to become one…”

“Oh, you’ll be fine. Have some faith in yourself!”

“All right. I will. Oh, but it’s almost time.”

“Mm-hmm. Well, be careful. And don’t forget about Her, either, all right?”

“I won’t. I’ll be right there…Oh, I’m sorry, one more thing.”

“What’s up?”

“That red scarf you have. Who’s that ‘the color of a hero’ to?”

“Hmm…Good question. Oh, I know. Why don’t you ask someone on the outside? They’ll probably have an answer for you.”

“Really? All right. Well, I guess we don’t have much longer here.”

“No. See you later…I’m assuming, anyway?”

“You will. You definitely will.”

“Great. Well, see you then.”

OVERTURE TO CLOSURE

Step by step, I made my way back to the hideout, the moon hanging in front of my face.

“This is kind of embarrassing, Gran—I mean, Momo.”

“Well, what do you want from me? You’re the one who passed out on me back there, Hibiya. Also, you messed that whole thing up, didn’t you?”

“No, I…I mean, it’s kind of hard, just *doing* it all of a sudden…!”

“Oh, stop whining at me! My feet are killing me too, you know. We’re almost there, okay?”

It was a pretty long distance between the park and our hideout.

My legs, heavy with the burden of Hibiya draped over my shoulders, were undoubtedly going to collapse into jelly the moment I sat down.

“…Do you think everyone will believe me? You think they’ll really help me…?”

“Are you still being suspicious? Of *course* they’ll believe you! We’re all friends here.”

“S-since when were we friends?!”

“Hmm? Uh, since today, I guess.”

Hibiya found himself at a total loss.

It wasn’t difficult to see why. He mouthed off at my brother yesterday, the way he described it, and he had some pretty nasty verbal abuse for Konoha as well.

And then he ran out of the hideout by himself. Kido was no doubt beside herself.

“But…ahhh, it’ll be fine, it’ll be fine.”

“The way you said that doesn’t make me real confident…”

“Oh, I’m just being mean! C’mon, they could care less about what you did.”

“Uh, don’t you mean they *couldn’t* care less? Which is it?”

Hibiya was still more than a tad dubious by the time our hideout came into view.

“There, see? There’s the hideout!”

“Y-yeah…”

“…Oh! And before I introduce you to everyone, we should probably give your ability some kinda name.”

“A name? Is that what you, uh, do?”

“That’s what we do!”

There wasn’t a rule or anything, of course. But it seemed to be common practice for the rest of the gang. It kind of felt right, too.

“Your skill lets you look at things from far away, so…hmmm…”

“…How about ‘Focusing’ Eyes?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, um, I mean, if nobody else has claimed ‘Focusing’ yet, I kinda liked the sound of that. You gotta focus a ton to make it work, too.”

“…Aww. I wanted to name it first. That’s cool and all, but…”

“…Why do *you* care so bad?”

We carried on in similar fashion until we reached the hideout door.

It was finally time to tell everyone about all the amazing things Hibiya and I accomplished today.

Heaving Hibiya off my shoulders, I briskly shoved the door open.

“Hey, we’re back! Momo and Hibiya are back…home…?”

The atmosphere around the hideout’s living room was more chaotic than what I expected.

The first thing that caught my eye was my brother, sprawled out on the sofa

and dressed like he just got back from a mountain-climbing expedition, lifelessly breathing, “Yeah…Welcome back…” at me. Just a bit away, Konoha, completely topless, stared at me like a robot.

Marie was busily sewing up an enormous hole that was opened up on Konoha’s shirt. And Kido, for her part, was intently poring through some sort of old handwritten book.

Taking notice of me, Kido slammed the book shut and walked straight up to me by the door.

“Whoa, you were okay by yourself, Kisaragi? I was really worried about you. Oh, and Hibiya’s with you? Well, you both picked a great time to get back.”

“Um…boss? What happened to all of you…?”

Kido, in response, turned around and, without a shred of irony or sarcasm, said this to everyone in the room: “Okay, gang. Kisaragi’s back, so starting from this moment, Operation: Conquer Kagerou Daze is under way! I want all of you to make sure you’re thoroughly prepared!”

“…What?”

“Hey, uh, Momo? What about me?”

I, of course, had no way of knowing at the time that Operation: Conquer Kagerou Daze, kicked off without a single word of explanation to me, would mark the Mekakushi-dan’s final mission…or more like the final time I’d ever be with any of its members.

FAKE AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. My name is Ishiburo, and I'm taking pen to paper to help celebrate the release of *Kagerou Daze*'s third novel.

People familiar with my name can feel free to mutter "Not *this* guy again…" to themselves as they skip ahead, but for those of you thinking "Hey, who's this freak and what's he doing in *my* book?" I invite you to use the search engine of your choice to look up Ishiburo's work as a Vocaloid music composer. I think you'll be happy you did.

Anyway, the last volume ended with Shintaro finally obtaining the fabled Final Element sword and thrusting it deep into the breast of Kidorn, head of the 427th section of the evil Mekakushi-dan syndicate. After that breathtaking climax, who could've guessed the story would jump over to life at the Kashiwa Academy? That JIN…He's such a crafty story-weaver!

The synergy between Enene, Momomo, and Shintarou as they engage in their breezy rom-com school antics is what really stood out the most this time around, I think.

But when the focus shifts halfway through the novel to Kahrno—a character that you could tell was up to something fishy, but mostly stayed out of the spotlight until now—the excitement suddenly ramps up to almost dangerous levels!

What did you think of it? Quite an emotional roller coaster, wasn't it?

By the way, I haven't had a chance to read Volume 3 yet. Sorry about that.

The writing work came right to the edge of the deadline this time around, and I've been constantly hounded by work of my own as well, so I didn't have the time to read through it. I'm toeing the edge pretty close myself, basically.

I figured that I would save this volume for a time when I can line up at the

bookstore, purchase my own copy, and really bask in the literary excellence waiting for me within. I'm not about to just skim through it and forget the whole plot an hour later.

By the way, the plotline I wrote a few paragraphs ago has absolutely nothing to do with *Kagerou Daze*. That was hopefully pretty obvious, but if I made anyone excited for something that doesn't exist, my apologies.

JIN, I know I've written a lot of words before broaching the topic, but congrats on wrapping up the third volume!

It's always a blast for me to take in the fruits of JIN's labor in all its many forms, so I'm confident that this is going to be just as heart-pounding an experience once I read it.

Thanks to all of you for reading my somewhat childish attempt at an afterword. I'd love to meet you elsewhere, too, if we ever have the chance. See you then!

Ishiburo

AFTERWORD

A Sight for Sore Eyes

Hello. JIN speaking.

How did you like *Kagerou Daze 3: The Children Reason*?

As always, the story is set in the dead of summer. This volume, though, makes an effort to propel the plot further into the future, introducing new characters and new situations for them to lose themselves in.

By the way, the release of this third volume (in Japan) happened to occur exactly one year after the first one came out…but, wow, the schedule's grown astoundingly more frenetic since then.

Writing something like this all the time will probably lead to reactions like "Oh, God, he's whining about how busy he is *again*?" if I keep on doing it. But the difficulty level does seem to rise just that bit more with each new volume. A little help would be nice.

I am cutting it so close timewise, in fact, that for the past few days, I've been shut into my room, leaving only to bathe myself and visit my erstwhile pal Mr. Crapper.

When I started on this volume, this room was very well kept—you could call it nice smelling, even—but somewhere along the line, mountains of plastic bento trays and bottles have sprouted up from the floor. I'm surrounded by them on both sides even as I craft this afterword.

Sigh…And once I'm done with it, I suppose we'll have to say our good-byes to each other before long.

Someone from the office will come along and cruelly whisk it all way, no doubt. (Don't ask me why I'm not doing it myself. Personal reasons.) When I

was deep in the trenches of writing, facing looming deadlines and a desperate, lingering sense of doom, it was these piles of garbage who cheered me up, giving me a hearty thumbs-up and a friendly “Hang in there, kiddo!”

Thanks, guys. It’s been nice.

Working in conditions like these naturally means that I have food delivered here pretty often. By the end, though, this got seriously awkward.

Whenever the bell rang and I opened the door, the delivery guy would look at me and make a face like “…oh.”

If you were greeted by a gaunt, unhealthy-looking gentleman in a stained hoodie, you’d probably do the same thing. It made me want to claw my eyes out sometimes.

The worst was always when I ordered in food two days in a row, and the same person showed up each time.

Me: (while paying) “Uhhh…mmmmm…Thanks for coming by all the time. I work a lot out of the home these days, so *blah blah blah*…”

Female restaurant driver: “Oh, is that so? How *inn*-teresting. Well, thanks as always!” (*slam*) Me: “…Welp, time for dinner.”

Every time.

This is what I have to deal with.

It makes a man feel lonely, undeniably. Chewing on a slice of pizza by yourself in your room. Painful stuff.

So it should come as little surprise that once I’m done writing, I’m rarin’ to hit the road!

I haven’t had real time off in a dog’s age, so I figure I’ve earned that much.

Someplace out in the countryside would be nice. I was born in what’s pretty much a one-stoplight town, so living in the big city can really be exhausting for me sometimes.

And while I’m making wishes here, once I arrive at my little country villa, I wish there was a fetching lady there I could spend some time with.

Come on, God. Give me half a chance already. I'm honestly a bit miffed.

Seriously, when my editor suddenly knocked on my door and said:

Editor: "You'll submit Volume 3 on this date."

Me: "Eeeeggaaaaahhhh!!"

—I began to consider preparing my last will and testament for a while, but somehow I made it over every obstacle presented to me. It's a huge relief.

I had to work through a lot of crap to make it here.

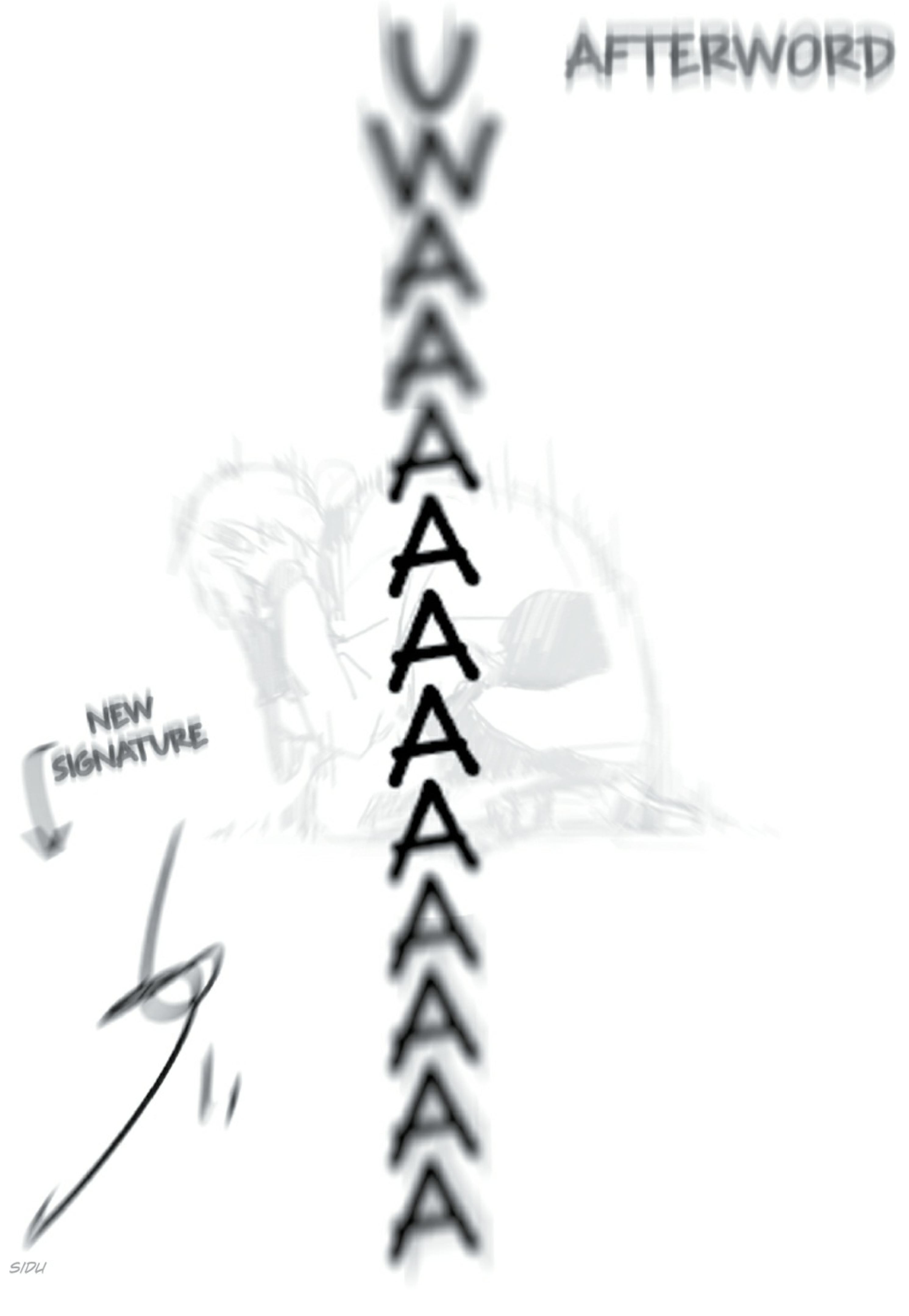
And I think I'll have a much more relaxed schedule for the next volume, so I'm looking forward to taking it a little easy for a change.

Surely my editor won't materialize before me and tell me to start writing Volume 4 immediately. I think I'm reasonably safe for at least a little while.

My editor isn't *that* much of a demon, after all. By the time you read this, I'll probably be enjoying a nice, relaxing vacation in— Oh? Hang on. There's someone at the door. I wonder what anyone would want this late at night.

I'm starting to have a bad feeling about this. Better wrap this up before anything else. Until the next volume, I'll see you around.

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)


AFTERWORD
UWAAAAAAAAAAAA
NEW SIGNATURE
SIDU

SPECIAL END-OF-BOOK BONUS

ROUGH SKETCHES / DESIGN SHEETS



VOLUME 3 COVER SKETCH



ILLUSTRATION 1 SKETCH



ILLUSTRATION 2 SKETCH

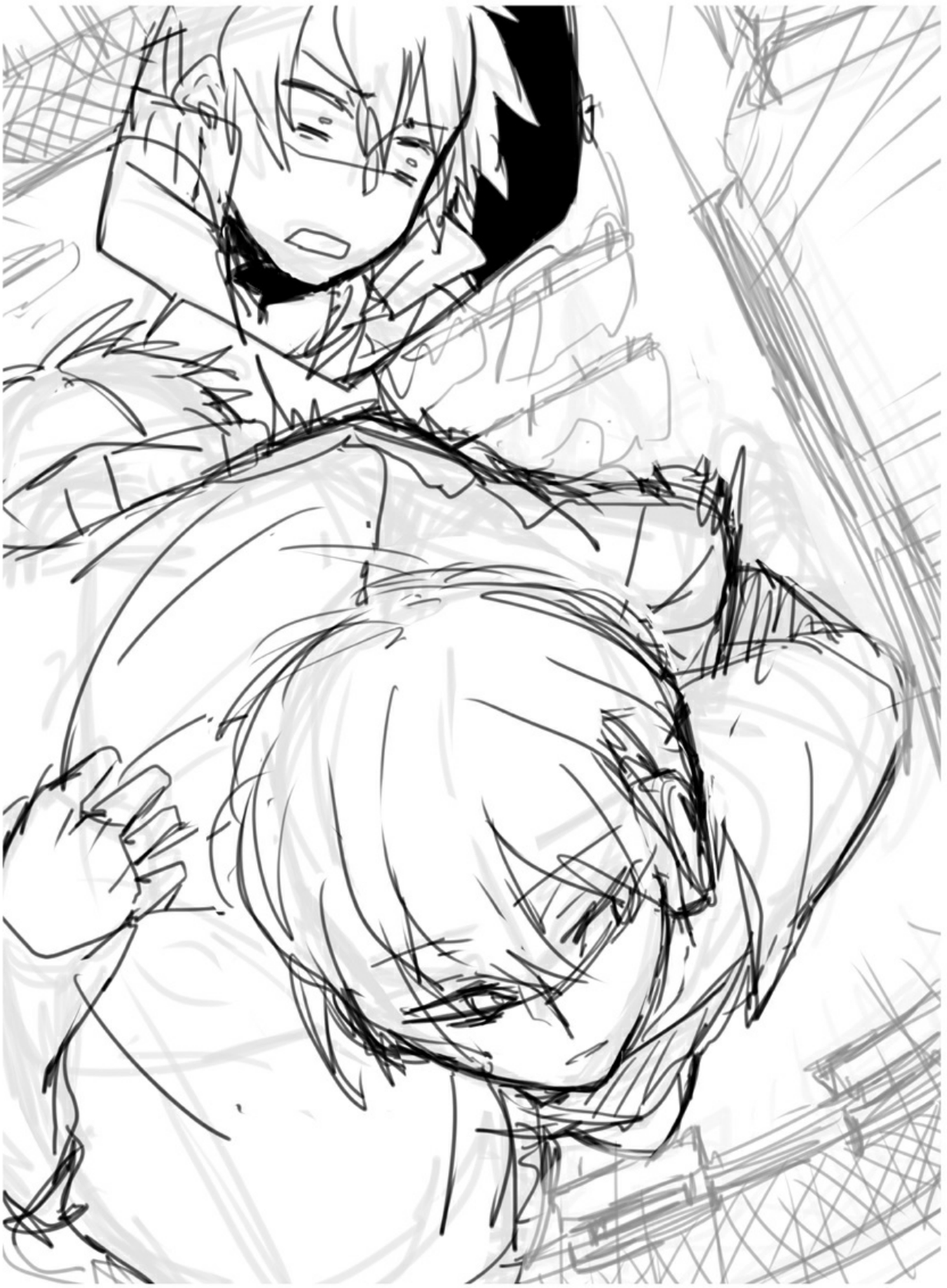


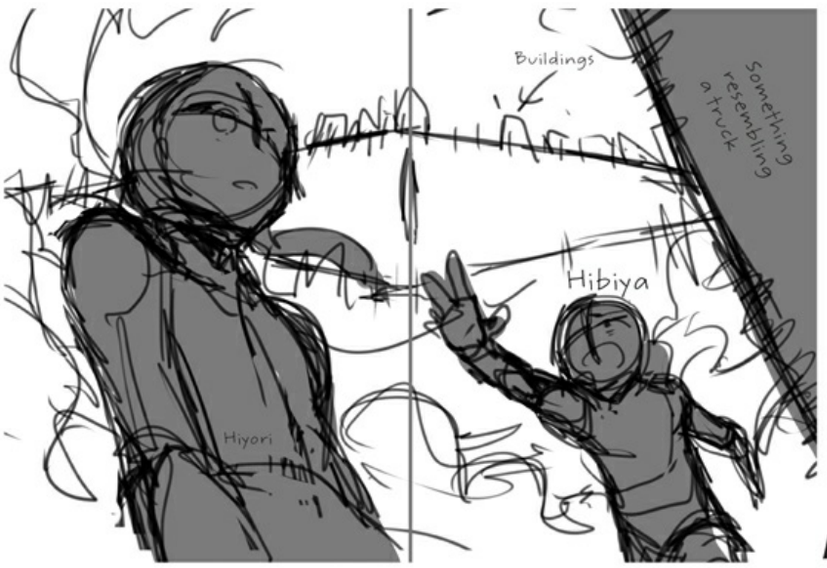
ILLUSTRATION 3 SKETCH



ILLUSTRATION 4 SKETCH



ILLUSTRATION 5 SKETCH



INITIAL CONCEPT

FINAL DESIGN



ILLUSTRATION 7 SKETCH



ILLUSTRATION 8 SKETCH



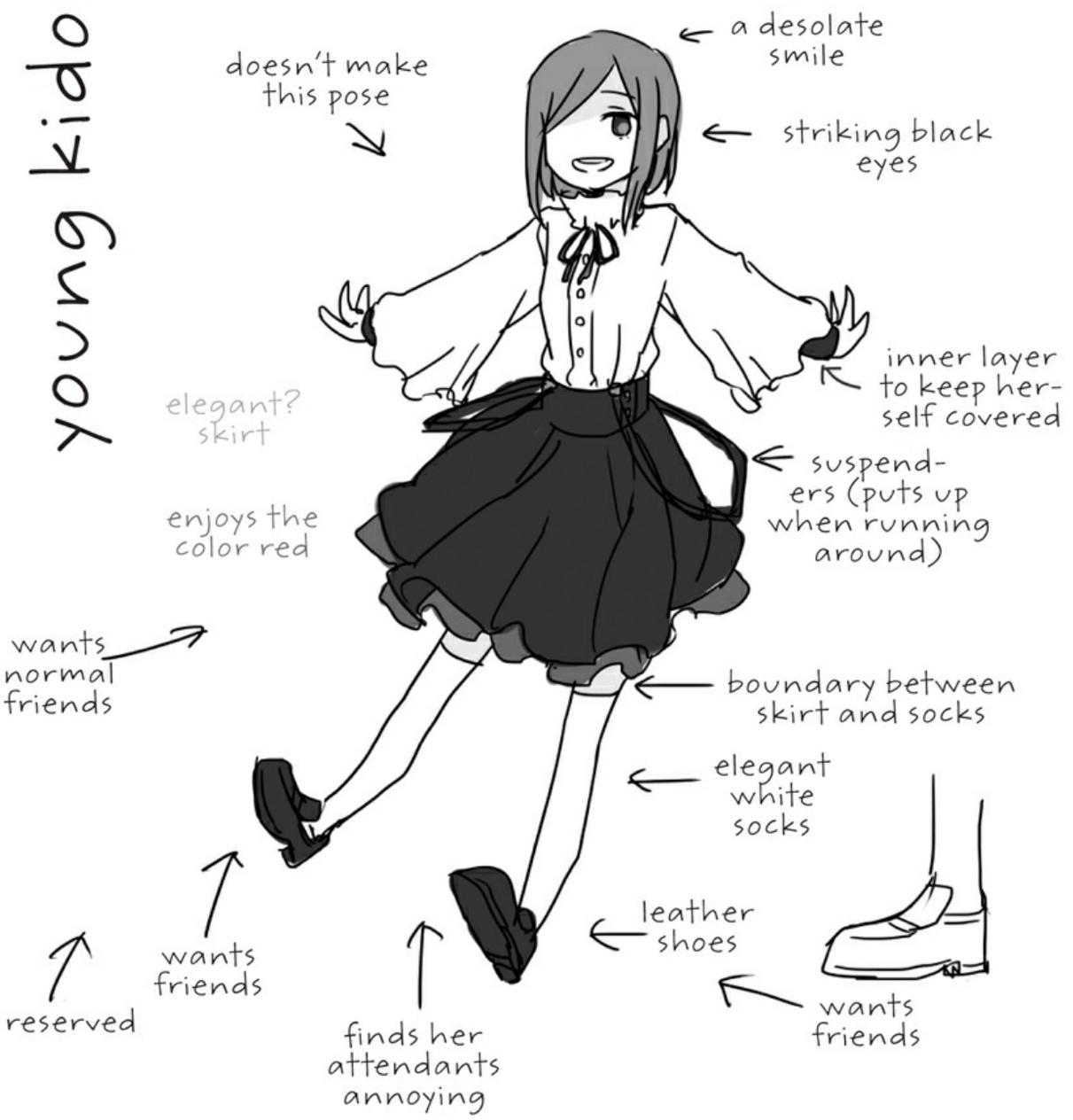
ILLUSTRATION 6 ROUGH



YOUNG KANO
(FROM CHARACTER DESIGN SHEETS)



YOUNG SETO
(FROM CHARACTER DESIGN SHEETS)



YOUNG KIDO
(FROM CHARACTER DESIGN SHEETS)



KONOHA INITIAL DESIGN CONCEPT
(FROM CHARACTER DESIGN SHEETS)

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KAGEROU DAZE, Volume 3

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

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Kagerou Daze III –the children reason-

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