

The Longing of Shiina Ryo

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Hosted at:

<http://menasepublications.blogspot.com/2011/01/longing-of-shiina-ryo.html>

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Prologue [PC]

I stopped believing in Santa Claus when he cheated me at cards.

That kind of sentence made me the person I am today. It might sound like a lame joke, but I don't say it to try to be funny or anything. I've always said stuff like that and most of the time I don't even know why. It slips out, just like that. After listening to that kind of sentence, people often start treating me as some kind of lunatic or someone that shouldn't be taken seriously. Maybe that was a little too light. No, no, I know what they are truly thinking, deep down in their hearts: that I am a serial, shameless liar.

Which I'm not.

I just happen to be in the right place at the right time for the wrong things. If there's something weird happening somewhere, somehow I'll be involved. I'm always the one that finds out the truth about the cult trying to revive a black dragon, which one of my classmates is the teacher's murderer or the deepest secrets of the "end of the world" conspiracy. I don't even try to find these kinds of things; I mean, how many of you have accidentally clicked on a link that led to the activation of an atomic bomb while searching for sheet music? Oh, c'mon! It's not like I have a van, three friends and a talking dog or something.

I'm as normal as the next guy, but that doesn't stop the strange phenomena that seem to follow me everywhere I go. I've been moving around ever since I can remember and because of that, my best friend is someone I met online. Hmm, let me rephrase that. My only friend and probably the only person who doesn't think I'm a blatant liar is a girl I met last year in a chat room. It's weird to think that even though we have never seen each other, she is currently the only friend I can rely on.

And here I am, moving to her town. I have lived in many places, and since this thing called 'Mystery' follows me everywhere, it might be a little better if I have a friend (even if it's only for three months, before something really weird happens and I have to move again). It will probably be good for me, for a while.

Trying to make myself believe that, I went to the town where Shiina Ryo lived.

Chapter 1: Ryo Part 1 [C1R1]

For the very first time in my life I was woken up by a regular electronic alarm clock.

This might strike you as odd because you probably are someone who had the chance to lead a regular life so far, but till now I have been woken up by the weirdest things, including the deathly elbow blows of my female cousins, the screams of classmates and neighbours and there was even this time a maid walked in and...

...never mind.

Quick as something very quick, I opened the curtains and promptly let the sunshine in. With the windows open it was easy to see that I wasn't paying much attention during the move yesterday, this city seems really awesome. I have been in many, many places around the world (probably more than most TV channels, including the cable ones), but I still think this place looks great because of its simplicity.

It kind of reminded me of a small rural village I had the chance to visit once. It seemed really peaceful at the start, but after a festival dedicated to one of their local gods, I suddenly found myself trapped in a mysterious murder case. A brutal one. With time loops.

Maybe I am not that fond of simple places after all...

Still half asleep, I slowly crawled out of my bed and did my best to dodge the randomly placed boxes on the floor on my way to the flat's kitchen, and if we just ignore that surprisingly tricky last box it will be obvious to anyone that I managed to complete said task marvelously. I wonder if there is a world record for that.

While the water boiled lazily, as if it was too tired to respect or even consider the laws of Thermodynamics, I too did something without paying it much attention: brushing my teeth. Having such a distracted mind in the early morning could give me enormous problems in the not so distant future. Most of them involved dental care.

However, finding myself in a numb state was not something usual(which is a great thing, considering that at the very least it postpones some rather painful visits to dentists). At that moment there was something disturbing me deeply: it's really incredibly hard to get used to silence when you were surrounded by noise your entire life. Actually, the absence of noise is not pleasing in said circumstances, but truly unsettling.

As you can already guess by now, this is the first day I'm living on my own.

It's pretty unusual for a teenager to do that, especially with their parent's consent (and I guess in my case, I could safely say "relief"). I don't blame them or feel angry about it. It's better for everyone, hopefully.

We have moved around many, many times, but this force I like to call Mystery always manages to find me. They eventually got tired of being in a different town every month and if I hadn't left, they'd probably have grown tired of each other. I couldn't let that happen, not when they gave up so much for me. So, I asked for their permission to live by myself. I wasn't expecting them to like the idea, though.

Which leads us to my first solo flight and the awkward taste it leaves in my mouth. No, wait, I can actually explain the awkward taste. Distracted as I was, I managed to mistake two things that were not similar at all and ended up brushing my teeth with soap. Well, I suppose it could be worse; at least my teeth are clean.

The tea kettle eventually became bored of heating slowly and, after making up with Physics, caused the water to quickly reach the proper temperature and whistle in an earsplitting high frequency that suddenly interrupted the house's maddening silence.

Ignoring the shiny and nearly bubbly reflection of my teeth in the mirror, I ran to the kitchen to turn off the stove. After adding the hot water to the instant noodle cup, I look at my new whole-floor apartment through the kitchen bar. It seems really big, especially because I am fully aware there will only be one person living here.

My first breakfast alone was both silent and simple, and it tasted a little bit like solitude. And soap.

"I really need to stop doing this." I said to the air, oxygen and carbon being my only companions. No, that was quite imprecise; I'd better take that back before the rest of the Periodic Table elements in my house start feeling uneasy. "Living by myself can be a good experience for me, and I might grow up a lot because of this situation. This self-pity thing isn't good for me, and I'm certainly not going anywhere thinking like that..."

If reality was a perfect place, that would be the moment an incandescent light bulb would have magically appeared over my head, mostly for comedic effect, since I assume the sudden materialization of an object above my body for purposes other than comedy would be rather terrifying.

"...wait a second." My monologue went on, finally bringing some action into such a monotonous setting. "That's probably the solution; I need to go out! Yes, going out does sound like a fabulous idea to get rid of those unneeded feelings. The timing is perfect! I have a new city to explore and I bet there are many places worth visiting here."

It sounded like a plan to me at the time. A much better plan than spending the day tidying the place up, which seemed quite pointless since I wasn't expecting any visitors. It was a Sunday, for crying out loud. Sundays are for rest.

Surrounded by countless boxes I still needed to unpack that didn't feel like unpacking, I quickly finished the flat's soundless inaugural meal.

A few minutes later, I started my amazing journey through unknown city streets. There was a lot of green on them, but not enough to classify it as a rural town (hopefully). I could see some fancy shops and a few restaurants of famous franchises. I then realized that I had probably moved to a developing

city. My parents sure did a great job buying real estate here, since its value will only rise as the city grows.

I can't help but wonder what they're doing right now.

The streets were surprisingly calm, even for a Sunday morning. Keeping in mind that the schools were closed, I supposed the city manages to be a look more crowded on the other days.

Without a proper destination, I walked through the streets and saw several great places to spend and, if it comes to that, kill time. It occurred to me that I could and presumably would bring my friends to some of those cafes and shops. As soon as I made some new friends, that is. Anyway, I guess hanging around in this city will be nice.

Before you manage to mess everything up again, right?

The mysterious yet recurring voice at the back of my head spoiled the whole moment for me. It's really hard to be optimistic about your future when the one pointing out the flaws in your plans is yourself. Especially because you alone can't argue with your own life experience, and every single discussion is pointless because it is nothing but a poorly written monologue in the end.

No, I won't let myself surrender to pessimism so easily. You can only fail if you stop trying, or so I heard. Obviously, I have heard a lot of sayings that didn't actually work in real life, but that's certainly not the point. If you haven't stopped trying, every apparent failure is just a step in your journey to victory. Perhaps just another failure, making it a series. Or just adding new elements to an existing set. Anyway, I won't allow myself to succumb to such a fate without even trying!

"Take that, mysterious voice!"

With my self-confidence reaching a new high, I continued walking aimlessly. I approached a bridge that directly connected the residential side of the city to the commercial one. Oh, so there were the big stores, the important buildings and probably the schools. Maybe this city isn't that small, after all. That's a great thing, since big cities are less prone to unfortunate events such as, just an example, mind, time loops than rural villages. That's common sense, right?

When I was just about to cross the bridge and resume my exploration, I was stopped by a magnificent, overwhelming vision.

Next to the bridge, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen was staring directly at me.

Her long, golden hair moved like flames due to that precise, perfect action of the wind that we only get to see in ads and fiction. The frilly one piece dress she was wearing was crimson red and combined with skin the colour of sand, made her look like the sun itself. Wait, why do I feel so poetic?

She, whom I could easily mistake for a statue of a Greek goddess, suddenly started moving and I felt my own heart skipping a whole beat. No, that's way too cliché and imprecise; actually my heart had a syncopated pause, a dotted eighth rest which marked a drastic change in the time signature of my

heartbeat. Now that I think about it, 'you make my heart go prog' sounds like a fairly decent pick-up line for musicians. I can even picture it as a popular t-shirt stamp.

Anyway, it skipped.

As she sweetly came in my direction, I noticed that I couldn't move or look away; it was like her innocent face (that for some unknown reason perfectly matched her well-developed body) was made of quicksand, and I took far too long to realize that I was sinking.

She stopped in front of me, close enough for me to feel her delicious scent, the scent of raw sunflower seeds. The Sun smiled at me and tried to tell me something, but I was deeply lost in the smooth movement of her cherry lips. Once she stopped talking, I realized that I was missing something.

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

Now, I need to confess; I understood what she said, I really did. It would be weird if, after paying such devoted attention to her beautiful lips, I hadn't read what they were trying to say. However, I really wanted to see them moving one more time. Call me what you want, I don't mind. You'd have done the same thing, or wished you had.

"I said 'excuse me, what time is it?'"

"Oh, let me see..." I looked at my cell phone screen. "Exactly 11:45."

She smiled, looking so radiant I was afraid I would go blind.

"Thank you very much." She started walking away, then turned and waved to me. "Bye bye!"

I never saw her again.

Just like that. I know, it sounds unfair and kind of dull, but so is life. We could have been through many adventures or solved mysteries or even have common, peaceful high school years together. We'd probably face the possibility of being torn apart at one point, but just to set the scene and build a decent literary climax.

Yeah, a solid climax. If this was a manga or some sort of fiction, we'd probably have a dramatic reencounter under the rain (maybe snow, it depends on the author) with generic sad piano background music and a dialogue that involved the word "promise". No, a whole dialogue *based* on the word "promise". Yeah, that's much better.

That was the shipwreck of our romance, I suppose: the fact that it never happened. I believe they call this tragedy.

Back to the story.

I still had a smile on my face (especially because I didn't know right then that I'd never see her again) when the cell phone in my right hand started to vibrate. As the dog biting The Fool in the Tarot's Major Arcana, that message worked as the call of the real world to me. It reminded me of something that I was so used to that I didn't even need to think about it. It was like a built-in mechanism, something that was hard to believe wasn't there from the start.

It was Ryo, and I shouldn't be surprised. She did know that I was supposed to arrive in her city yesterday. I forgot to send her a message saying that I was already here. Anyway, I was so tired from travelling yesterday that I just entered the apartment and went to sleep, without even looking at it. Yeah, I'd better use that excuse.

With that in mind, I pressed the button to read the message.

Where are you?
We didn't talk yesterday, you know ._.

My smile was so wide that my jaw hurt a little bit.

She usually talks like a guy and I blame the internet for her manners, so seeing her act in such a cute way sure is good for my self-esteem. Besides, it's nice to have a friend that actually worries about you. She also has a decent reason for being worried: ever since we met we have been texting each other every single day without fail. Sometimes I wonder if the day will come when we won't have anything to say to each other.

For a reason I don't know, I felt that I needed to make it up to her. I cannot just say 'I was tired, lol' or something like that. It would be really inconsiderate of me, and we have known each other for a while. I need to think of something quick, before she starts to think that I'm ignoring her.

I looked around, searching for an epiphany or, at least, something that I could use to avoid that topic for now. OK, I'm next to a bridge; there are a few shops over there, a French-themed cafe...

What comes next can be very, very dangerous. Don't try it at home, kids.

Hey, I'm hungry: do you want to eat something?
Right now I'm in front of a cafe called Le Ciel Bleu.

Wait, what on Earth am I doing?

Realizing what I just wrote, I tried to delete the message, but my attempt to do so failed in the most miserable way possible: my fingers betrayed me and pressed the SEND button on their own. How could you do that?! I trusted you!

...

OK, so the message was sent. Big deal, there's no reason to panic. Don't panic. I said don't panic, damn it!

Fine, I just (technically) asked a girl I only know on the internet out and despite talking to her for a whole year I can't help but feel nervous. Not only because I just happened to walk through half of the city and I think I'm starting to sweat, but also because I'm afraid to meet her and see that she might not be exactly like the persona she represented on the net. There must be a way out of this. I just need to relax and think about it. Think, think...

The moment my cell phone quivered in my hands, I felt like its vibration spread through my whole body. It's interesting to think that vibration in English is also a slang for aura, atmosphere. Possibly, that slang started when someone was in the same situation as me. Yes, someone who has also endured the massive, dark wave of dismay that is receiving a text message from a girl you just asked out.

I know I can't run away now. If I choose to ignore her message, I might have to move away from this town. The reason for that is because I am supposed to attend my first day at her school tomorrow. Even if I pretend I never got the message, I'll probably have to face a questionnaire at school. And that would probably mean the end of our friendship, because despite my reputation, I just can't lie.

With another movement of my untrustworthy fingers, I pressed the READ button and faced my destiny. It just occurred to me (a few milliseconds before the screen finished loading the message) that she could reply by saying that she didn't want to meet me or that she was busy (which, according to centuries of mankind's knowledge and experience, most likely meant that she really, really didn't want to meet me). That hypothesis hurt my pride a little bit. Fine, not only a bit.

Don't you dare say you can't come!

Oh, I know that place.
Get us a table next to the windows; I'll be there in 15 min.

Thank goodness, she is coming. No, wait. DARN, SHE IS COMING!

Would you please decide whether you want her to come or not?

It's not as easy as it sounds. You see, both choices have bad points. Lots of 'em. Therefore, while I myself have excellent reasons to want to avoid both choices, I also know that as long as I'm in this town, I can't avoid an encounter (not even by using a repellent spray while walking on the tall grass, since this is probably a boss battle, most likely necessary for plot advancement), which leads me to a dilemma and...

...wait a second. Why is there a mysterious voice that speaks in underlined italics inside my head? I know that "speaking in italics" is an idiomatic expression that implies the use of tone to emphasize certain words, but how does one actually *spe*ak in underlines?

Does it really matter? You'd better use your time on getting a table like she told you instead of wasting it on pointless videogame references or discussing linguistics with me.

Unfortunately, the voice was right; I didn't have much time. The Rubicon was crossed and now I had no choice but to face the resulting responsibility from the actions of my treacherous fingers.

I must enter that cafe, get a table and patiently wait for Ryo to show up, even if it kills me.

My hero.

Oh, shut up.

As I walked toward the cafe's door, I saw mischievous words engraved on a banner. From the moment I read them, I found it hard to conceal my anxiousness and continue advancing easily. Deep in my despair-engulfed heart, I know that it had "Welcome!" written on it but the banner meant "abandon all hope, ye who enter here".

Bravely I opened the door and walked straight into the endless darkness.

Chapter 1: Ryo Part 2 [C1R2]

Tick

The absolute worst case scenario. The awfully bad situation I avoided and had nightmares about since I was little and dreamed of being on spaceships (which didn't work out because my father was opposed to my career as a space marine). However, even creatures from outer space and other dimensions sound like a great idea compared to this. I mean it. Words fail to describe the horror, the absolute dismay I'm feeling at this very moment.

Tick

This is just dreadful. I don't believe in *karma* or past lives, but if I did (and I'm not saying I do), I would probably have been (and I'm not saying I am) a really mean, distrusted and hated person. Probably a soccer referee.

It's just a maid cafe, stop being such a drama queen.

Tick

Just a maid cafe, you say. I swore to myself that I'd never enter that kind of place. Will you look at the waitress? She thinks she is still a teenager, but anyone can see the wrinkles on her face! That horrible makeup isn't helping at all! This is outrageous, almost an insult for those who were once in the presence of a true maid!

Meanwhile, could you please tell the "fake maid" that you're not going to order now? She keeps staring at you with that "I don't get paid to stand here and look at you" look.

Tick

Against my will I turned around and saw the eldritch, I mean, elder abomination looking at me. Oh my, she was actually trying to look cute. That was really, really lame. She was probably in her thirties, and shouldn't have to put up with this anymore. I wondered if she hated her job. I certainly did.

"May I serve you, master?"

"No."

Silence ensued.

Tick

"I mean, I intend to order, but right now I am waiting for someone."

She probably did not realize that she was making an awkward face, a feat which in her case was not a challenge at all.

"Oh, I see." The maid said, without much conviction. I cannot even blame her, since she probably deals with hardcore otaku every single day. She gave me a cheap, fake smile and tried to talk in a high pitched voice. "Just call Myu-chan when you're ready to order, myu~~"

Tick

Just at that moment I realized that the maid assigned to my table was the only one that wore cat-ears. Great, a cat-maid; I must be the unluckiest person on Earth. When I thought it couldn't get any worse, a song that I could only believe came from some anime filled the room.

Tick

I couldn't recognize the song, but I guessed it was an anime opening because of the overused structure and the shrieking child-like voice of the singer/voice actor/whatever you kids call it these days. The synthesized bass was steady but clearly uninspired, which hurt my pride as a bass player. And when I looked at my cell phone, I noticed that Ryo was already seven minutes late.

Heavens, what am I doing here?

You know, that's an interesting question that intrigued humanity since the beginning of time. There is a great deal of people who believe that the mysterious reason of their existence will only be revealed when we reach a definitive conclusion about the creation of say, everything. Some believe that gods created the universe, and others that everything began because of a random explosion of nothingness. Fascinating subject, no matter how you approach it.

Tick

...I didn't mean it like that. I was just wondering how my life had reached this point. It's always been weird (really weird, for honesty's sake), but not anything like this. I'm used to dealing with "supernatural" weird, or "murder case" weird, even "space monsters" weird; I just don't know how these people manage to deal with "normal" weird. I mean, it's my first day in town and I've already broke a promise to myself and thought about my maid.

Since the subject is breaking promises and maids, you also had sworn that you would bring her favorite ribbon back when you were kids. Instead, you mixed things up and mistook her for her sister.

Tick

Wait, I did return that ribbon; in one of the routes, at least. And they were identical twins, so no one can blame me for being confused. That doesn't matter, anyway. Discussing my past won't change the fact that I have to wait in the most hideous place on Earth for a girl I'm not sure I want to meet in real life because if I do and she is different from the girl I've met on the Net, I won't have any friends left. No one should have to face such a crisis.

Crisis, which comes from the Greek 'krinein', 'to separate'. Which is funny because you do feel like you're being torn apart, right?

That's not funny at all!

Tick

...

Tick

...

Tick

...

...oh, c'mon, it's not that bad. She might be different, but in a good way.

Like what?

Well, she could be a guy. You wouldn't feel so awkward waiting for a guy, right?

I'm not sure; it would depend on the guy and...

Tick

... just wait a second. What are you insinuating?

Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.

The mysterious voice coughed nervously, and I wasn't even sure if it was a feat possible for someone who doesn't have a body, since it involved stressing the throat and such.

...anyway, it's not like people lie on the internet or anything like that. I mean, there is no way someone would set up an offline meeting with you just to make you wait for a long time and make you feel like an idiot.

Tick

Well...

Nah, no one would do that.

I sighed in relief.

It's too simple, way too simple. Unless...

Tick

...what? Unless what?

...unless they were recording your reactions to post the movie on the internet later. It sounds like a fine reason to set up a date instead of just saying they couldn't come.

Why are you assuming that Ryo is a "they" or a "he" instead of a "she"? Why do you need to make me feel more paranoid about everything, when it's not like I need your help to ruin my self-esteem? Why the heck don't you just leave me alone?

...

Tick

Despite the awfully loud music that seemed to fill every corner of the room, my mind was completely silent. However, that was only the calm before the storm. The peace only lasted for a blink of an eye and after that, I was thrown into the deep well of agony once again.

It was like someone made an enormous hole in the submerged submarine that was my mind, the unfounded theories (but not impossible) being the black waters of the ocean surrounding it. They found their way in and were filling me, making me too heavy to keep floating.

Tick

What if the voice was right? What if every message, every single word she typed was a big fat lie? It's not like I never considered that hypothesis myself. Darn, I wished I had talked to her on the phone. Once would have been enough, at least to destroy my doubts. At that moment, they were crushing me.

Tick

The agony suddenly transformed into white anger. I was suddenly mad at everything. At myself, for being such a fool and talking to someone for so long without knowing simple details about her, which is practically a requirement in healthy human relations. At her, him or they for making me wait for so long. At the waitress, for being so old (she was probably not very happy about that either). At the clients, for repeating what seemed to be the same song over and over again. At the voice, for ruining my day. Especially at that voice.

Tick

I listened to the piercing sound of laughs. Laughs of many, I'm completely sure of that. The mysterious voice was right! Surrounded by hunters, the white beast of Rage wanted to reverse to its previous state but failed and stayed in the middle of the road between Anger and Agony, becoming a creature with features of both and decent Special Attack stats.

As I stood up, I heard the table shaking and the chair I was sitting on quickly falling on the floor; I felt my eyes twitching and my head hurt, but I ignored it and focus on the sounds around me. The laughing ones are...

...on my right! ...on your left side! ...right there! ...on the ceiling!

"I'M IN DESPAIR!"

Just a moment after screaming that, I realized that the clients were laughing at an anime scene on the widescreen television. However, after my performance, I manage to finally become what I was afraid of being from the start: the center of their attention.

Tick

I lowered my head and grabbed the chair, ignoring the infinite sounds hovering around me. I sat on it again, not only because I was finding it hard to stand, but also because I was too confused to run. I covered my face with my hands. Have I gone completely insane?

Listen...

What? Are you going to mock me by saying "good job!" or something like that? Save it, I don't need your offensive remarks to feel bad about myself. I'm only glad that I hadn't ordered coffee or anything when my burst of despair occurred, or it would have fallen on the floor and I'd be even more embarrassed than I am right now, and I'm not quite sure if that is possible.

Shut up. Now, pay attention to the people around you.

For some reason, I did. They were not only laughing.

How often have you seen bullies clapping their hands in ovation to the weak kid?

When I looked at them, I saw that the voice was right. The clients were on their feet, smiling and screaming and clapping their hands like there was no tomorrow. For some reason, they weren't laughing at me, but with me. Technically, since I wasn't laughing. The point is, I was not being mocked.

It felt warm.

"That was a nice performance, and your voice does resembles Teacher's," There was a small pause, and I could hear a rasp in her breath. "...however, it would have been much more effective if you had done it while wearing a hakama and glasses. A great performance, nonetheless."

I turned around to see where that voice was coming from. A pale, geeky girl with pitch black hair watched me with interest. It took me a little while until I realized who I was talking to.

"Y-you...!"

Tick

Chapter 1: Ryo Part 3 [C1R3]

Her silky long hair.

Her expressive eyebrows.

Her dark-grey eyes and that stupid yet cute cat-like grin of hers.

She seemed to know everyone in here and everyone seemed to be watching us. I'm not being paranoid now. Ever since we sat down and started staring at each other in silence, I felt the gaze of the whole cafe. Everyone here seemed to want to know about Ryo, and while being popular can be nice I was only worried that her fandom was composed only of people significantly older than her.

The maid that insists on calling herself Myu-chan coughed and brought an end to the empire of silence.

"S-so, are you guys going to order now myu~~?"

I heard a small dosage of despair in her words. Everyone in the cafe seemed to hold their breaths, just like the crowd waiting for the gunslinger's duel to start in a Wild West movie. I unintentionally moved my fingers in the air next to my chair, like I'm getting ready to draw my gun.

We stare at each other for what seems to be an eternity. Suddenly her face changed from unique cuteness to mad anger and before I could react, she rose up and hit the table with her hands.

"OBJECTION!" She pointed to something behind me. "I do realize that we're having a Grand Duel tense moment, but is that rolling ball of hay really necessary? We're still in a maid cafe and that doesn't even make any sense!"

I looked behind to see the ball of hay along with the rest of the customers, just to find that there was absolutely nothing there. I turned around just in time to see Ryo calmly sitting in her chair again, ordering two portions of 'the usual' from the maid like nothing had happened. She tricked me, and it worked out just as she planned.

As the maid scurried away and the mood in the cafe lightened up, I relaxed my shoulders and gave up on the whole tense scenario. I still tried to sound grumpy, but mostly for comic effect.

"You're late."

"But I came just in time for your anime impression show, right?" She blinks and smiles. "I'm sorry for taking so long. I was just reading an article on Hikkipedia for a novel I'm writing, and you know how those things work: you decide to read just one small article, then a related one and when you finally notice what you're doing several hours have passed since you started researching, the daylight is gone and the cat either needs food or to be buried."

I released a big sigh. She wasn't even going to lie about being in front of the computer when she was supposed to meet me and it's really hard to get mad at someone that's being genuinely honest because there are not many of those these days and we all have the duty of protecting endangered species. Take that, mysterious voice; not only is she a girl, she is also honest.

"Don't worry..."

Now that the whole scene was gone I got to properly look at her

Her white baggy t-shirt and khaki jeans failed to hide her developing body, but her long hair managed to attract the attention of those who looked at her (at least for a while). Her medium-sized eyeglasses looked big on her petite face and she seemed oddly familiar to me, despite the fact that I never saw a picture of her before or something like that.

Too familiar, actually. It's like I've seen her face my whole life, but I'm unaware of details such as where I could have seen her before or whose face she resembles. The fact that I've met thousands of people in the last years doesn't help at all. Technically, it should, since my travels around the world could count as a decent reason for having a "been there, done that" attitude. However, my memory is not that good; while I remember every single little thing about the situations I've been in, I often forget people.

...

Wait. Where is the mysterious voice now? I'm pretty sure that it was time for some mean comment or paranoid idea.

Now that I think about it, I haven't heard that voice for a little while now...

...whatever. I need to focus on the important things. I'm here, Ryo is here. We're in a cafe and the awful music is gone, so I'm probably going to have a fine day. The first regular day in my brand new regular life. That's all that matters, right?

Right?

I shook my head to get rid of the thoughts about the voice. Fading back to Earth, I noticed that Ryo was typing on her cell phone furiously. She probably started while I was daydreaming.

The only thing that stopped the Empire of Silence from striking back is the sound of her little fingers pressing buttons at an unreasonably fast tempo, and when I say fast I mean it: she was using both thumbs to type alternately, using a technique similar to a drummer's blast beat masterfully. Such precise movements...

If she was doing it with her feet, I bet she'd be a great jazz musician. Maybe the world's most amazing cyclist, or a dance machine master, or just a weirdo stomping her own cell phone. It's only a matter of perspective. Or a matter of what you have your feet on.

She stopped typing and looked at me with a curious face.

"It's getting cold."

I was going to argue and say that the day is actually pretty hot, and the sunlight is usually stronger by lunch time. There's ultraviolet radiation in sunlight and it can give you some problems. So, if you're on a beach, don't sunbathe during mid-day or you'll get sun burned. Stay in the shade!

Judging by Ryo's skin, I came to the conclusion that she took this "avoid the sun" policy seriously. Far too seriously. She looks a little bit like a ghost. Not that this is a bad thing, you know. I've met some really nice ghosts and I learned to respect people that float and haunt places for a living. Hah, a ghost doing something for a living. That was a good one.

Unintentionally I blinked and brought myself back to reality.

"W-what?"

"Your coffee, it's getting cold."

She pointed to the table and I noticed that there was, indeed, a mug of coffee there. Myu had probably left it here while I daydreamed and... oh my.

Ryo came to meet me, and I kept daydreaming over and over again. I was so lost in thought that I didn't even see the waitress bring us the coffee. I probably ignored Ryo as well.

I could feel the gaze of everyone in the cafe. There was a big chance no one was looking directly at me at that time, but I had a bad feeling. No, my danger sense told me it wasn't just my paranoia talking. They were waiting for me to do something. Ryo seems to know every one of those guys, and from what I saw I can see she is the little sister they never had. And I'm the jerk that ignored her after asking her out.

"Have you finished reading it?" Without any ideas left, I tried to redeem myself by making conversation.

She touched her lips with the tip of her index finger and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"The article."

"Which one?"

"The Hikipedia one."

She looked away, not paying much attention to me.

"I'm reading it right now."

Which means she is so bored that she'd rather be doing what she always does instead of being here with me. I'm used to talking to girls and I know that when they stop paying attention to you, you'd better get it back quickly and...

...the voice should have pointed out that if I'm such an expert with girls, I could have avoided this situation merely by paying attention to her. And if I could hear it right now, it would tell me that I am doing the exact opposite by thinking about it and...

Control yourself! It doesn't matter if you're nervous or not. Ryo probably waited for this day as much as you did. Now you'd better find a way to make this day amazing, or I won't forgive you (and by that, I mean you won't forgive yourself)!

I used my fingers to type in my cell phone as fast as I could, and instead of betraying me, they joined me in this special attack; our synchronization rate was now absurd and I could feel a great energy emanating from my body and flowing through me. The opening song I could listen to in my heart told me that it was a decisive moment, and it wasn't nearly as bad as the one that was playing when I got here.

I won't let you down, Ryo! Behold my new power!

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With my ASCII art piece finished, I pressed the SEND button; Three seconds later her cell phone beeped, and she immediately looked at me. I tried to smile at her, but she gave me a cold stare that didn't fit her and then her gaze went back to her mobile phone.

Now I could only wait for her reply.

She sighed and started typing again. Not as fast as before, and certainly not as furious. Ryo seemed pretty normal to me right then; she was just a teenager messaging someone (and not a girl with a mob-like fan base and machine gun fingers).

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Her ASCII art is much better than mine, but that's not the point. If you filter the harsh part of message, you'll notice that the 'again' implies that I would have another chance to ruin everything again and therefore I also have the chance to make things right. There's also a cute 'drawing' of a kitten, and you can't send something like that to someone you're genuinely angry at.

Everything was alright.

When I looked at Ryo, she was giving me another of her cat-like smiles, and only then did I notice that I was actually enjoying myself. Despite the little things, I realized that I liked this place and I could see myself actually living here as a normal person. I could even get used to the atmosphere of this cafe and even its customers. Not to that song, I'm afraid, but I suppose nothing is perfect.

We kept on chatting so happily it was like nothing bad had occurred to us in our entire lives.

Living here with Ryo could be really nice. Just being here with her right now is amazing, and from the things she told me on the net, nothing supernatural or mysterious ever happened in this town. I might finally be able to have peaceful high-school days along with a good friend like I always wanted to. It feels like I died and went to heaven, except I feel alive and I'm pretty sure heaven would have better music...

The thought of leading a regular life got me in a good mood that accompanied me through the rest of that day.

...

From that point on, the day was pretty much perfect. Oh, contradictions. Right, I just said nothing is perfect. Yet, I also claimed the day I spent with Ryo was perfect. Ergo, this day would be the same as nothing, logically speaking. But not to me.

Anyway.

We laughed a lot and talked about random things like we did every day online. Somehow, it was much better than our previous conversations.

Ryo took me to some stores and parks and despite the fact that I had already visited most of them, I decided to not say it out loud; she was so happy to show me her town that I couldn't bring myself to spoil her fun.

Then Time passed, against our will.

The twilight sky looked absolutely beautiful from the spot we were sitting, and I must admit that I had planned that much based on my earlier visit to the park. There seemed to be no one else but us in the park or in the infinite Universe, and a different kind of silence kept waving in the air. We were both enjoying a calm and motionless moment after a full day that resembled anything but a storm, but I found myself also wishing that very moment would last forever.

The sudden spring rain that fell upon us, on the other hand, seemed to want the opposite.

It was a big surprise, because the day had been bright and sunny till that point. When I was about to start running away from the bench and look for shelter under the trees, Ryo pinched the sleeve of my shirt to attract my interest. My eyes met an object I knew she was carrying the whole time, but hadn't paid any special attention to: a white lace parasol.

"Shall we?" She instantly hid me under it and grabbed my arm tightly.

So, here comes a philosophical question for you: at what point does a parasol becomes an umbrella?

Her parasol was way too small for two people, so we were about as wet as if we didn't have anything to cover us at all. Not that it meant much to us at the time. We ran under the rain, laughing and singing and completely ignoring the prospect of catching a cold before my first day of school. I don't regret it at all, because it felt right.

We went in the direction of her home, because it was both closer to the park and because she told me that I could borrow the parasol after I dropped her home. I knew that it was practically useless, but I walked (technically "ran") her home anyway.

Then we arrived at her building and I was truly glad she didn't invite me in because it's always weird when you meet someone's parents, weirder if both of you just got your clothes completely drenched while running in the rain despite the fact that this someone had a parasol. She let go of my arm and looked at the lobby.

That was it.

In the end, I wasn't sad. The perfect day was over indeed, but we would still have tomorrow, and the day after, and so on. What started as a perfect day could easily become a perfect week, a perfect month, a perfect year and I know I am being utterly pretentious but I can even wish for it to become a perfect life. My perfect life.

Despite it being unrealistic, it was still what I truly hoped for.

When I was about to say "goodbye" and go back to my place the expression in her face stopped me.

"Look!" Ryo pointed to something behind me, and I instinctively turned around to see it in a blink. That action brought instant results, and none of them was regret. "It's so... beautiful..."

"Whoa..."

During the rain, a rainbow had formed in the skies above us. The rain was still really strong, but we ignored it for a while and kept watching the palette of pigments painting the sky. The sunset made its colors surreal, but we both knew that those were the true colors of the rainbow.

And then I realized that this day, so rich in events and full of interesting moments was coming to its end. I had no regrets, but I already missed it. There might not exist a day like this in my life again, or even on Earth. Even if the years pass me by and I die only to reborn again in this world, I will never forget the vivid colors of the rainbow I saw with Shiina Ryo.

I looked at her, and she was smiling like a child with a new toy.

"We need to do this again."

"What, hang out?" I laughed honestly. "I am going to live here now, you know. I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to do that."

"No, I mean we must watch the rainbow together again." Her voice had a serious tone now, and for some reason it made me happy. "Promise me we will..."

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 1 [C2R1]

"...Koukishin Shinzou." I finish writing my name on the blackboard. "You can call me Shin-tsu, if you want to."

I guess this is quite easy to explain. I got nicknamed Shin-tsu at one of the schools I've attended because the *kanji* at the end of Koukishin is the same as the one at the beginning of Shinzou. The "tsu" is the result of the Japanese pronunciation of two, I guess. I'm not so sure now. And it's not like I came up with that nickname myself.

When I turn around to face the class, I meet the gaze of those who will, from this point on, be my classmates. They all seem friendly, and happy to see a new student from abroad. Strangely, I can't help noticing they are all girls. Every single one of them. Now that I think about it, I haven't seen a male student since I got here. It sounds weird, but I don't think I want to ask any questions that could lead to a harem development right now...

In the midst of the curious looks, I see Ryo waving at me from her chair at the back of the class. She looked particularly beautiful in her school uniform. . She radiated a wave of happiness that seemed to pass through the whole class and reach me, and I could feel an extension of her smile forming on my lips.

The teacher coughed and brought me back to reality.

"You can sit in that empty chair at the back, the closest to Kouma-san." She pointed to the back of the class where I could see the chair she assigned me. I would sit between Kouma Yon and another empty chair. Looking back at my teacher, I noticed that when her gaze fell on the second empty chair she seemed suspiciously displeased. This was only confirmed by a whisper, so low I was most likely the only one that could hear it. "Interesting."

A girl with braids raised her hand quickly.

"But that's Minato's place, Reikoku-sensei!"

The teacher just shook her head in denial, but her brown hair didn't move a single millimeter. Almost as if the hairspray had made it as solid as a rock. She probably spent hours working on that bun, and it was certainly a practical hairstyle. It made her look serious and could defend her from a meteor falling from the sky.

"I'm afraid not." She pressed her temple. "Not anymore. I was informed this morning that Minato's family just moved, due to her father's new job in a big company."

It sounded like everyone in class had decided to talk (or rather, scream like caged monkeys at the sight of a banana mountain) at the same time. They all seemed so surprised with the sudden departure of their colleague that I felt like I had become old news already. The ear-shattering noise went on for a while, but it was so solid I felt like it would go on forever.

The teacher raised her open hand and started to close it slowly, finger by finger. A few students noticed the quiet countdown and started warning the others as quickly as they could. They seemed to be truly afraid of what happened at the end of the countdown. Before she reached the number four, the class was silent once again.

Ms. Reikoku lowered her hand and gazed at me. At that moment I realized that she had already told me where I should seat and I was in the way of starting class. I hurried to the empty chair, without knowing exactly what I was afraid of. Now that I think about it, it's much scarier when you don't know what the monster looks like.

The desk I ended up with was in the last row, located by the window. I sat by Kouma's side, and smiled shyly at her.

"Hello..." I try to think of a proper honorific to use, but I haven't been in Japan for a while and this is harder than it seems. Sometimes it's hard to remember that I'm actually Japanese; I've spent most of my life living abroad. In the end, I decide to go with a neutral honorific. "...Kouma-san, right?"

She simply looked at me without a trace of expression on her face and made the V sign with her fingers. After that, her attention went back to the person sitting on her other side: Ryo. She just kept talking to Ryo like I wasn't even there, and then she kept blocking my way when I tried to talk to Ryo. It looks like she's jealous or something. This Kouma girl is literally between me and Ryo.

Ryo managed to look at me and give me one of her cat-like grins when the girl with the razor cut fringe was distracted. It was just a simple gesture and nothing more than one of the oldest forms of communication known by mankind, but it meant more than words to me.

After that small yet significant commotion about the girl who transferred, the day was calm. It took me a while to get used to the kanji used in class, but Ryo helped me with that and said that it was only expected since I'd been living outside of Japan for a while. When the rest of the class heard Ryo say that, they started to ask me if I needed any help and stuff. I felt a little bit like a foreigner in my own country (which is partially the truth, anyway), but they were all very helpful. So in the end, it was a great start for a first day and everyone in class was pretty much nice to me...

...and everything felt alright until lunchtime.

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 2 [C2R2]

When the bell rang, the three of us stood up and decided to go to the cafeteria. I forgot to make a lunchbox and I was starving, so I needed to buy something to eat. Ryo saved the day by offering to show me the cafeteria. Kouma had brought her lunch from home, but she insisted on coming with us (and I'm betting that she doesn't want me to be alone with Ryo) instead of going directly to the rooftop, where they told me they usually eat. We were just about to leave class when...

"Koukishin-kun, come here for a minute."

...our teacher decided to talk to me.

I looked around to tell the girls to wait for me, but they had already vanished.

"Yes..." I said, and then remembered that I was in Japan and honorifics were the thin line between being polite or not... which was probably the reason my teacher was staring at me with that evil look in her eyes. "...sensei?"

Ms. Reikoku proceeded, apparently satisfied.

"Because of your sudden transfer, you are the only student in this class I haven't had the chance to home visit yet. Still, I need to finish writing down the report on all students currently attending my class for the meeting tomorrow morning." She paused for a second, and I noticed that she looked a little bit angry. Probably because my transfer ruined her organization scheme. She seemed to be someone that liked everything in perfect order and freaked out when they weren't. "Without further ado, I'll be at your front door tonight by eight post meridian, also known as twenty o'clock. Any questions?"

I tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to me.

"...no, sensei."

"Good." She waved her hand and her gaze went back to the notebooks on her desk. "Dismissed."

I bowed and walked out of the room. Ryo and Kouma were waiting for me in the hall, but after seeing my face they must have decided that it wasn't a good moment to ask about my conversation with our teacher.

...

We went downstairs and then moved to another building, where the cafeteria was located.

...

I ordered Gyudon by pointing.

We came back to the first building and went upstairs to the same floor where our class was located.

After walking through the hall we reached another stairway, which led to the rooftop.

We sat on the rooftop and started eating silently.

I put my chopsticks down and breathed deeply.

[illegible]

As I screamed after being completely silent for several minutes, the birds on the rooftop flew away and the world seemed to stop moving. It was almost a cinematographic scene, but I didn't feel like I was going to get a golden statuette for demonstrating my despair in public.

Since I used all the air in my lungs, it took me a while to regulate my breathing. Kouma and Ryo just looked at me with curiosity in their eyes, but they did not seem shocked.

"...I guess I'm ready to talk now."

I sat down, calmer than I was a few seconds ago but still full of tension.

"Go on, it will be good for you. Talk to us." Ryo said, but quickly corrected herself after looking at Kouma, whose attention seemed to be completely drawn to her udon. "Talk to me."

"Reikoku-sensei will pay me a home visit tonight, but I haven't unpacked yet and there is so much to do that I don't think I could do it even if I skipped classes." I sighed, hopelessly. "Which is probably what I'm going to do."

"You shouldn't skip classes, Shin-tsu!" Ryo seemed genuinely angry. "It's your first day at school!"

"Why all the drama?" Kouma said, suddenly joining the conversation. "Can't you just call home and ask your parents for help?"

"No, he can't because..." Ryo stopped herself.

"It's okay, Ryo." This little detail was going to show up sooner or later, so I'd better just say it and end the subject. "I can't ask my parents for help because I'm living on my own now."

There, I said it. Now what comes next is a long, awkward silence and then a subject change...

"We'll help you."

...not. Ryo surprised me by subverting the common flow of the conversation.

"...what?"

"We will help you unpack and tidy up." Ryo seems pretty excited about this, but I can't think of a reason why. "If it's the three of us, we'll probably make it and..."

"Wait a second, Ryo-chan." Kouma interrupted. "I never said I was going to help, so don't include me in this cleaning group out of your own will."

"Oh, come on Yon-chan..."

I make a hand sign to Ryo, telling her to stop talking. I think I have a plan.

"I guess it can't be helped if Kouma-san doesn't want to come." I make a calculated pause in my speech. "Don't worry, Ryo; even if it's just the two of us, all by ourselves the whole day through, in a big flat without adults to supervise us and a romantic and astonishing view of the city, we might be able to finish tidying up." I smile maliciously at Ryo. "Unless we lose track of time while engaging in... other activities."

For a split second, I thought my plan had failed miserably, but Kouma raised her hand without looking at me.

"... I'm coming."

After saying that, she resumed eating her udon silently. I kind of felt bad for having to tease Kouma like this.

No, not really. And it's not like I did it just for fun (not entirely, anyway); there's a lot to do and I certainly need all the help I can get. So, my ends justify my means (especially when it's fun).

We kept quiet for the rest of the meal, mostly because I knew that if I looked at Ryo's face, we would start laughing and ruin everything. We suppressed the laughs that wanted to be set free, ate and went back to class.

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 3 [C2R3]

It's funny to think that I was incredibly nervous only a few seconds ago, because after I heard the doorbell ring, I felt a wave of relief passing through me. It was sudden and apparently at random, but I felt peace, like it was the calm after the storm.

"Just a second!"

I ran through my flat to answer the door, taking care to avoid the piles of boxes I hadn't unpacked yet. Obviously I had started unpacking before the girls came because, well, I didn't want to look like a lazy guy.

As soon as I realized that the door key was not in my pocket, I start searching for it in my house (which, thanks to the boxes, was a tough task). In the end, my efforts were wasted: the key had been in the door the whole time. When I saw that, I died a little bit inside.

I opened the door and saw two faces that were quickly becoming familiar. Kouma and Ryo came two minutes earlier than planned, which is good; we have a full day ahead of us and if they were late I am not sure we would be able to make it. I do have a lot of boxes, and even if I moved the boxes to the first and second floors, the ground floor would look rather empty (especially because the shelves and cabinets are already here). So, the teacher would come and see I live in a place with closets and bookshelves and even an antique mahogany cupboard of which I'm very proud of (but would never admit it in front of people) with absolutely nothing on them. Which would be extremely embarrassing and...

...I did it again, didn't I?

"Sorry for making you guys wait." I shake my head and wave the random thoughts away. "I had a hard time finding the key. Please come in."

"Sorry for intruding." Ryo steps in with the grace of, uh, something very gracious. You can't possibly expect me to think about clever or poetic comparisons all the time. I'm not that smart.

Kouma entered just after her, but she didn't say a thing until she noticed that she was not minding her manners...

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry for intruding because technically you invited me and I'm the one doing a favor." She said, looking directly at me. "And I only came because I didn't want Ryo to be here alone with you. If I'm sorry for anyone, it is for myself."

...and instead of doing so, she only made the situation worse by issuing a declaration of war under my roof without a trace of shame on her face. That's Kouma Yon for you.

"This place is huge!" Ryo wasn't paying attention to her friend, which is good. I guess. "You've got to be kidding me; you're living by yourself in a flat with three floors? It even has a spiral staircase. A spiral

staircase! I've always dreamed of a spiral staircase!" She kept running from one point to another like a little kid in a theme park. She went all the way up the stairs and screamed, her voice echoing in the second floor's empty space and finding its way to the ground level. "Look at this view! You said it was romantic, but this is simply the epitome of awesome!"

I was thinking about telling her that this place wasn't that great compared to the mansion we had at England or the *château* at Vallée de la Loire, but I stopped myself before I ended up sounding snobby. Let's just keep it a secret between you and me, okay?

It's interesting to compare Ryo's cheerfulness and Kouma's lack thereof. I wonder how those two ended up being friends. Well, people do say that opposites attract, though I'm just not quite sure if magnetic fields are the same as relationships of any kind.

Not that I'm an expert in magnetic fields. Or relationships. Just saying.

As I closed the door, Kouma started stepping through the ground level. Her falcon eyes made up for the lack of expression on her face. After a minute of silence, she decided to enlighten us with one of her amusing comments.

"A huge mess, really." No kidding, Sherlock. "Did you really need to bring so much stuff with you?"

"Yes, I did. I wouldn't stay away from my CD collection, my board games or my kitchen utensils." Wait, that didn't come out right. Worse than that, Ryo came along just in time to hear me talking about my girly collection. Think, boy, think! "Did I say 'kitchen utensils'? I meant my secret manly stuff. Because I'm a manly guy who likes manly stuff. I'm really manly. Like a pirate. Harr."

"...right." Kouma just looked at me with disbelief in her eyes. "So, you were here since Saturday night, right?" I nodded. "Why didn't you start unpacking Sunday?"

"I can answer that one, matey!" Ryo raised her hand, clearly getting into the pirate character. "Me fellow Shin-tsu couldn't swab the decks of his ship at Sunday 'cuz we went down to the port for some grub and ended up singin' ol' chanteys till nite."

It took me a while to understand that she was telling Kouma about our Sunday meeting. At first I thought my Japanese skills had failed me, but I guess I talk better than I read (except when it comes to understand girls impersonating pirates, perhaps).

Kouma seemed to be having a hard time making sense of Ryo's speech, so I translated it for her...

"What our corsair Ryo was saying is that we met for the first time in real life on Sunday and after going out to eat, we spent the day together. By the time I came home, it was getting late and I was too tired to unpack, so I just slept."

...which was not such a smart move, now that I thought about it.

I felt a dark aura emanating from Kouma's body and I feared for my life. I was certain I would be killed at that moment. Curiosity killed the cat, huh? Then why am I the one who is going down? It's all Kouma's fault! She is the one who asked too many questions!

...I wonder if the cat died because he was so curious about a box that he entered it to see how it was from the inside. Probably. Then, at that very moment a theoretical physicist walked in and closed the box, making an internal mechanism release poison inside the box. Now that I think about it, I can't tell if the cat is dead or not because the box was closed when he entered it. And technically (since there were no holes to watch the cat), the cat would run out of air pretty quickly, with or without the poison.

I reach the conclusion that I don't like physicists very much, and neither do cats. I'm not sure if you noticed, but I'm trying to think of something else while Kouma kills me in the most dreadful way she can imagine (unfortunately for me, she does look like someone with an excellent imagination). Which she is going to start doing any minute now... any minute now...

"We're wasting time here." Kouma exhales lightly. "Let's stop fooling around. We need to get this done."

Despite her obvious anger, Kouma managed to keep her self-control and act with much more maturity than I expected. Which is good for me, since her self-control in these situations is probably the thing that stopped her from smiting me with her bare hands. However, I am kind of disappointed now. It's not like I'm a person with suicidal tendencies or anything, but her reaction didn't quite meet my expectancies. Don't judge me, you were expecting a violent reaction yourself.

I raise my hands in defeat.

"Okay, we've played a little bit, let's get down to business."

Ryo suddenly saluted.

"Sir, permission to go to the bathroom, sir!"

Really, it's like she is a little kid. Deciding to go to the bathroom just when we are about to start working...

I guess it could be considered cute if we didn't have such a tight schedule.

Twice as cute if it didn't have a toilet involved.

"...permission granted, it's the second door over there." She saluted again and walked away. "And that's not a pirate, it's a soldier!"

Once the bathroom door closed, I was alone with Kouma. You can imagine what happened.

Right, nothing did. Kouma didn't say a word since Ryo left the room, and it's quite disturbing. I mean, it's obvious that she is good friends with Ryo and since I intend to spend a great deal of time with Ryo, I'll end up spending a considerable amount of this time (probably most of it) with Kouma too. However, the

girl didn't like me from the start and I haven't done much to change this situation (actually, I met her today and I have already teased her twice).

Girls tell everything to each other and when they're close friends they can talk about any subject, right? Plus, friends can influence others with their opinions. If someday Ryo got mad at me, she would probably talk about it with Kouma. Who would probably bad mouth me and make my situation even worse. Basically, my friendship with Ryo might depend someday on this girl's opinion of me. And I started with the left foot. Way to go, champ.

Well, there might still be hope: I could be incredibly nice to her from now on and make her change her mind! And this is the perfect occasion to put my plan into practice. I'm alone with Kouma, so no external interferences will affect the course of our conversation. I just need to pick a topic.

Which would be an easy task if I only knew her interests. Besides Ryo, I mean. It's kind of weird, really. The spark that glows in her eyes every time she sees Ryo makes me think of that nurse in Misery. Creepy, but she is still Ryo's best friend and I need to impress her.

Oh, I know! I could talk about her clothes! Girls love fashion, right? Also, everyone loves a compliment, so if I manage to say good things about her dressing style I might be able to score a point or two and start a friendly relationship out of this.

Alright, I'll do my best!

Gooo~od morning, Miami! Welcome to Fashion Week! On the catwalk, Kouma Yon! She is sixteen, 5'3, and a full B-cup (believe me; I have a good eye for that kind of thing)! Kouma is wearing dark skinny jeans, a brown cashmere V-neck sweater and the most fabulous silk scarf I have ever seen! Some will say it might not be the best choice of clothing to use when you're going to unpack boxes, but when this girl decides to get down to work she will most certainly do it with style!

...I could just go with the simple, straight (pun intended) way.

"You're looking really good dressed like that, Kouma-san. Err... It's a shame that our school's uniform rules won't allow you to show your true beauty."

She looks deep into my eyes.

"Please don't hit on me. You're weird and I don't have the slightest interest in 3D boys."

...I must confess that I wasn't expecting this.

"What the...? A female 2D lover? That's not even possible! There are no giggle.com results for that!" I keep struggling with the idea of a pretty girl with a great sense of fashion who is only interested in anime characters; it certainly doesn't sound right. "And I wasn't hitting on you; I was just trying to be nice! Why do you need to be like that? Have I done something wrong?" And I add, in a much lower voice. "Is teasing the only way I can get to you?"

She stayed still for what seemed to be centuries and then started muttering something unintelligible.

"What did you say?"

"...it's not personal. Really," she finally said. "Please sit down, Koukishin-kun. We need to talk."

"Okay." Her voice was a little different. We sat on the couch next to the stairs, which was probably a strategic move on Kouma's part since from that point she could observe the bathroom door. That's why I assumed that our little talk was going to be about Ryo. "And like I said earlier, you can call me Shin-tsu. No need for family names or honorifics."

"Understood, Shin-tsu." I was done with the teasing, but it still felt good to see Kouma having a hard time talking to me without being able to sound indifferent or impersonal. It obviously wasn't easy for her. "We must talk as quickly as possible, since we don't know how much time we've got."

"Right."

She sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry if I made you think I had something against you. It wasn't intentional; I'm just not fond of people." Kouma stopped herself for two seconds of meditation. "This is probably the reason why Ryo-chan is my only friend in the world."

Despite her usual lack of facial expressions, that sentence showed me that the girl facing me had feelings. It kind of hurt because I was in the exact same boat as she was: currently Ryo was my only friend in the world as well. I wanted to interrupt her and say that I understood her and that we could be friends, but I know that you can't just decide something like that. It takes time and several moments together before you can form bonds with someone, and we only met today.

Besides, she looked like she still had much to say and not a good amount of time to do so.

"I think I have been acting childishly towards you, and I apologize." Actually, I'm the one who was having fun teasing her. Listening to her apologize to me when I was also at fault made me feel bad. "I was jealous. I still am, actually. You've managed to do something I have been trying to do for months just by saying you'd come here."

"What are you talking about? What have I done?"

"You made Ryo-chan smile."

No words could describe what I felt at that very moment. Especially because I had too many mixed feelings about her statement: happy because the fact that I was moving here cheered up Ryo, concerned about the fact that she was unhappy before my announcement and particularly intrigued because I don't remember anything about Ryo being sad and we talked every day, about everything. This last one is tricky, because either Kouma is lying or Ryo has been hiding something from me. I guess I'll have to give them both the benefit of the doubt for now and investigate a little more on both sides.

I've been in this kind of situation (conflicting experiences and arguments) before, so I'm used to dealing with it. I'm just glad that, despite requiring a little bit of investigation in order to find the truth, this

doesn't smell like Mystery at all. actually, it smells like teen drama, which is not much of a big deal. I'm still safe.

"So Ryo was sad before I said I was moving here, huh?"

"Yes, she had been like that for three months. She kept smiling and saying everything was okay, but I could tell that she was depressed just by looking at her." Based on what I saw today, I bet she does that a lot. "No one else seemed to notice it, but I have known her since kindergarten. If anyone can understand Ryo, it's me... or that's what I used to believe."

"What do you mean by that?"

Kouma took another breath like she was having a hard time focusing.

"I need your help."

She certainly doesn't look like the kind of person that says that a lot. Since she stopped talking then and I could see that the bathroom door was still closed, I try to guess what she wants.

"You want me to find out the reason for Ryo's sadness? How am I supposed to do that? Do you want me to pray for a miniature moon or something?"

Kouma waved her hand.

"No, that task is mine. I know Ryo better than you do, and my odds of making her talk are much bigger than yours because I'm a girl and I have been by her side for the past ten years. I just need you to keep her happy until she feels comfortable to talk about that problem of hers. Just keep doing your job and she will be fine. Also, stop quoting nearly-unknown songs from the early nineties."

"You shouldn't talk like that when you're asking someone for help."

"I never asked you for help. I said I needed it, and I know you will help me because you want the best for Ryo too. I am not begging you, I am giving you a list of your tasks."

I do want the best for Ryo, but I don't enjoy being used like a toy. This Kouma girl is completely impertinent. She took it to a whole new level. I mean, how dare she say that to me in my own house?

"What if I don't cooperate?"

She sighed.

"If you don't want to be near her, I can't force you. I'm not very supportive of you being friends with Ryo, but I'm not against it either. Really. The more the merrier. I can even ignore your disturbing lack of honorifics towards her, if I must." She looked around and then looked at me again, staring at my jugular. "On the other hand, if you make her life just a little more painful, I'll make you wish you were dead and after I have my fun I'll grant that wish. Do you understand me?"

I wanted to talk back, I really did. However, what I saw in her eyes wasn't the same thing as before. It wasn't anger or sadness: those were mere paper masks of a deeper feeling that kept growing inside her and was consuming her soul quickly. I have seen that before, and every time I see it, I just hope it's the last time. She would do anything to reach her goals (whatever they were), even if it meant killing or dying. In front of my eyes, the horrendous face of desperation.

This is starting to sound like Mystery, and I don't like it.

"Have you guys done any work yet?" Ryo said as she walked out of the bathroom wearing her hair in a ponytail. I noticed that she was also wearing make-up now, which she doesn't seem to do a lot (justifying the amount of time she spent inside that bathroom). She did a surprisingly good job for someone without any experience in the field. It's not like I'm an expert or anything. "We don't have much time."

"Are you done with pirate talking already?" I turn back to Kouma and extend my arm with a smile on my face. "Come on, sailor: we need to keep up with the plan!"

Kouma understood it at once and shook my hand with tremendous force. We stood up and I did my best to pretend there was no tension between me and her. Now I'm worried about both Ryo and Kouma, but I can't let that show.

I might need to save them both in the future. Right now, the only thing I need to tidy up is my house.

"Raise the anchor! This ship is sailing!"

Ryo saluted in the cheeriest way.

"Aye aye Capt'n!"

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 4 [C2R4]

"Guitars usually have six strings. Why does yours have only five?"

Kouma is much more talkative (and interesting) when Ryo is around. She raised a fairly decent question that probably bugged a lot of people that were too shy to ask, thinking they would be treated like idiots by the ones who knew the answer. The point is: when she is with Ryo, Kouma Yon is almost innocent.

I was about to explain it when Ryo started talking.

"While technically still a guitar, the electric bass guitar is quite different from the guitars most people are used to. The electric bass' standard tuning is an octave lower than the guitar standard tuning. Keep in mind that most bass guitars have 4 strings, which correspond to the four lower strings of the electric guitar." She took a breath, and her unexplainable burst of knowledge about an area I love was so intense that I think I lost mine. "Shin-tsu owns a five-string bass, which is a variation of the standard four-string bass tuned to the same pitches as the contrabass used mainly in symphony orchestra and jazz bands. So, his bass is not missing a string, it has an extra string that delivers an extended lower range. By the way, the standard tuning for a five-string bass is B-E-A-D-G, which corresponds to Si-Mi-La-Re-Sol, right? Ti-Mi-La-Re-So if using the variant note name list which uses Ut as Do."

I was so astonished that I could only nod. Words failed me. Big. Time.

Let's get some things straight.

First, I was expecting anyone but Ryo to talk like a robot. Kouma doing that would have been alright, and Reikoku-sensei looks just like the kind of person that says the content of encyclopedia articles during a casual conversation with a friend (and I don't even think she has one). Ryo doing it was a completely unforeseen development.

Second, I have never felt so attracted to her as I am right now. Everything was so beautifully precise and sudden that I almost cried like a baby watching scenes from a postmodern movie. ...bad comparison. Nevertheless. If she had finished that perfect explanation with a funky, mind-blowing bass solo I would be asking her to marry me right now. I swear I would.

Third... there is no third. I guess it's the second all over again. Yes, I would gladly marry her twice. Yes, I would even go as far as divorcing my geeky wife just to win her back and marry her again, making our lives seem like a romantic book end.

Strong passion burns my body and soul; I feel the urge to express my admiration, even if moderately, before it explodes and I definitely lose control over my body and eventually find myself either engaged or restrained by a police order.

"Oh wow, that was simply amazing! How did you know that, Ryo?"

She suddenly became aware of the fact that she had just given a complete lecture on music to Kouma and started to blush.

"Well, I... I have been a m-moderator at Hikkipedia for a while, s-so I have read a few articles in order to c-correct them..."

"Don't forget you have been programming synthesizers for a while, too." Kouma says, proudly for some reason. "You had to learn a thing or two about music."

"Hey, you didn't tell me you were a synth programmer!" I say, and pat her back lightly (my self-control is a little stronger than I expected).

Kouma... kind of... grins. I think she is grinning. I'm not sure; this is way too creepy to look at directly.

"So you didn't know about Ryo being a composer..." She said it like she had an advantage on me or something. "Could it be that you don't know a thing about Ryo's famous works?"

"Actually, no, I don't. Tell me about it."

I'm not going to play Kouma's little game, whatever it is. I have been talking to Ryo for only a year, so it's obvious I don't know so much as Kouma does. And I really don't, but instead of letting it get to me, I'll just use this opportunity to learn more about Ryo. Kouma might be a bad winner if she wants to, but I certainly won't act as a sore loser.

"Cut it out, Yon-chan. It's not a big deal." Ryo says and turn to face me, not blushing anymore. "It's just that when I started working on Visual Novel games I didn't have a team to work along, so besides writing I had to learn how to program and compose."

"Oh, right." Kouma's grin became a chuckle. Since our roles reversed, she teases me every chance she gets, and I don't even feel bad for teasing her anymore. This is probably the beginning of a weird friendship (if I can call it that). "You do know what a Visual Novel is, right?"

"Yes I do, thank you for asking." I might have spent most of my life living abroad, but I know a thing or two about Japanese pop culture. A Visual Novel is an interactive fiction game genre pretty similar to Choose Your Own Adventure books. Not much of a game, now that I think about it. Anyway, Visual Novels are basically stories for computer or console with anime-style graphics and multiple endings. Oh, interesting. I just noticed something. "What about the graphics, Ryo? If you write, program and compose, who draws the characters and the background images?"

"That would be me." Kouma says, and my sensors detect a good amount of arrogance and pride in her voice. "The artist in the A.R.K. game and manga developing team, 4koma!"

It was my time to get back at her and burst her bubble. Better than that, I would do it in the best way I could: by telling the truth.

"Never heard of it. By the way, how did you manage to pronounce that?"

The grin in her face faded, and the lack of expression I had quickly grown used to came back. I kind of missed it, to be honest.

"What about you?" I look to Ryo. "Do you have an uncommon pen name as well?"

She took a small notebook and a pen out of her pockets and started writing. After she finished, she handed it to me. The word written on it was SCENARIO, clearly another pun. See, Kouma Yon's nickname is pronounced yonkoma. I think it's a type of comic strips with four panels. Ryo's *nome de plume* is pretty much obvious: the Japanese pronunciation for that word is Shiinaryo (which is probably why she chose to write it instead of saying it).

Even after understanding the reason of their pen names, there was still something bothering me.

"Ryo... your handwriting... is surprisingly bad."

"You should have seen her draw." Kouma agreed with me. It might be sad, but we can't deny such an obvious truth. "A real abomination. My eyes were soiled. I even offered to help her after seeing a drawing she made at elementary school, and I didn't even know how to draw back then."

Ryo simply shook her head.

"Well, *sue me for not being a Mary Sue*."

Despite the aftereffect of her rather imprecise and disturbing sentence pronounced in heavily accented English, we kept on chatting and unpacking for a while.

...

An hour later, Ryo raised her hands.

"How about... we take... a break?" She said, panting like she had just run a marathon. Ryo laid down on the couch until her breathing stabilized. When she noticed the worried look on my face, she tried to make a joke. "I don't have much stamina... because I have spent all of my points on intelligence."

Kouma did not seem surprised. Since they have known each other for a long time and even work together, I'm guessing Kouma experienced this situation a few times before and grew used to it. She looks at me and shakes her head.

"Don't worry; it happens once in a while. Her body isn't really strong, so she doesn't even get to participate in P.E. classes. Give her a couple minutes to rest and she will be fine."

I didn't know that about Ryo. In fact, I am starting to realize that there are a lot of things about her that I don't know. Things that matter.

"I'm so sorry, Ryo..."

She extended her arm and touched my hand lightly with her fingertips.

"It's not your fault. I decided to come by myself, so I'm the one to blame. I just need to rest a little..."

Her declaration doesn't make me feel any better about this. Ryo doesn't look well at all and she is only like that because she came to help me. I can't help but feel responsible about it. I know it's not directly my fault, but I can't get this thing out of my chest. I can't.

Kouma suddenly started moving.

"I'm hungry. We should go out and get something to eat."

"Good idea, I'm starving too." Ryo says, looking a little livelier than she had a few moments before.

"Not you." Kouma said, with surprising motherly care. "You will stay here and rest. I don't want to see you passing out on the streets."

"I can cook, you know." I say, my pride a little hurt. "And I know I didn't have time to go grocery shopping properly, but it's not like I don't have any food at home."

"I didn't mean it like that, Shin-tsu." Kouma looks at me and starts curling a lock of her hair with her index finger and thumb. "It's just that I already have something in mind since I was coming here, something I saw on the way. I'm not going to tell you what it is, so don't ask. Besides, we don't have time for cooking. There is still much to do."

"Okay, okay." I admit defeat. "Then let me at least give you some money. Paying for the snacks is the least I can do..." An idea strikes me; I can at least be useful at something. "...I can also make us some tea! Do you have a favorite flavor?"

"White tea for me!" Ryo says louder than necessary from the couch.

"So *Oolong*, White and...?" Kouma just kept staring at me, so I continued. "Oh c'mon, just pick a flavor and..."

"So you're not coming?" She sounded a little angry, but she started talking in a lower voice as soon as she noticed that. "Do you really think I'm going to leave you here alone with Ryo?"

"We can't leave her alone, not like that. And I can't go buy the snacks you want so much because you want to keep it a secret, so you'd better chose either to trust me or tell me what you want me to buy."

There was a long time of silence between my line and her reply.

"Fine." She finally said and then sent me a glance, this one with a message within: "You'd better not try anything funny while I'm not around or I'll come after you with hellhounds and zero mercy; even if you run, I will hunt you through the mist of Nifelheim and when I find you I will obliterate your soul completely after torturing you for over two thousand years."

I handed her some money and she left, leaving me to ponder the fact that her eyes can be impressively full of expression when she wants them to be. And no, I wasn't surprised when she avoided the easy

solution and instead gave me a chance to prove I'm not as bad as she thinks. Not because I have done much to deserve it but simply because, despite her everyday mask, she is probably a very impulsive person at heart.

After the door closed, Ryo sighed.

"Yon-chan worries too much. I was not that bad, just tired." She does look better now, but it doesn't change the fact that she seemed pretty unhealthy a few moments ago. "Besides, if I don't make any physical effort, how is my body supposed to become stronger?"

"Your condition will only grow worse if you make too much effort. On the other hand, if you make none, your muscles will atrophy." I breathe, suddenly realizing that I am tired too. I walk into the kitchen and put the water to boil. "You need to take it easy and start with small things, so you can gain strength and stamina little by little. So no heavy weight lifting or such for now, okay?"

"Okay!" She smiles to me as I come back to the living room and my worries start to fade away. "By the way, don't you want to sit down?"

I had the impulse to do so, especially because I am kind of tired right now. Then I remembered Kouma's threats and decided not to push my luck on my second day in town. This kind of situation seems to instantly lead to a misunderstanding and domestic violence in manga, so I guess I'll be better off without being on the couch with Ryo.

"N-no, it's okay... I'll just stand up and watch the window for a while."

"It's your loss, anyway." Ryo looks around, still looking amazed. "This flat is really something, Shin-tsu. I knew that you travelled a lot, but I wasn't expecting your family to have this kind of money."

"Oh, it's not like that. Buying and selling buildings around the world is actually my parent's job. It's a family business, so we're not really rich or anything." She still looks a little bit confused, so I try to simplify it. I guess even smart people have problems understanding subjects not related to their interest areas. "Me living here is no different from a kid who gets free candy at his father's convenience store."

"Except I don't think there is such a thing as candy whose value surpass ten million yen." She shook her shoulders. "I'm a little jealous."

"Don't be, they are just trying to compensate for not being around." I am not sure if I'm ready to talk about this with someone, but I find myself unable to hold the words back. "Actually, it has always been like this. They don't make that much money because they technically still work for my grandfather and most of the houses belonged to him to start with, but they always worked really hard to pay for all the travels and constant moving. The rest of their money ended up as compensation gifts I didn't really want." I turn around to face the window. "I know I'm being childish and unfair, but I just wish they had spent a little more time with me inste-"

It was so sudden it took me some time to make sense of it. One moment I was having one of those dramatic inner monologues said out loud and then something struck me hard enough to make me lose

my breath. I felt an overwhelming heat wave pass through every bit of my body, filling me with something I can't find the word to describe right now.

Ryo was hugging me from behind. Her slender arms were around my waist and she was holding me tightly, as if I was going to fall if she didn't hold me strongly enough. Right then, I probably would.

"Don't worry." She rested her chin on my shoulder and whispered in my ear. "I'm here. Everything will be okay now."

Now that I think about it, Ryo knows only a little bit about my life so far. She probably knows more about my personal life than I know about hers, though. It might sound weird, but she knows about my problems with Mystery. Not everything, but she knows enough. I am not sure if she believes it, but I don't think I care about that.

The weirdest thing is that this situation is familiar to me. I know this is not possible. I only met Ryo in real life yesterday. However, I feel like we have done this a thousand times before in a distant past.

We stood like that for a while, until that beautiful moment was completely ruined by a cough. Not mine, not Ryo's. Go on, guess whose. Good job, Sherlock. Now if you don't mind, please find a way to get her into jail for what she is going to do to me. Better than that, come quickly enough to help me avoid being a murder victim. Please.

The tea kettle whistles higher and higher, as if measuring the rising anger in Kouma's once again expressive eyes. She marches through my living room, which unfortunately does look like a battlefield right now. Except the boxes won't serve as proper trenches against the fury of Kouma Yon, the Merciless Fashionista. Help!

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 5 [C2R5]

Never mind, Kouma didn't kill me. Not yet, at least. She said she would when Ryo wasn't around, but not right now. I hope she forgets it. No, that's being too optimistic; Yon-chan doesn't seem to be the kind of person who forgives or forgets anything. I'm most likely doomed.

The three of us are sitting at the kitchen bar. Once the misunderstanding was explained (with much effort, I must add), Kouma revealed the contents of the paper bag she had been carrying around. Fortunately for me, it wasn't a machete or a halberd. I guess it would be a hard task to hide a machete or a halberd inside a common paper bag. Not impossible for someone with a good imagination, but quite hard for a common person. Not that I think that there's anything common with Kouma Yon.

Still.

The thing she took out of the paper bag was something fish-shaped and apparently baked. Despite its odd look, I could smell something easily recognizable to me: red bean paste. My olfactory memory is much better than my visual memory, and even if it has been a long time since I last visited Japan, the same doesn't apply to the rest of Asia. I'm not sure if it is because of the smell, but this fish-cake thing seems really familiar to me.

I pick one of them.

"What is the name of this thing?" My Japanese speaking skills are not that bad, but some words still fail me every now and then. "I can't remember."

"So you really have spent a while outside Japan, huh?" Kouma says without much interest.

Ryo looks at me, serene as the sky.

"This is a *Taiyaki*. It's a cake and it's delicious. Go on, try it."

I take a big bite.

"Oh, I was right about the filling!" It seems my nose didn't fool me. "This surely is *chi xiao dou*."

"*Chi* what?" The serenity in Ryo's face fades to curiosity.

"*Chi xiao dou*. It's the Chinese name for the annual plant *azuki* bean, also known as *Vigna angularis* or *Phaseolus angularis*. Widely grown throughout East Asia and the Himalayas. Is a member of the *Fabaceae* family and has *Faboideae* as subfamily." She suddenly became aware of the fact that she was the center of attention. "What are you staring at? It's not like you have the right to get all the good lines. Besides, my grandmother is Chinese."

Surreal.

That is the only word I can use to describe this kind of situation. Sometimes everyone is so odd and the scenario feels so dreamlike it's hard to believe that this is not fiction. And it could be; this could all be a dream, even someone else's dream. I could probably take some time to consider the theory known as Anti-Realism, but right now I happen to have something else in my mind.

And it must have shown on my face, because Ryo started to stare at me.

"What is wrong, Shin-tsu? You seem a little disturbed."

"It's just that, well... Kouma-san has known you for a long time. That classifies her as a 'childhood friend', right?"

"Yes, it does," said Ryo, curiously.

"And she loves *Taiyaki*."

"Yes, I do," said Kouma, awkwardly.

"And she is helping me unpack."

Kouma raised a fist.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

I can only conclude this with a question.

"Did you really pay for that *Taiyaki* or did you just run with it?"

Ryo suddenly started laughing so hard I thought she was having a heart attack. No, maybe a soap opera dramatic heart attack. Real life heart attacks are not like that at all. Anyway, I wasn't the only one surprised by her reaction: Kouma also seemed completely dazed, which is indeed something rare. Ryo kept laughing for a while and it looked like she would never stop, but eventually she got tired and her laughter started to die down.

"Ha-ha, oh wow! I laughed so hard I actually cried..." She started to wipe away the tears. "My, I wasn't expecting a game reference from you..."

I was going to interrupt her and say I wasn't sure of what she meant, but I guess it would end up being at least another half an hour wasted, and right now we can't afford it.

So after eating and drinking tea, we resumed working.

Chapter 2: Reikoku Part 6 [C2R6]

20:17.

She is late, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing. I mean, I didn't wanted her to come in the first place, but after spending a whole afternoon tidying my flat up, I would be rather disappointed if she didn't show up.

Kouma and Ryo left at 17:24 p.m. because they needed to work on a project that was already behind schedule. Apparently they were going to their studio at Kouma's place. I thanked them for their help and they left in quite a hurry, making me feel a little bad for making them come when they already had other plans. After that I kept unpacking and organizing. I even went down to the market and bought the ingredients to make curry rice. I have eaten it a few times, but never tried cooking it. Now it's time to test my chef skills.

No, I'm not going to start cooking now. I have already started. Actually, I'm just letting it simmer right now. It might take 10 minutes, so I guess I can spend some time explaining the recipe. Are you ready to rock (or rather, cook)?

First, the ingredients. Let's start with the meat: I don't like to use a single kind of meat in every meal, so for this recipe you will need a quarter of a pound of pork and a quarter of a pound of beef. One onion, two big potatoes, three carrots, three and a half cups of water, a quarter of a pound of curry roux and four or five cups of steamed rice. You will need some vegetable oil, too.

Once you got the ingredients, start by cooking the steam rice while you slice the onions and cut the carrots and potatoes into small pieces. Get a deep pan and heat the oil. Sauté the meat in it (some might say it's not a good idea to put both the beef and the pork together, but they would end up mixed sooner or later). Add the vegetables and sauté them together with the meat. After that, pour water in the pan and bring to a boil. Turn down the heat to low and simmer the ingredients for 30 minutes. Don't forget to skim off any impurities that rise to the surface. Add curry roux and simmer for 10 minutes. Serve the curry over steamed rice.

The recipe is easy and it seems like the result is going to be really good. Thank you, Internet!

You're welcome.

Oh, you're back.

Don't mind me, I just came because I wanted some curry.

Really? So today you didn't come to bring me down and fill my head with paranoia. You just want some curry.

Yeah, it smells divine.

You, a mysterious voice inside my head, wants to eat my curry.

Pretty much; that recipe serves four portions, so you will still have more than enough for you and your teacher. Is there a problem with me wanting to eat some curry?

No, not at all. Everything is just fine. Except the obvious, of course. You don't have a mouth, a nose, a stomach or even a physical body for that matter. Just that small issue. Other than that, no problems.

You're right...

The voice went silent for about ten seconds.

...well, then I won't be getting any curry. I guess it could be worse, though.

How so?

I could be you and have to find a way to pretend my legal guardians weren't around right now but would soon come soon, the whole night. And if I were you, I wouldn't even have legal guardians in the country.

Just wait a second, I...

Yet I would have to pretend and lie until she either found out the truth and made the situation weirder by telling the school or went home for tonight and came back in a near future, eventually learning the truth and resulting in the same ending for you. So yeah, not having a body is not the end of the world. I'm really glad to be myself instead of being you.

...t-t-thank you for your kindness and cheerful words. I feel so much better now.

Once again, you're welcome. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to leave you alone with the teacher. She will arrive in three... two... one...

The doorbell rang.

I know my own capabilities very well and I wouldn't be able to hear someone walking to my front door from the kitchen, especially considering the flat's acoustics. It would be an impossible task for any human being, and it confirms a hypothesis I started working on since that little situation at the Le Ciel Bleu café: the voice in the back of my head is not mine at all.

Still astonished, I turned off the oven and went to answer the door.

"Good evening, Koukishin-kun."

The figure of the woman standing in front of me certainly didn't look like the one I met in the classroom. While in school the teacher was simply the definition of neat, the one I see here is someone who could easily pass for a NEET. Forget the serious teacher outfit, Reikoku-sensei is fine with a hand knit sweater and white wool pants. She had let her hair down and, surprisingly, it was longer than I expected it to be

based on the size of her bun. Her face was now calm and almost friendly and she was carrying a plastic market bag full of instant ramen. I barely recognized her.

"...sensei?"

"I'm sorry for being so late. There was a big line at the convenience store because a woman insisted that she wanted her change back. Now that I think about it, I would have done the same. Maybe not, if I was under the same circumstances. Anyway, aren't you going to let me in?"

I was a little bit too shocked. I mean, even her speaking style has changed.

"Oh, sure." I shake my head. "Yes. Please come in."

"Well, well..." She walks in and scans the whole place with her eyes. "This is a lot less messy than I thought it would be. I bet you spent the whole day trying to tidy the place."

"Yeah, I did."

"Then it's a good thing that I've bought us dinner." Reikoku-sensei hands me the bag. "You just need to add hot water and we'll be able to eat it in three minutes."

"Actually, I cooked our dinner." I say, proudly. I didn't realize at that moment that she was unaware of the fact that I had food at home (and worse than that, she had brought just two cup noodles' units with her when she wasn't supposed to assume it would be just us). It's always easier to think about the details when the opportunity is gone, isn't it? "Tonight we'll have curry rice."

She seemed to be pondering over that.

"I guess that explains that apron you're wearing. I was starting to think you had a thing for cross-dressing or something."

"What are you talking about? Every great chef wears an apron! I-it's not like I enjoy cross-dressing or anything!"

That last bit went out on its own, and after I said it, I only wished I could take it back.

"Yeah, a real chef would wear an apron. It's just that the one you're wearing is pink and frilly, and your face is not really manly. Just look at yourself; it doesn't make you look like a chef, it makes you look like a maid."

Despite being called "girly", I was actually glad she ignored my tsundere reaction towards cross-dressing. I'm pretty sure she would have a witty comment for me. I knew she would. The best I could do at that moment was distract her. I needed to be sure that she wouldn't start thinking about that, and I started to serve the curry. After doing so, I took my apron off and put on my robe and wizar-

What I meant to say is that I knelt on the floor and we started eating. The weirdest thing is that despite her sarcastic remarks, unusual questions and rather manipulative ways, she was really nice to me. Nicer

than she seemed to be to everyone in class, anyway. She seemed genuinely interested in talking about trivial things, and never made a question too deep or personal (well, except that one about my kitchen utensil collection). She even helped me do the dishes after dinner. Who would have seen that coming, really?

We played a few short chess games (and when I say "short" I mean she beat me up so quickly I can only believe she was cheating, somehow), watched a zombie movie from the 60's and listened to some remastered old-school jazz recordings (unlike Ryo and I, she doesn't play any instruments or program; she just loves listening to jazz). It was a great night, after all.

Around eleven o' clock she stood up.

"I guess it's time for me to go, Koukishin-kun. We have played quite a bit and I am tired. I'm just glad I don't really need to write a report about you now, otherwise I wouldn't get my beauty sleep." She shook my hand firmly and walked to the door. "I had a great time. See you tomorrow at school."

There was only a single thing in my mind, and it was "WHAAAAAAAAAAT?"

"W-wait! You don't need to write a report for tomorrow? Then this wasn't a routine home visit after all!" I screamed. "You haven't even met my pare- ck!"

She looked at me and her expression was clearly saying 'gotcha!'

"You are right about this not being a routine home visit, but I never said I was expecting to meet your parents tonight or anything like that. You assumed that, and you were wrong. Please don't take me for an idiot. As a responsible teacher I had checked your documents and I already knew you were a... ah, recently emancipated minor from abroad."

We both knew that wasn't quite the situation.

"Why have you come here, then?"

"You're kind of slow sometimes." She stopped for a while, probably searching for the proper words. "I came to spend some time with you, obviously. I, of all people, know how it feels to live by yourself and have to eat dinner alone every night. I also had to... emancipate myself at fifteen and it was kind of depressing, so I decided to come and see if you were doing alright."

The shock made me feel really odd.

"I didn't know that."

"And how could you? Practically no one here does, and you just came yesterday. By the way, you know too much already. I'm not telling you anything else about my past." She combed her hair with her fingers. "My reasons to come and spend time with you might be selfish, but I'm only trying to do what I wish someone did for me back then. Sometimes, all we need is a little company, even if only for an hour."

At first words failed me.

"...thank you for coming, sensei. I really appreciate it."

"Don't worry. Now you know I'm doing it out of my own selfishness, so cut it out." Reikoku-sensei sighed. "So you'll keep my liking for splatter films a secret and I promise not to say anything about your little familial situation. Deal?"

"Deal."

"You also need to understand that I won't treat you any different from the rest of the class just because you are living on your own or because we are, say, friends. Not in class, though."

"I'm okay with that too, sensei."

She nodded, satisfied.

"Good. Farewell and good night, Koukishin-kun." She turned her back to me and started walking. "I might drop by to have dinner with you and play chess again someday."

I kept looking at the streets for a while after she left.

Closing the door, I went straight to my bedroom. I felt pretty tired, but this was certainly an interesting day for me. I think I found the word for that thing I felt when Ryo hugged me. It's the same thing I am feeling right now. The word is hope. I think I might have finally found my place in the world and it feels great.

After texting Ryo "good night", I fell asleep.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 1 [C3K1]

The first thing I noticed when I woke up in the morning was that I was full of energy. As I opened the windows, I listened to skylarks chirping and swallows twittering. The sound seemed to come from a beautiful cherry tree near my house, and was only interrupted by the sound of departing geese flying above me, probably in a V formation. It sure is spring.

I was in a good mood and had absolutely nothing to do at home, so I decided to leave earlier than usual and take a nice walk to school.

Filled with spring orchids and cherry trees I failed to notice yesterday, the path seemed to be trying really hard to make sure I didn't forget the season was spring. I don't mind; I love spring. In fact, I love it so much I could spend the whole spring somewhere and when the summer decided to come, I would travel the world just to meet spring somewhere else.

Now that I think about it, I have done such a thing. It wasn't that interesting or romantic, especially because I was being chased by mobsters. And aliens. And even a spy squirrel. No, really, a spy squirrel. This is so ridiculous I can't believe how someone would take me for a liar. I mean, if I were to lie about being hunted by something, it would certainly not be something like a squirrel. Even a serial liar would have some dignity.

It's interesting to see how different people react to the same thing. In this same situation (walking alone to school along this beautiful path, not being chased by a squirrel with a license to kill), I guess Ryo would be happily looking at them like a kid seeing the circus for the first time. Wait, I must stop doing that! It's not the first time I compare her to a small kid in my thoughts. What if I ended up saying something like that out loud? She probably wouldn't be happy about this.

I kept walking through the streets that seemed to be a maze inside an endless urban garden.

What about Kouma? What would she think while surrounded by flowers? Well, she doesn't look like someone who likes spring very much. I can totally relate her to winter in my mind. However, it seems to me that while she tries to keep a facade of coldness and apathy towards anyone but Ryo, she hides her sweet side deep inside herself. Her occasional bursts of feelings and the way she is concerned about Ryo made me think that there is a nice but tormented girl inside that apparently empty but incredibly well-dressed shell.

Maybe she is a little bit like Reikoku-sensei. Oh, I'm missing the point, here. I think that in the midst of this perfect, textbook example of spring, Kouma would probably spend more time thinking about the biological classification of the flowers than about the beauty of the scene, but deep down she would eventually think "cute!" I might be wrong, but that's what I believe.

I prefer not to ponder about sensei's reaction to this situation. Despite being a nice person (even if only to me), her taste for anything other than jazz is the kind of thing you don't want to imagine this early in the morning. Especially if you had breakfast. She is really into horror and it seems like she fits right into the "gore film aficionado" category.

Actually, I kind of like horror movies and I don't have anything against the old ones, but a certain scene from one of those movies is making me feel slightly uncomfortable about this walk. It shocked me, big time. Since then, I can't help but feel awkward when alone and surrounded by trees. I might still have the daylight, but the trees have their vines.

With that in mind, I decided to walk a little bit faster.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 2 [C3K2]

No, I wasn't running. I was just, eh, walking a little bit faster. But you assumed I was running, didn't you? I knew it! You did assume I was running like a coward! Can't you read? And I was only moving myself slightly faster because I wanted to, not because I was afraid of trees and flowers or anything. Why would I?

Better safe than sorry, anyway.

I arrive at school without any events, and from what I could see I wouldn't have any events for a while: the school seemed even emptier than the streets. It was like a theater stage after the play is over. Like I was the only person on Earth.

Which would not be that bad, as long as there weren't any suspicious trees around me.

I enter the building where my class is located. The hall was as silent and empty as the rest of the world seemed to be, but since there were absolutely no perennial woody plants in sight, I started to relax. There were, indeed, a lot of wooden objects inside the school. Pencils, desks, chairs, even the floor. However, the thing that calmed me down was that they were all already dead. I just hope that no one at Greenpeace heard that one.

It didn't occur to me back then that, in the same movie, a girl was turned into a zombie with a pencil. Right, a pencil made from a dead tree. It doesn't make much sense, anyway. The movie is quite good, though. If you like that kind of movie and don't really care about details, it's worth a night of fun and weird dreams. Not really scary, just weird.

So, basically, I calmly walked through the hallway unaware of the fact that if my theory was indeed right and trees actually attacked people in what I can only describe as "an unorthodox way," I was trapped in the worst case scenario. Worse than a naked man quickly strolling into a dragon's den.

Everything seems to be worse when you're naked.

In much better spirits than before, I entered the classroom, which was (big surprise!) empty. I guess it's safe to say that I'm the first to step here today. That made me feel good about myself. Being the first one to enter an empty classroom is a great responsibility. It's such an honour, despite being such a small step...

I kept moving towards the last row, walking so slowly it was almost dramatic. Step by step, like a lion trying not to be detected by its prey. Every step felt special, every single of them was an omen. I just wasn't sure what they were trying to tell me.

And then, when I reached my desk, I saw it.

A card.

A plain white card with absolutely nothing written on it was on my desk. The kind of card you would give to your contacts as a businessman. If you were one. If you had a decent job, I mean. If you had a job at all.

So yeah, a card.

I looked around and noticed that the other desks were completely empty. No one else had received a white card. No, I shouldn't suppose that someone sent it to me. No reason for that. There was no apparent reason for it to be there, either, but it could have been an accident or something and...

...wait. Why am I making such a big deal about this? It's just a piece of paper. A common, standard, plain, ordinary piece of blank paper. I can't be afraid of that. I really can't, and simply because I have seen too much and dealt with many weird things. It wouldn't make any sense. I need to stop being so paranoid: I won't be able to have a normal life if I don't quit sabotaging myself.

I just need to pick it up. Yes, I'll pick it up and nothing will happen to me. It will end up being a micro-love letter delivered to the wrong place, and after a lot of misunderstandings, fan service and confessions everyone will laugh. Everything will be just fine, right? Right?

Yeah, like that would happen.

Reality shifted clearly in front of my eyes. Crimsonness danced madly and spread through the once nearly-monochromatic room like a paintbrush in the hand of an epileptic painter. In a second, the vivid red took over the room and distorted it. Around me, the classroom had literally changed from its natural state to a nightmarish, grotesque living hell.

Run.

Appalled, I looked around out of the corners of my eyes, seeking a hope I couldn't seem to find anywhere. Unable to move my body from fear, I ended up sinking slowly but not gently.

Run.

No visible means of leaving.

Run.

Being completely swallowed alive by a sea of red.

Run.

It took me a while to realize that the crimsonness enveloping the world was indeed alive, and every bloody strand emerging from its core was most likely a tentacle. Despair quickly invaded me as the enormous mass of red started closing in. I felt suffocated, almost claustrophobic; I was truly helpless in front of a power I could not understand and my worst fear had become truth.

It's here.

Symbols hovered in the midst of chaos like black ink butterflies, clearly unaffected by the closing storm of red. I felt like I had already seen that symbols somewhere else but for some reason, I couldn't make any sense of it. Actually, the reason might have been the fact that I was being crushed by something I have never seen before. I was right; it's always scarier when you don't know anything.

I cannot hide.

There is absolutely no escape from this.

In a moment of momentary madness, I wished for zombies or monstrous trees I could understand and eventually defeat. My wish was not granted, and as I was restrained by the grotesque ruby-coloured creature I faced the truth I couldn't deny even if I wanted to with all of my soul.

Mystery had found me once again.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 3 [C3K3]

And then I ran.

I admit it. I really, really ran that time.

As soon as the apparently interminable nightmare was over, I used all of the strength I had left to run away from the classroom. Not sure of how many minutes I had stood there, I rushed as if to compensate for the time I was completely catatonic and immersed in that wicked reality. I needed no more than a few seconds to move my body so fast anyone would have only seen a blur (if there was someone around to see me running down the hallway, that is).

The school seemed to be much larger now that I was trying to escape it. It didn't look like the place I had been in yesterday, and I felt trapped. The crimsonness wasn't present, but the despair wouldn't let me go so easily.

So I ran and ran, but I still could not find a way out.

Like a scared rat in a maze, I kept running around without so much as a clue. Every room seemed dangerous and after that event, I felt like I was inside the enemy, and not in a good way. Not like Odysseus entering the city inside the Trojan horse, but a sinking boat. There were no visible exits to me. My brain had shut down and the single thing that stopped me from, well, stopping was sheer primal fear. When restrained, all I could think about was running away from that. Now I could only run, not thinking at all.

Every step meant nothing.

I jumped down the stairs and, without any grace, gravity made me meet the ground with the same intensity I had inside of me.

Every sweat drop meant nothing.

I ached. Every single bit of me hurt, because I had accidentally bashed my knees and arms into objects while searching for a way out. The pain was now steady, controlled chaos striking.

Every breath meant absolutely nothing.

There was nothing particularly poetic or symbolic about it. Just despair.

Despair was everything, everywhere.

So I ran, falling several times and scraping my body here and there, but not paying much attention to it. I was too scared to think about pain at that moment.

Too scared.

...

Eventually, I found an exit.

I ran towards it and found myself out of the school building, and a few seconds later I had passed the school entrance gates. Leaving behind Shiina Ryo, dumbfounded, as she tried to greet me.

Without looking back even once...

I ran.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 4 [C3K4]

Astonishingly realistic butterflies danced in the air, majestically encircling me as if to properly execute a ceremony to crown me King of Infinite Space. Playing the role of a true born star, my presence naturally provides illumination and warmth to the minuscule living bodies that gravitate around me. There is order in the expanding Universe, finally.

That's what they probably think. I guess.

To me, however, they are just mere flies attracted to a cheap light they truly believe to be heaven. Also, I am most likely an ordinary man bound in a nut shell, without anything but his extraordinary inborn ability to attract the obscure almost instantly, along with a high dosage of mostly justified paranoia.

Yes, my rationality is back, thank you for asking. Unfortunately, so is my chronic negativism.

I ended up at the same park I visited on Sunday, and only because I was too tired to keep running randomly. Despite being used to running away from things and places, I am not very good at *de facto* running. Quite interesting, huh? My legs sorely hurt and I felt my whole body was bruised and/or scraped, so when I ran out of energy I simply allowed Mrs. Gravity to put me down as delicately as she could and layme out on the grassy ground. She's not really gentle, Mrs. Gravity. I'll keep that in mind.

Feeling slightly better, I tried to stand up to find out that I couldn't. Since I had neither balance nor strength left, I fell again, feeling like my legs were an imploding building. Sitting on my legs, I decided to quit trying to stand up. Maybe it's better for me to stay like this for a while.

Then I had the faux poetic butterfly moment and now I'm here.

Alone.

Surrounded by trees and not caring much about it. I do know that wasting time thinking about it means I do care, even if only a little. However, I just wanted to state that I am not, at least not at this very moment, afraid of, say, trees. Just for the record.

And since I'm being honest, it wasn't the distorted world I saw that scared me.

How can I say it without sounding like an idiot? I want to avoid clichés and tropes, but it is really hard for me. I am not that good at expressing myself, and that's probably the main reason why people often think badly of me. The truth is usually simple, but making a poor choice of words can ruin a lawyer's good case and convict an innocent man. Hence, I'll try to be as direct as I can and hope I don't ruin everything as I usually do.

Here we go: while I cannot deny the fact that I was afraid of something, I can only say that it wasn't the red dimension that scared me. That's because I had seen worse things many times before. Really. What really worried me was...

My cell phone rings, suddenly interrupting my train of thought and making my royal butterfly court fly away gracefully. Which is quite awkward, since not all butterflies have auditory systems. What a fortunate coincidence it is, to have the only specimens of one of those specific subspecies hovering around me just in time to mark a change with a fairly popular graphical effect! I thought this kind of thing happened only in novels!

Self-parody aside, it doesn't take a genius to find out who was calling me. Actually, it does; given the circumstances, I could be receiving a call from a video tape girl from the underworld or from a masked killer. No, wait, important people with lines that are actually relevant to the plot are not the only ones who make telephone calls: it might just be someone trying to call a pizza delivery service or something.

Yeah, like that would happen.

Honestly, I only answered the call because the name on the screen was Ryo's. My cell phone rang several times while I was running, but I wasn't thinking enough to pick up calls. Now that I think about it, the one calling me as I hurried away was probably her. After leaving like a madman without saying anything to her, I guess I owe her an explanation.

"You're... pretty fast, aren't you?" Breathless, Ryo sounds like she was going to pass out any minute now. It's even worse than yesterday, which is quite distressing. "I tried to follow you, but... as I said before... I don't have much stamina."

She tried to laugh, to make this moment a little lighter, but ended up coughing and only greatly increasing the size of my worries. And there is only one person I can blame for this situation; the one whose behavior made a friend worry so much she immoderately ran after him despite her body limitations.

"I'm sorry. I really am. This is all my fa-"

"Cut it out." She suddenly stops me. We stay silent for almost a whole minute. I mean, I stay silent; she actually tried to, but I could hear her breathing through the phone. By the time she starts talking again, her breathing is once again under control, but still weaker than usual, resulting in a soft, whispery voice. "I went after you on my own, so if it is anyone's fault, it's mine. You really need to stop blaming yourself for the mistakes of other people." Despite kind of deserving it, I didn't see that coming. "Now, tell me what happened at school."

So I told her everything. I know that based on Kouma's assumption, this was a reckless thing to do. If Ryo really had big problems, I shouldn't worry her more with issues of my own. However, I couldn't help myself. I needed to talk to someone. I only noticed when I started telling the story to her, but despite trying to keep a cool state of mind, I was still very, very nervous. When it comes to nerves, body and mind are not always found in the same tune, tempo, or even harmonic series for that matter. The result is the same as completely improvised polyrhythmic solos in live music: sometimes it might sound jazzy, intriguing and creative but mostly the results are utterly disastrous, true-born mood ruiners.

There is another reason, though. I don't feel like hiding things from her. I simply don't. She is the one who had been there for me for a while, and probably the only one who really believes in me. Not in my uncommon stories that tend to become even weirder every minute, but in me as a person.

So, unless I must, I won't hide anything from my best friend. Obviously, I classify telling her "Kouma is a manipulative psychopath who thinks her good intentions make up for any bad deeds she performs" as something I must hide. For now, at least.

I'll suppress the dialogue that followed, since you already know what happened and Ryo is a very good listener, interrupting me only when I forgot to mention some detail that might have seemed quite obvious to me, but not to everyone else who doesn't happen to be inside my mind. After listening to my weird fiction-like tale, she only tells me to go home and calm down. Which would end up being just comforting common sense if she hadn't added that unusual, rather preoccupying sentence.

"Don't worry about anything, I will find a way."

I wonder if I managed to run into the mafia once again.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 5 [C3K5]

The boxes.

The boxes are staring at me.

Probably staring back, because I have been looking at them since I came home. I don't blame them, poor boxes. I came home after Ryo hung up, and the oppressive silence in this house is driving me crazy. I bet this is hard for everyone, even for the unanimated objects.

To run away from the weird, I came to this small town, only to meet a split-personality teacher, a possessive psychopathic fashionista with severely broken friendship ideals, a supernatural mind-blowing entity and now I get the hint that Ryo, the apparently fragile yet common girl who was my only link to the normal world, is in fact some kind of mobster. So, yeah.

My third day here barely started and I already feel tempted to move again.

The memories of what happened in class this morning are still too vivid, too real. Burned into my retina, the image of a bizarre world that seemed to be waiting for me. The proof that I can't outrun Mystery. It found me again, and I can't help but despair. There is no hope, anywhere.

Once again, I feel forced to state it's not about the supposedly terrifying and truthfully obnoxious supernatural vision. After all I have seen in the past years, they don't even scare me that much anymore (truly unfortunate hazards of the profession); it's the lack of peace that bothers me. I'm always forced to run and leave everything behind all of a sudden, and I do realize that this has become a habit for me. However, I don't see any other alternative. I am, indeed, a walking lightning rod for disaster and staying here would only make things worse for everyone.

Keep saying that to yourself, kid. It makes you sound less of a wussy, and we certainly need it to sell the novel.

Oh, you're here.

And you won't be here for long, right?

Yeah, I'm seriously thinking about packing up and leaving. Feel free to stay, if you want to.

I wish. You really embarrass me with your completely unneeded drama.

So you think I actually enjoy having to do this? Don't you think I'd rather stay here with Ryo and have a normal life like everyone else? I have been dealing with this stupid thing for too long, and I'm just what you called me: a kid! A kid dealing with problems an adult wouldn't be able to! And I'm so sick of your comments! You are nothing more than a stupid voice at the back of my head that is good for nothing but bringing me down! So don't you dare make me feel worse about this when my own parents were relieved to get rid of me! You know absolutely nothing about me!

...

Everything went silent and I never had the chance to ask if this was really a novel.

It stayed like that for exactly seven minutes and forty-three seconds until the doorbell rang. I tried to ignore it, but the person (assuming that it wasn't a tentacle-like tree vine) pressing the button persisted, like winners and travelling salesmen usually do. So it kept ringing and ringing.

Right now, I'm not sure if I was touched by the beauty in the other party's perseverance or just got annoyed by that constant high-pitched noise, but it is true that I went down and opened the door. Probably the latter, if one took into consideration that my hand had turned into a blazing fist.

As soon as I opened that door, I found myself glad to have a fist of my own ready because my foe surely did.

My attacker's moves were lightning fast and I could feel the killing intent present in every single blow she dealt. She pushed me back inside my house with strong punches that would have broken my bones if I had used my arms to defend myself directly instead of striking her arms before she could hit me in order to make she waste her energy. Imagine that her attacks were just like river waters; basically, I chose to fight back by redirecting her strength like a floodgate rather than simply block the flow and take the damage like a simple dam.

It seemed to be the most reasonable thing to do at the moment, especially because I was fighting for my life against someone who was obviously pretty good at modern wushu. Not a master, as someone used to reading novels would expect. Just a dedicated student with incredibly powerful fists of doom.

Once again, hazards of the profession. When you get into trouble all the time, you end up developing insane reflexes, an unusual way of thinking and even learning a thing or two about self-defense, martial arts and stuff. It's not like I'm good enough to become a kung fu movie stuntman, but it was surely enough to keep me alive after Kouma Yon's otherwise deadly attack.

Right, Kouma is the one trying to kill me.

Without enough time to dialogue, I can only keep striking back. Her fighting style is as furious and harsh as an untamed stallion, which is completely unexpected from a girl like Kouma. She is certainly not an adversary to be messed with. Her small fists are powerful and merciless and that's why I cannot afford to hold back just because she is a girl. Especially because that would go against my feminist ideals. There, I said it.

There are many different schools of Chinese martial arts, but only two real kinds of style: there is hard and there is soft. While Kouma's mighty attacks come from her training on the external part of fighting, such as hitting other people and breaking stuff with bare hands, mine focuses on the internal side with breathing techniques, controlling the energy's flow and meditation.

Guess which style is more useful when you're in the middle of the battle of your life.

Kouma is certainly stronger than me. It is quite obvious to me now that she is not one of the soft school Chinese martial arts students; her style is based on body's strength instead of mind's balance. Which might be the only reason why I am still alive and fighting back.

Too bad, you guessed wrong. When two different fighting styles clash, it's all about not being hit before your opponent is. And since the soft school teaches keeping yourself calm and not wasting energy, it's clear to me that if I keep avoiding her strikes and preventing her from hitting me, I have the better chances to be victorious. Piece of cake, right?

Wrong again. I haven't trained in a while and I don't think Kouma could say the same. My techniques are rusty and my body is not used to fighting. I'm actually more skilled at running away. Not for long distances, I'm afraid. Still, I am in worse shape than I was a few years ago and I don't believe I am in any condition to fight Kouma to exhaustion.

This means I am at this very moment fighting a great amount of fire with a half-empty bucket of water. Right now, I only wish I had practiced more. Kouma is clearly far more skilled than I am, and this difference is going to show soon. It's only a matter of time before she overpowers me, unless I manage to do something about it.

No, wait, am I really inside a novel? I know it's not the time to have an epiphany or an existential crisis, but that certainly explains a few things. Not exactly, but it is certainly a fine lie. Easier to swallow than the awful truth, anyway. It works as a decent excuse for the uncommon things that happened to me and to my obvious excess of thinking. No one thinks that much in the real world. Wait, I wouldn't know that. Considering I might be a novel character, I could never have been a real world common human. Perhaps.

Gracefully, she jumps and misses by a hair an imperfectly calculated flying kick, making me retreat a step instinctively while she was still floating in mid air. It seems I'm not the only one who is not on good terms with Lady Gravity; Kouma is outrageously defying it/her. I really need to come up with a decent strategy to either defeat her instantly or restrain her until I can calm her down; if it keeps like this, I will certainly...

And then I got struck right in the face by her other foot and was sent flying through the living room.

I was way too naïve. How could I have ignored it? The perfect circle she had traced in the air with her right leg was but the omen of something much, much bigger. The way she twisted her body, keeping her almost perfectly horizontally aligned; I should have seen that it was only a trick to distract me, taking my attention away from her other leg. Not a common flying kick as I thought, but a butterfly kick.

Trying to ignore the pain and heat present in the left side of my face, I realize that she wasn't trying to kill me. While aesthetically beautiful, the butterfly kick is surely not the most effective attack. To use such a low damage attack after finding a breach in the opponent's defense, she is probably...

Now is not the time to analyze her attacks or intentions. I need to stand up.

When I manage to, she is already waiting for me. However, there is a big difference this time; we are now in my living room. How is it different, you ask? You can't possibly expect me to be happy about fighting in here when I spent a great deal of my time yesterday trying to fix everything up! There is no

way I'm going to let her Kouma to walk in and destroy everything. I won't allow her to ruin my beautiful living room, even if I die in order to defend it!

Switching our roles was the obvious thing to do.

Kouma first tried to punch me, so I avoided it and grabbed her left wrist. Surprised by the sudden change in my fighting style, she attacked with another punch, once again resulting in a wrist restraint. She furiously raised her left leg to kick me (and I'm not even going to say where, since I intend to keep this clean and free of parental guidance warnings), but this time my chromosome-influenced slightly superior physical strength (sorry girls, it just happens) finally overwhelmed her and I used the impulse to throw her forcefully against the wall while holding both of her wrists, our bodies sweating and simultaneously synchronizing at the same pulse.

Picture that scene. Go on, I know you want to.

Her eyes were now full of expression (overflowing with burning rage to be more specific); not only uncontrollable mad anger but a gracious tear glow, like a diamond exposing the Sun's full color spectrum by letting the rays of light pass through itself.

No, not only fury.

Tears.

The girl I couldn't even imagine feeling anything yesterday was now crying in front of me, like I had taken something very, very important from her.

"Release me, you jerk!" She screamed, raising the chances someone passing by the streets comes here and turn this sudden fight development into a police case. This is getting dangerous; I'm way too pretty for jail. "I'm going to make you pay for that!"

And maybe I did. The problem is, I don't really know if I did it. I don't even happen to know what I don't know I did. And even if I did know what she believes I did, it wouldn't mean I had done it. So, I need an explanation about what I possibly have done and evidence of me actually doing it. A semantics book would be fine, too.

"Hey, Kouma..." I said, negligently releasing her hands. "Could you be more specific? What exactly do you think I have don-"

I had released her hands alright. Problem is, by the time I took my hands away from her wrists they weren't just hands anymore. They were, once again, blazing fists of death.

Lucky me.

Indeed, if it wasn't for my sudden burst of luck, this story would be lacking a narrator. A living narrator, anyway: stories with posthumous narrators are becoming rather popular these days. Since there are a lot of supernatural elements in this particular one, I might keep my job after being buried. No, I think

you need to be at least slightly alive to be the protagonist of a slice-of-life story. If anything, you need to have a slice of your life.

About that luck thing.

Kouma wasn't completely free to move when she decided to attack me. Afraid of rather disturbing retaliations, I kept my hold on her leg as strong as I could. This fear was proven useful when she tried punching me, just as cavemen's primal fear of well, deathly things. You got the idea, I hope.

I was lucky to be in a fictional world with a certain working level of coherent physics.

When Kouma moved her arms to punch me with all of her strength, the driving force used on that physical action worked as an impulse that sent us spinning earthward, and those unbelievably fast revolutions didn't stop when we hit the floor. As opposing sides of the Yin Yang, the enemies revolved on their common axis until they struck the room's center table, resulting in falling moving boxes and great pain for both sides.

At least for mine, that I guarantee you.

Once bitten, twice shy; as soon as we stopped rolling like hay balls in a particularly powerful storm, I took advantage on the fact I was on top of her and once again held her by the wrists to avoid future attacks. Since I cannot trust Kouma to talk to me rationally right now (not when she can hit me), overpowering her completely might be for the best.

"Hah! You're mine now!" I screamed with hints of madness, and then became truly aware of the situation.

Crazy looking guy? Check. Crying girl on the floor, being held by said guy in a rather uncomfortable pose? Check. Front door open to the streets, more than susceptible to attract the attention of curious passersby? Check. Negative luck on the guy's side, making him a living sitting-duck in a world where every single person seems to have a gun? Double-check, triple-check, checkmate. Check it as much as you wish.

It would certainly look like I was taking advantage of something else (in this specific case, someone) other than the fact I was on top of her. Not that the first thing is completely unrelated, anyway.

I was just going to say this is not getting any better, but I guess it's most likely a question of points of view.

Let's check the facts, shall we? Lady Gravity did throw me to the ground, but she also sent a pretty girl along to make my fall, say, lighter. Also, said pretty girl did roll with me on that ground, and I ended up on top, resulting in a fan service scene a little bit more risqué than the latter. Which is indeed a great thing for this humble character and quite a teaser for the average reader but it won't help much selling the book since, well, we're already in the middle of it. Bad marketing planning on the author's part.

Just like this fight. I mean, no matter how much our society pretends to be open-minded, most of the audience won't like the fact I fought Kouma, a girl, even to defend my life. And those who see it as a

good thing, because it was a fair fight between someone of the male persuasion and an equally (if not more) skilled female fighter, will complain about me winning the battle (yet would have clapped their hands if she had won). The only ones who are truly neutral about this are the people who liked this scene because of the blatant fan service.

There is no way I can please everyone right now. There is no turning point. So, in order to displease equally Greeks, Trojans and perverts, I will make the plot quickly advance by ending this action scene with the only thing whose mere trace can instantly kill the fun of any form of fiction: logic.

“Kouma, listen to me! Killing someone for no particular reason might be a recurring plot in anime and movies, but it has some rather unfortunate implications in real life.”

I said that hoping that I am the only one who noticed that we are in a novel. Well, noticed might not be the right term since it is only a theory induced by paranoia, but still... “You’re not being reasonable right now, and despite knowing you for no more than a short amount of time, I don’t think you are the kind of person who does this kind of thing.”

Actually, I do. I seriously believe I’m lucky you didn’t come here with a sub machinegun. “Can’t we sit down and talk about this?”

She looked at me for a while, probably stunned by seeing me not talk like a complete idiot when around her.

“...fine.” Her voice was softer and breathy, almost to the extent of mellow. “I will explain my point and listen to your defense, like in a proper trial. After that, I will mercilessly deliver punishment. Is that alright?”

Just as reasonable as some governments.

Reasonable enough, anyway.

“Well, while I don’t entirely agree with you, I guess we can move on. Until the punishment part, I mean.” Sighing seems to be the only proper thing to do right now. Maybe there is such a thing as sigh timing. Like comic timing. Maybe my sigh timing is good especially because my comic timing sucks. Maybe. “First things first: why specifically do you want to deliver punishment to me?”

She gave me an upgraded version of that blasé look of hers.

“Isn’t it obvious?” No, not really. “I’m going to make you pay for making Ryo cry!”

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 6 [C3K6]

Apparently, the last time Kouma Yon saw Ryo cry was when the latter's father passed away.

They were in elementary school's first grade at the time, so Ryo must have suffered a lot. I don't know if I could cope with that kind of feeling if something like that happened to me today and I don't want to think about how I would have turned out without one or both of my parents. Being slightly absent is one thing, being separated by six feet of earth and spiritual/material world issues is a completely different one.

I really shouldn't joke about this.

Anyway, it seems Ryo was truly worried about me. Worried to the point of crying after years of keeping a façade, worried to the point of making Kouma worry about her. Thankfully, they are not the most popular girls in school. Otherwise we'd have a mass domino effect situation fueled by a little bit of ghostly influence but mostly by teen drama.

I shouldn't joke about this either.

However, humor is my only available weapon to deal with the guilt. It would be hard not to notice. Besides me and Kouma, no one in class seemed to be particularly fond of Ryo. The fact she is a walking nerd stereotype surely doesn't get her any popularity points, except for the middle-aged *otaku* guys at the maid café. Let's face it: just like me, she probably doesn't have many real friends. Based on the unreasonable amount of time she spends connected to the Internet dealing mostly with sheer data for her projects, it's not something that would surprise anyone.

A few things in life work proportionally. For a common person with several friends, seeing one of them having a hard time and moving to God knows where is certainly stressful and might be the source of many, many tears. Think about how it feels like, having fifty-percent of your friends moving to your town and, when everything seems to be starting to get better, wanting to go away from the town (and incidentally, from you) after telling a rather fantastical story. When you already are, according to the other half of your friends, a complete, massive emotional wreck.

Please ponder it for a while.

Kouma might as well punish me, for I am guilty. I was too careless, too selfish. After Kouma's warning/menace, I shouldn't have told that occurrence to Ryo (or, at least, thought twice about doing so), but I really felt like telling it to someone. I thought I would explode if I didn't, yet by doing so, I almost made my best and only friend explode herself.

I am officially an idiot.

"You really are an idiot." Kouma said, bringing me back to the real world.

"I don't remember saying that out loud. How on Earth could you reply to that? Do you have some kind of mind powers?"

She looked quite disturbed.

"Reply to what?"

First a wave of shock. Then everything feels normal and you get used to that once odd feeling. Pretty much like listening to mathcore for the very first time.

"...I see." I said, a little less devastated. "You're just being the usual Kouma Yon."

Her eyes rolled so quickly that for one second I thought they were going to pop out of her face.

"Seriously; you are very, very weird." She made what I can only think of as a calculated pause. "So, tell me what happened to you that made Ryo worry so much."

"Hasn't she told you already?"

"I am assuming you never heard Ryo's voice while she is crying." Kouma sighed like an old man remembering the tough days of war. "Good for you. I could barely understand your name in the middle of that mess."

"Ah."

"Go on. Talking to a friend might not have helped much, but talking about it to a semi-stranger won't do any worse."

I was not sure of how I should feel about her statement. First, she made it very clear: we are not friends. Then, she offered her attention to a problem of mine with the cool attitude of a *manga*-like big brother. Maybe she does have a personality disorder.

Still, she is the sanest person I have seen all day and, even better than that, she is here. With that in mind, I proceed to tell Kouma the dreadful story that happened to me, both before coming to this town and today.

"Is that all?" Kouma said when I finished my minimalist summary. After three hours. Despite her expressionless face being the same from the beginning to the very end, I'm betting no one would enjoy listening to the Director's Cut.

"...yeah." Breathless and feeling my throat becoming sore, I can only think about never having to talk again. A dream that won't come true unless the author finds a way to make a dialogue-based story with

a mute main character work. If only this was a console RPG, my hopes and dreams could become true.
“Pretty much.”

She stood up and started clapping her hands, and I noticed it was the second time I received a standing ovation since I came to this city. It must be one of those cultural things.

“You, sir, are either insane or the best liar I have ever met. Either way, you are completely mental.”

No, you’re mental! Even the same sentence! How dare you invade my mind without my permission? No, wait, that was a conceptual mistake of mine. It can only be considered an ‘invasion’ if the affected party does not agree, so please go on. Wait a minute, there’s something wrong here!

“You couldn’t possibly expect me to believe all that nonsense. This was not wasted time, however.”

“Really?” I firmly protested. “You claim you don’t believe a single word of what I told you and yet you say we were not wasting our time. How so?”

“I just found out why Ryo is interested in you.”

“May I ask why?”

“Sure. It’s all about Sigmund Freud.”

What?

“What?”

That’s what I thought.

“Sigmund Freud.” Kouma answered, breaking the noir novel depressing ping-pong monologue mood at once. “Jewish-Austrian neurologist? Father of Psychoanalysis? Born in May 6th of 1856?”

“I know who Freud was! I’m just trying to see the relation between him and Ryo’s interest in me!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Actually, every time you say that it just means your line of thought is not obvious at all. “Electra Complex.”

“...Electra Complex?”

“What are you, a parrot?” Deep. Sigh. “Let me make it easy to you: her father was a storyteller too, except he made money out of it. He was a fairly decent novelist, specialized in urban fantasy stories. You are, without a trace of doubt, a great storyteller; you told me the most unbelievable story I have ever heard, yet you pronounced every word like it was an absolute truth you based your life on. Sort of.”

While her cold attitude remained the same (no sudden dramatic changes like before, thank Heavens), but Kouma seemed to be rather discomfited now that she unwillingly complimented me. “Her affection towards you is but a children’s; she is just looking for a replacement for her dad’s figure.”

“Ah.”

There was indeed a little bit of sense in what Kouma was saying, except she almost completely lost the track: giving it some thought, I noticed that it’s very unlikely that Shiina Ryo became friends with me just to fill a gap in her heart; I mean, we have around ten years between that incident and now. Some people do take longer times than others to get over something, but ten years is more than enough time for anyone to decide if they are either going to sink or swim. Ryo’s decision of becoming a novelist was most likely the only influence in her attitude directly left by her father’s death. Plus, only Jung would have said Electra Complex, since Freud himself rejected the term, as it emphasized the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes.

The girls are not the only ones who read around here, you know.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Kouma Yon asked, not giving me any chances to point out obvious flaws in her logic. “Run away like you presumably always did?”

“...I’m not sure.” I finally said.

Disappointment was the only thing showing in Kouma’s eyes.

“You’d better decide soon. I cannot pretend Ryo is going to be alright without you here right now, especially if you leave under these circumstances, but I won’t stop you if that’s what you want. It’s your life, after all. If you choose to go, I hope you are wise enough to never talk to her again. Cleaning up the mess you made will already be a tough job, but I guess I can take it. However, if you stay I will certainly make you take responsibility for your actions. It will not be just your life, but hers as well.”

I think it’s the first time I have seen Kouma being truly mature instead of acting cool. I mean, it’s easy to see why she turned out like that now. She probably wasn’t creepy like that when she was younger. She most likely forced herself to become like that in order to help her only friend. Sounds weird, but I’ve seen that kind of thing happen before. People often change as they get closer to another. This evolution is their form to adapt and achieve equilibrium together.

I, too, have lost my balance.

Ryo might not be the only one seeking for a replacement or a savior here. Who am I fooling, really? I have been living like a damsel in distress, hopelessly running around crying and expecting to find something that worked as a magical hero that would bring me my happy ending when I should be the one seeking that. I ran for my whole life and it never changed my situation. If anything, it only changed the shape of the enemy and the background; the battle remained the same.

I, too, need to grow up, and there is only one way of doing so, the right way for me. I need to fight Mystery and solve it, once and for all.

Standing up, focusing on my target.

Breathe.

Walking to the kitchen, every step a small revolution.

Breathe.

Grabbing a matchbox, not looking back once.

Just breathe.

"I am not running away. Not anymore."

The sudden friction generated a blue spark of pure burning energy, a flame so weak and surreal when compared to the light inside my soul. Like our Sun in comparison to the Pistol Star; no, V382 Carinae. Maybe not VY Canis Majoris, but certainly V382 Carinae.

I set fire on the paperboard moving boxes to make sure I would not look back or feel any temptations. This is it; I'm standing my ground and I'm going to earn the peace I longed for so long with my very own hands.

Like a man.

A manly man.

...gosh, this is getting old so quickly.

"Burning inanimate objects as a symbolic gesture for revolution is really, really lame. Even for you," spoke the fashionista. "Worst than that, the boxes you burned down could be easily be replaced after a single stop at a convenience store, so there is nothing epic about it. And you might end up buying the same kind of objects, since burning something that holds you down is but a standard graphical representation and you need the dreadful objects anyway." She shook her head. "Boy, are we feeling feminist today."

Now, I'm not sure if I became angry because she ruined my turning point moment or simply because she sort of mocked the feminist ideals I believe so strongly in. Wait, what?

"Why is everyone always trying to judge my actions? Stop acting like a psychoanalyst and just go home, Kouma!" I only realized what I had done when I had already screamed at her without a good reason.

"People often do that, so get used to it. Also, stop screaming at the ones who are going to help you on your personal coming-of-age issues. We're going to solve that case and go back to our mediocre, boring teenager lives." Once again, she seemed flustered. "And don't get any weird ideas, I'm doing this for Ryo-chan's sake."

"I'm sorry." I reflexively bow, not because of respect but mostly to avoid Kouma's gaze. If she found out I was almost laughing, I'd be done for. "Just leave me alone for now, please. We'll discuss that at school tomorrow," I added in a murmur, faux-shamefully.

Kouma Yon just looked at me, contemplating the situation. After a while she sighed and opened her petite mouth.

"No."

"...excuse me, what?"

"No, I'm not going home. I'm sorry, but that is not going to happen." She pondered about it for a while. "Well, actually, no. I am going home eventually. 'Youngsters living together' is not the kind of development we're going to have in this story, at least not now. That would be too uncalled for and would most likely turn this into a harem situation." Wait, then she knows about this being a novel! "What I mean is: right now, I'm staying here with you."

...

Fine, I admit it; that was kind of cute.

Don't tell her.

"...I could just throw you out, you know," I say, pretending to be upset. Truth is, I don't really want to be alone right now, but I don't want to be a burden to anyone. Specially Kouma. If half of what I think I know about her is true, she already has enough of that with Ryo.

She gave one of those evil grins, and I couldn't help but notice the contrast between her way of smiling and Ryo's. To be honest, I would think about anything to keep her smile out of my mind. It's really, really scary.

"I guess you could try." Oh my, she even winked at me while smiling in that awful way of hers. Surely. Not. Cute. "For now, don't you think it's better to stop the fire before it burns your house down?"

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 7 [C3K7]

In the end, after I assured her I was fine, Kouma went home and I had a peaceful moment to reflect on my actions and think about the future on my own.

"Shin-tsu, are you sure that you need all that chicken?"

Yeah, like that would happen.

I did manage to make Kouma stay away from my home. But, in order to do so, I had to go out with her.

No, not a date.

Seriously, no.

I'm not that popular, and I don't think she would like me. I have more than two dimensions, you see.

We just came to the market together because, apparently, all that fighting and talking made her hungry and my house smelled like an old oven. Obviously, we could just have eaten those instant ramen cups Reikoku-sensei brought me last night, but I actually felt like going out and Kouma wanted taiyaki.

What a big surprise.

She might get fat if things keep up like this. I don't think her fabulous clothes would fit anymore. Which would be a disaster. So, it's safe to say it would be quite a waste if all those fish-shaped cakes gave her a large waist. Ha-ha.

Oh boy, that was amusing.

...

Anyway, I decided to make her eat something truly healthy for a change.

"Shin-tsu, did you get lost in thought again?"

Broccoli chicken salad sounded like a great idea to me because it only takes around fifteen minutes to be ready. I'm guessing she eats meat, since I don't know any other manipulative yet extremely violent vegetarian. Biased, me? No, not really; I just happened to see the way she looked at the raw meat in the refrigerated section of the market, but didn't want to use it as an excuse or even remember it (as a feminist, I have a certain disdain for that kind of look; it's built-in).

That girl is most certainly a predator, anyway. Her actions and bizarre logic qualify her as either that or an alien.

“Oi, I’m still here!” She said while pinching me with such effort I felt her fingernails harshly dig and drill into my skin, despite the thick jeans jacket I wore that was supposed to suppress some of the damage caused by, say, natural forces and crazy fashion victims. Suing the company for not making armor-like, Kouma-proof clothing seems the only reasonable thing to do.

It is very hard for me not to compare her and Ryo, especially because of their contrasting actions and the way they respond differently to the same kind of impulse. Thinking how those two ended up being friends for a decade is even harder. And I don’t even want to know how hard it might be to think about having a place and a future in this town.

It’s just better not to ponder about certain things.

“Yeah, we do.” I finally reply, mostly intent on stopping her from tearing my arm apart completely. “I don’t intend to use all of it in today’s dish, though. Considering the unusual occurrences that happened to me today and the fact that both you and Ryo have promised to help me, I’m guessing I will be cooking meals for more than one person for a while.”

“We could just come to the market when we’re hungry.”

“That would be a nuisance, and it could be in the way of our train of thought. I mean, what if we get hungry just a few steps away from solving the mystery? That would be too distracting, and there is a great chance we won’t be on the same track after the sudden break.”

“Good point. What do you intend to cook?” She said as we moved towards the produce section to get vegetables.

“Let me see... Tonight we’ll have broccoli chicken salad, if that’s okay with you. For tomorrow, I was thinking about something a little bit more traditional, like Yakisoba.”

“I have no complaints about tonight’s dish, but you really should keep in mind that Ryo is not much of a fan of red-”

“-red pickled ginger.”

It was a little embarrassing for both of us to say it at the same time, but I guess it shows we have something we care about in common. *Someone*. “I was thinking about that earlier and I have just the right recipe, so don’t worry.”

Then I stop myself just before having another cooking show moment: that is a dangerous territory for a male’s reputation. “Is there anything you don’t like, when it comes to eating? Wait, that came out wrong...”

"No offense taken, be at ease. And no, I have no problems with eating anything." Is it just me or Kouma is actually getting slightly less creepy and evil every minute? It's most likely just me. "That was really considerate of you, anyway."

"Well, thank you."

"You're welcome." She quickly looked away, probably a side-effect of having shared a polite dialog with me without any cynicism or sarcasm.

"Oh, and Kouma?"

"Yes?"

"You're still pinching me."

She gazed down to see her own fingernails deep in my arm, and then quickly brought her focus back to my face.

"It seems so, yeah." Kouma Yon said, without letting go or even showing the tiniest bit of embarrassment, and once again sighing was all I could do.

We left the market carrying way more plastic grocery bags than I intended to (which means they didn't have the dude-don't-ruin-the-environment paper bags I wanted, so taking a single world-killing plastic bag would already be classified as 'way more') and attracting the stares of pretty much everyone. The reason, you ask.

I know you didn't ask anything, I'm just following the script.

Anyway.

People were looking curiously at us because (and I only realized it when we walked next to a mirrored glass where I got to see a reflection of us) Kouma and I look like a weird couple. About looking weird, uncommon, wicked, bizarre, and maybe even grotesque to some; that doesn't bother me at all. I've gotten used to that. It would be awkward if I hadn't, wouldn't it?

It's the couple part that bothers me. Sort of. I mean, she sure is pretty and quite smart when not following a completely different track other than, well, reality. She is quite fashionable too, I can't deny all that. However, she certainly is not the kind of person I want to be associated with.

Which is why I must stop this right now.

“Kouma, correct me if I’m wrong, but even in Japan locking arms is a little bit too intimate for people who just met, being a gesture reserved for lovers or close friends.” She immediately stopped walking, and remained silent for what seemed like several minutes to me. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

She sighed, apparently disappointed.

“I don’t need to correct you, since your affirmation is correct.”

Only then I realized I have probably been pointing a gun at my very own head the whole time. There seemed to be only a single way to deal with Kouma, and I think I have finally found it. Took me long enough, that’s right.

I just needed to make one last test to confirm my hypothesis.

“Could you at least stop pinching me? I will get bruises if things keep going this.”

“Yes, I could.” She made a pause, and for once I truly believed I had knocked some sense into her. “And yes, you will.”

That’s it.

I could easily see the trigger I needed to pull.

“Kouma Yon, stop pinching me. Please.” I said, firm and calmly. It seemed pretty obvious to me that girl was like a computer in some points and would only respond to commands and only with proper, detailed syntax. “You may as well release my arm, if that’s what you want.”

In a dream world where everything magically went just as planned, Kouma would have quickly released my arm.

However.

Not quite as planned, she not only kept holding my arm but also held it tighter, as if I was a teddy bear in the darkest night, as if she was afraid I would vanish forever and she would end up finding herself lost and alone.

I’m not sure of how I should feel about it.

“Let’s go,” I finally said.

Then we went straight back to my flat, two joined figures walking slowly with only the absence of noise as background.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 8 [C3K8]

"So, you and Kouma-san, huh?"

Her presence kind of fascinates me, and I am not quite sure why. Probably because her attitude is so different in class that I feel like I'm having dinner with an evil twin or something. If I were to describe her in the form of a school-like multiple choice test, my options would probably be:

- a) A doppelgänger;
- b) A dissociative identity disorder victim;
- c) A true born sadist;
- d) All of the above.

I am not talking about Kouma Yon, but now that I think about it I realize I could be. The cases are absurdly similar. Both of them are wicked creatures who occasionally show small hints of kindness, despite living in an inner prison, a masquerade of their own. It surely sounds a little bit like a writer's lack of inspiration to me, having two characters with practically the same basis in a story.

However, instead of spending a considerable amount of time pondering on such unfortunate and rather uninteresting things, I'd better quickly answer my visitor's question before she starts thinking too much. It seems like I am not the only one here who is often more interested in the context.

Obviously, I'm also not talking to Kouma. How weird would that be, taking into account the sentence the other character used? Now that I think about it, not that much. It would be Kouma we'd be talking about so it would actually make some sort of sense, I suppose.

I hope so.

"So, you have seen her leaving, huh?" I reply, taking a mental note to never ever let Kouma use the back door again. Or even the front door, for that matter. No, wait, she might want to invade my place by breaking the windows, breaking my ceiling or even digging her way in. I'd better still have that in mind when I decide to turn this house into a fortress. Which will most likely happen soon, if things keep like this.

She nods.

"Mimicking someone else's sentence structure is an awfully sharp double-edged sword, Koukishin-kun. It can ridicule the other party when used against a poorly devised argument, yet make you sound like a royal-level fool if not properly manipulated. Pretty much like any weapon, if you ask me." Her lips contorted a little bit, as if she was holding back a grin. "Just try and guess which case your lovely example fits the most."

"I'm sorry." I raise my hand in defeat. Now that I think about it, it's the same gesture Kouma made yesterday when I convinced her to come help me by suggesting that it was the only way she could avoid

things that she would (for unknown reasons at the time) find extremely displeasing. That's karma for you. "Yes, Kouma did spend the afternoon here. No, I am not in a relationship with her. Unless the red string of fate that connects us is a bloodstained chain of rivalry, I mean."

Reikoku-sensei seemed genuinely interested.

"Rivals are often closer than friends, like their lives truly depend on each other. They usually do." She miserably failed to suppress a giggle. "And it surely counts as a relationship, whether you like it or not."

"How so?"

"Being aware that you have lived abroad for a long time, I cannot do anything but ask: are you familiar with the concept of tsundere?"

Nervous coughs suddenly erupted from my throat, making it sore as it never had been.

After that fan-service scene when I restrained Kouma earlier today, I'm guessing this kind of comment will most likely make me flinch. Every single time. It's very hard not to think of her as a girl now that I've seen there's really more to Kouma Yon than just sharp words, expressionless eyes and a killing intent. Keep in mind that I didn't say that those things aren't a major part of her, just that there is more (just a little more) than that.

That girl is most likely too rational, which is far worse than completely insane. Either way, one cannot deny the fact she is truly mental.

However, she looks really cute (while not trying to smile) and is a walking fashion show, so it's quite tempting to picture her becoming a love-struck beauty after several seasons of quarrels and awkward misunderstandings. Reacting with fake anger to every demonstration of care, blushing madly while calling me a stupid dog, saying it's not like she loved me or anything.

Creepy.

"...I'd rather talk about something else. Pretty please."

The *karma* wheel started moving again when the teacher raised her hand.

"So be it, then. It's your badly written school drama story, your full-of-teen-angst love life. Your business, anyway." Reikoku-sensei sounded honestly disappointed, yet somehow relaxed. "And just for the record, I do believe she is a good catch and you guys would make a fairly good pair."

This makes perfect sense. They are so similar Reikoku-sensei actually roots for Kouma's happiness. Which probably means Reikoku-sensei thinks I'm a good catch too, and worthy of dating a younger version of her. This train of thought leads to some complex, rather disturbing paths, which either could send me to a psychoanalyst or should send my homeroom teacher to a slightly different type of psychologist (or to jail, depending on her actions from now on).

That doesn't make much sense.

Hopefully.

...

After a few seconds of silence, I finally noticed there was something else that didn't make sense.

"Wait, what on earth are you doing here?"

She curiously looked down at her chicken salad bowl and then straight at me.

"I'm having dinner. Isn't it obvious?"

Sometimes it feels like I'm surrounded by aspiring comedians, and these girls don't seem to be very good at anything but playing Japanese comedy-like games with me. Don't get me wrong, I do have a sense of humor. What bothers me is the fact that despite probably being the sanest person around, I only get the *tsukkomi* role in my own mind.

Life can be so unfair.

"Don't play stupid, sensei."

"Fine, enough with that. I'm here to check on you." She raised an eyebrow. "Someone I happen to know decided to skip classes this morning, and as a fairly good teacher I supposed I should pass by and see if there was a problem I could help with. Unfortunately my plans of visiting that particular student were delayed, the reason being simple: this responsible teacher had a school committee meeting to attend to discuss a few issues involving the cultural festival the school will be hosting next month. After finishing her duties the awesome teacher gallantly and nearly literally flew towards her student's home worried that something could have happened to him, only to see that not only he was doing well but also had a pretty girl of his age inside his house for company. Not a trace of a responsible adult around. Their actions only became more suspicious to me when the girl left as soon as the doorbell rang."

"Is that the truth?" I said, my attention completely drawn to a certain detail (which helped me ignore the rest of the story). "About you being worried about me?"

Reikoku-sensei sighed in a cool manner, like a cat.

"Obviously. I am a teacher, after all. *Your* teacher. If I don't worry about my students when they are not present in class, who will?" She really sounded reliable at that moment, and I could see that she really meant what she said last night. "Besides, you could not be expecting me to be coming here just for the delicious, wonderful, free homemade food you cook."

I could have taken it as a joke, but it really bothered me; I never said anything like that, and she didn't sound as sarcastic as she usually did when playing with me. There was something different, and I wanted to know exactly what it was.

"I can, now," I replied calmly with the intention of testing her.

Her surprised silence only confirmed my suspicions. *Touché*, sensei.

Chapter 3: Kouma Part 9 [C3K9]

After a rather dull philosophical discussion on whether fish do or don't have a proper word for 'water', a black and white vampire movie, and several cups of tea, it was finally time for Reikoku-sensei to go home. It was indeed a relief; I was afraid she had decided to spend the night, which would be (in my humble opinion) a little bit more inadequate than me spending the day alone with Kouma. Besides, I'm still not sure of whether she would or would not attack me during the night.

I was just kidding. Stop taking everything so seriously.

"So I guess that means you're coming tomorrow and the day after and so forth."

"...pretty much." She seemed slightly embarrassed, but not to the point of stopping her from coming to my house and eating my food every day.

"Fine." I said after sighing enough to make her believe I was not so fond of the idea when in fact I was. "I'll cook an extra portion from tomorrow on."

"Aren't you supposed to say something like 'but it's not like I want you to come here', or anything like that?"

"I am not a tsundere character, sensei." She seemed delighted to see that I was indeed familiar with the concept. "And even if I was, and I'm definitely not saying I am, you probably wouldn't be my love interest."

She approached me, most likely intentionally using the natural charm of a full grown, older woman. Reikoku-sensei's movements weren't as much as steps, but more like Gravity had completely forgot her existence and without realizing it handed her a license to dance tango alone in mid-air. Interesting. It seems that Gravity stops having such a strong effect on you when you grow up, but that's probably because there are several other things bringing you down already.

"Oh, really? I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"W-why?" There was only a single sentence in my mind, and it was 'don't stand so close to me.'.

She then released a smile clearly tainted with malice and whispered between it, lascivious, waving words flowing from her lips to my ears.

“Because I did correct your first day’s classwork last night.” She then backed off like a little boy who runs away after pressing doorbells. The teasing moment was over. “You, sir, are awfully bad at statistics. *Ciao.*”

Then she walked away, once again vanishing into the night.

Unfortunately for me, I started to realize I was getting used to this kind of relationship. By doing so, I am probably walking baby-steps towards complete insanity.

I won’t complain about that.

Also, I cannot complain about the fact people seem to always be coming to my place since I moved to this town. Thanks to that, I don’t have the time to actually feel lonely or to wonder why my parents haven’t called me yet. In fact, I might even have to thank that monster for keeping that kind of thought out my mind. If Kouma were here, I’m pretty sure she would complement that by saying something along the lines of ‘we are going to thank it alright, personally.’

Hah, how interesting; I’ve got to know a sweeter and actually decent side of her today, but the freaky first impressions won’t go away. Not easily, anyway.

Hah, how odd. I haven’t talked to Ryo since that call in the park. I guess I should text her or something to tell her I’m fine, although I’m pretty sure Kouma handed her a written report on my situation or something like that.

Hah...

After such an unusually tiring day, I only noticed how exhausted I was when I suddenly fell asleep sitting on the couch.

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 1 [C4A1]

You know, I actually believe there is such a thing as Justice in the Universe.

Despite knowing that there are many evil deeds that might go unpunished and good actions that will never directly bear any fruits for their perpetrators, I chose to believe that the Universe is formed by equations that will always get to balance themselves. It doesn't matter how it affect the elements involved in the system, as long as the answer fits the question and vice versa.

There must be equality.

If that was not true, I would have no reason to be running to school today, being the textbook example of 'late.' And yes, that does contrast with me running away from school yesterday, so early in the morning I didn't even met my teacher in the hallways while fleeing.

That's *karma* for you.

It would seem like everything was too perfectly balanced for reality, but I refuse to give it more thought because I still have the whole 'my real world is actually fictional' theory on my mind. To be honest, I probably deserved it. I got trapped in a gruesome nightmare, I ran for a long time, I fought like I haven't fought in years (mind you, my childhood was really tough with all of those mysteries going on). How could I expect anything other than falling asleep on the couch and waking up so late for school I don't even know why I bothered getting up?

So yeah, I believe in Justice. Especially today, because being mad at something you don't believe in is a job for people who don't quite grasp the meaning of the word 'atheism' yet still use it on a daily basis.

That was mean. I liked it.

...and here we go again. I'm glad you did, but I would rather not listen to your unusually kind words or anything coming from you for that matter.

Another rude thought coming from an essentially good boy whose body's endorphin releases do not seem to be successful at achieving the runner's high effect. It's very interesting to see just how out-of-character you can get when she is not around, or should I say 'in character at last'?

What are you babbling about? I am acting as I always do. No, I am not even acting: I am *thinking* and you cannot cause harm to others with your thought alone, only with your actions.

Nevertheless you just tried to and proved yourself wrong in your own terms, considering your belief that I am not a part of you. Of course I could demand an apology as a habitant of your mind, but I think I'll settle down if you admit that no one is as nice as you pretend to be when you're next to her.

My mind belongs only to myself and I won't apologize or justify myself to anyone for anything that stays inside its limits, particularly to you, who is but an unwanted guest, a despicable intruder in my inner kingdom. Begone, ye evil spirit!

You're getting hotter, getting hotter...

By the way, I mean it as in the hot-cold game. I am not attracted to you.

Oh, please! That thought would never cross my mind and...

Or am I?

"...excuse me, what?"

It doesn't really matter; either way, I am just the voice inside your head.

Just go away, will you?

Sure, i-it's not like I enjoy being near you o-or anything.

...

The absence of italic-underlined talk that followed was unsettling for some reason, but since it brought back my narrative it probably is a good thing. There are indeed a few unsettling and good things in life but most of them cannot even be thought of so early in the morning, especially in a presumably fictional universe under the risk of receiving a different rating and (for the lack of a better word) exciting some impressionable readers while greatly upsetting their beloved mothers.

Back to the work-safe 'running to school' we go.

Other than the sound of my feet stomping on the streets and the steady, fast heartbeats pulsing through me, there was absolutely nothing. At daybreak, the lingering silence in the town was as audible as the frail sounds my body produced, and it seemed to swallow them like quicksand. But as swiftly as the mythical god who shared the name with the chemical element once known as quicksilver...

...no, seriously: That's it? You're going away because I asked you to, easy as that? Aren't you going to make any nasty comments about my overly dramatic manners, remind me of how particularly creepy the trees are this morning, or anything like that at all?

I don't need to. You just did.

And then the strange voice left me and my narrative alone in a silent, distressingly weird world that was now too full of green for my personal fear-driven taste. Needless to say, in light of the circumstances, I ran just as Mercury would if he were a paranoid teenager with a disturbing and flirtatious inner voice while surrounded by mysteries and suspicious trees.

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 2 [C4A2]

Attached is a small yet interesting report on the results of running too fast and for too long to school.

Good news: I might have broken a world record of speed (we would have the exact number if I had waited for the patrol car to catch up)!

Bad news: I might have broken something else too.

Good news: My fear of trees made me lose weight; I even feel lighter!

Bad news: According to the last doctor I've seen, I should actually gain some weight in order to reach the ideal weight for someone of my height and age. However, I am also not sure if I should trust him, since Dr. Olaf turned out to be a vampire in disguise. He could have been just trying to fatten up his next meal.

Good news: I actually made it to the gates two minutes before they are usually closed, which means I either distorted space and time while running or... no, I think that's the only explanation I have right now. Space-time distortion, that's pretty much it. Sounds reasonable enough for my brain, which is currently just as tired as the rest of my body.

Bad news: I don't think I want to enter those gates, especially because once I do there will be no turning back.

Right, I know I did that whole box burning number yesterday, but that's just something I did (pardon my non-French ambiguous expression) in the heat of the moment. Just like Kouma said, it was meaningless. It's easy to act manly when you don't actually need to and right now I don't know if it was the exhausting race against the clock or something else, but it sure feels like I spent all of my Special Power on that and now even pressing up-up-down-down-left-right-left-right-B-A-start won't help me.

That's it. It's not even eleven o'clock and I already had a rough day, or at least what a common high school student as I aspire to be should consider a rough day. I am just going home and...

...

Absolutely nothing happened.

No one came out of nowhere with an interesting teaser sentence. No one decided to spend time with me to get my head out of my personal problems with random stuff. No one stood up, looked straight into my eyes and made me take a decision when I found myself at a turning-point.

Nothing like that happened at all.

Even though I invoked the trope (suspension point included and everything), no one came for me. Even though I really wanted them to, no one showed up. Even though I felt like I really needed them, no one saved my day.

Lifting my briefcase and putting it behind me by passing it over my shoulder, feeling the leather touch my back through the sweaty shirt, I started walking steadily.

Thank you, everyone. I had to break that awful habit of mine on my own, without relying on walking canes.

“Hah!” Feeling very brave after passing the gates, I spun and almost danced with my arms open as if challenging the whole world. Somehow I managed to stop myself before the applied energy was strong enough to send my briefcase flying away, but not without reluctance; laws of Physics work whether you like them or not, and whether you know them or not. “It’s time for me to live the dre...”

As I finished my gracious yet completely manly spin, I noticed that I wasn’t the only one around. By the time it dawned on me, I wasn’t sure if I should be glad or sad that the faces I saw were familiar.

“You’re right. It is very hard to sneak up on him.”

“I know. If it wasn’t for that passionate anime character imitation of his at the café, I think I would never be able to.”

“Now I kind of want to see that, especially after you spending roughly thirty minutes of a phone call talking about it. Do you think he’s going to do it again? I guess I’ll finally have a reason for frequenting that dreadful place.”

“Maybe next time, we can record his despaired impersonation with a cell phone and put it on the Internet.”

“Probably along with that spin, it was very amusing.”

“Indeed.”

Facing that kind of situation, I should feel embarrassed and strange...

“Good morning, girls. What are you up to in this beautiful morning?”

...but I just didn’t want to feel that way.

“Hm.” Kouma raised her eyebrow. “This wasn’t quite the outcome I expected. I have mixed feelings about this.” Did she just say that she has some sort of feelings out loud? “We arrived earlier today to make sure no blank cards or other suspicious objects were placed anywhere in our class.”

Ryo didn’t seem tired; she seemed to sparkle. It was like the cases I was so tired of were exactly what she needed to feel alive, and it showed. “Also, after doing a little research we found out that nothing

unusual has happened in the past days except for an unfortunate incident with bananas.”

“Nothing supernatural, though.” I felt relief when Kouma finally stopped staring at me and decided to focus on Ryo. “People often forget how their peels can be dangerous if left on the floor.”

The school chime rang, and then I realized that we have just wasted the two minutes I had to bend time and space to get.

“Let’s go, we’re going to be late! I don’t think Reikoku-sensei will let us...”

“Oh, don’t worry: she will let us in.” Ryo had a good example of her cat-like smiles on her face and she was pointing it at me. “Kouma already told her we could be a little bit late because of a project and Reikoku-sensei said it was okay. We have five minutes of tolerance today.”

“A little project with Koukishin-kun,” hissed the fashionista, her eyes gently rolling up towards the skies. The silent movement of her lips at me added, “Teacher’s pet.”

Sighing sounded like the only reasonable thing to do in such a weird situation.

“Anyway, we should discuss this later. We can be observed by our unknown enemy while in school, and since there’s a good chance he or she is in our classroom, we’ll probably be watched closely.”

“So you did notice.” Kouma grinned like there was no tomorrow, and when looking at her I almost believed it so. “Our school rules are not that strict, but the only ones who could go inside our classroom without being stopped by the inspectors are our own classmates.”

“Actually, no: I saw the exact opposite happening that day. When I entered the building, it was completely empty and no one even showed up to try and stop me from running away like a crazy person. And I’m a transfer student, so no one here knows me. Honestly, I think the security here is very, very lame.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” After seeing her argument discredited, Kouma Yon almost sounded offended. “We’ll have a lot to discuss on our meeting later at my place. For example, why would the staff...”

“Hey...” Ryo interrupted, and surprisingly I wasn’t pleased with that. Kouma sounded like she had a strong hint on something that didn’t fit.

“I don’t want to ruin your party but we have exactly one minute to enter the school building and get into our room.” A small pause was added by Ryo, most likely for comedy effect. We played along with it, despite knowing that we were wasting time we didn’t actually have. “That happens to be located on the third floor.”

The image of Reikoku-sensei making a countdown filled my mind, and by the look on the girls’ faces I wasn’t the only one thinking about what would happen if she said ‘zero’ before we reached the room.

“Don’t worry!” I screamed as we ran towards school. “I can bend time and space!”

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 3 [C4A3]

Apparently, it doesn't work every time I want it to.

Which is awful, now that I think about it. How awesome would it be if I could use that all the time, really? If I had the control over that gift, I would be able to prevent disasters, avoid problems and even fight crime. But better than all that, we wouldn't have been late for Reikoku-sensei's class by an entire thirteen seconds.

What scared us the most was that not only she was waiting for us at the door but that she didn't say a single word until we got past her. In fact, there was not a single sound in the classroom and it seemed to me that my classmates were just dolls made of flesh because Ryo, Kouma and I were the only ones moving and it surely was not as if we had much of a choice. The rest of the class was standing dead still, but most likely because they knew that we, who against all odds received a five minute tolerance from the most feared teacher in the school and yet seemingly broke it in defiance were the ones who were closest to death.

It was a mixture of pure respect with a strong desire not to join the about-to-be-killed party, and it disturbed me that they seemed quite used to it. Had anything like this ever happened before? What was the outcome of the previous group or individual's actions? Who will bury our bodies?

It doesn't really matter. I don't think we'll live to find an answer to any of those questions. Since it is my time to go, I shall leave with no regrets. It was a good life, anyway.

No, not really.

"Take your seats. Class is about to start." Our homeroom teacher said in monotone and almost mechanically we obeyed: I think it is common sense that we pushed our luck as far as we could for a year or probably, a whole lifetime. Does that mean we're not going to die today? Well, I suppose at least not immediately. This is great, right? Right? I suppose so, since I haven't even gotten a chance to lead a good life so far. So, in this situation even having an awful past is a good thing, right?

No, not really...

Full stop. I know where this is going and I don't want to walk that road again. I need to think positive. Yeah, think positive. This kind of thought hasn't taken you anywhere in the past and you decided to change this on your own today, right? Keep that in mind and you will be fine. That whole incident wasn't dangerous at all, and there is no teacher that would kill students just for being late. You are only being over-dramatic, as always.

"Aah, that was dangerous. You could really have died there."

Theatrically I turned to face the person that uttered those words and tell her 'you are not helping at all,' and then I noticed there was someone else sitting by my side other than Kouma Yon. While my bipolar I-

am-not-so-sure-if-I-can-call-her-a-friend was quietly on my left side, the high pitched voice that warned me came from the opposite direction.

"Aah, hello! My name is Morimoto Ayaka! Nice to meet you!"

"Oh, hello. I'm Koukishin Shinzou, but you can call me Shin-tsu." I stop myself for a while and think. This girl is not familiar to me, and I have a fairly decent memory for faces and voices. We obviously didn't meet Monday, otherwise she wouldn't be introducing herself today. Also, while Kouma was sitting I guess. Oh, right; focus. "Sorry to ask, but I don't remember you being here when I was introduced to class. Why haven't we met before?"

The girl giggled. Clearly, an easily amused person.

"Aah, that day. I had a cold and stayed home. I feel much better now, though!" She surely looked pretty much radiant to me. "Aah, I came to school yesterday and heard about you, but you weren't here. Did you catch a cold too?"

"N-not really..."

Now, what kind of poor, infantile logic was that? Is she serious? Everyone I talk to in this city seems to be slightly weird, but so far they have been closer to the eccentric genius type than the happy-go-lucky with a stupid and clearly unfitting verbal tic. Even if I accept this world as a fictional work that kind of character won't fit here at all. Not that I am pleased with the way this world is, but inserting this kind of wannabe-moe character in such a weird story would be unacceptable. Well, unless...

...unless this is just a farce. That would definitely fit and advance the plot. That would also be something that voice would say, so I'd better stay away from thoughts like this. For now, at least.

Suddenly, a piece of paper appears on my desk.

Déjà vu.

Considering the events that happened so far in the story, I am not sure if I should touch it or not. You know, 'once bitten, twice shy' and stuff. However, it came from Kouma's direction, it was considerably bigger than a business card and it had words written on it. Better-than-decently handwritten *kanji* (which means Ryo wasn't the one who wrote them) with small characters above that, different from the *kanji*, that I could actually memorize; the *furigana* allowed me to understand what the rather complex ideograms meant.

What I didn't understand was why Kouma Yon was acting so considerate of me today. I mean, she actually was nice enough yesterday for me to start wondering what was going on with her, but since I made her leave when our teacher arrived (which doesn't sound very friendly, no matter how I look at it) I assumed she would be slightly more... angered, perhaps? She did whisper something to me this morning that suggests that she got the wrong idea of last night's events, but why be discrete when she could easily make Ryo suspicious of me by saying it out loud? Maybe that's how she evens things in her

head. I'm not so sure right now, and I might never be: understanding that girl sounds like an extremely hard task to me.

For now, I'd better stop daydreaming and start reading her message.

I don't really care about your relationship with Reikoku-sensei.

What kind of an opening line was that? Am I supposed to answer that? How? Not only that, why does that sound so absurdly tsundere to me? Was Reikoku-sensei right about Kouma's personality, then? And why would someone bring an orange ink pen to school, for heaven's sake? It's not even practical!

Focus: confusion is exactly what she is expecting from me, because confusion often leads to errors. Right now this is a battle field and I must defend myself while showing my own fangs in order to avoid another attack. Against an ambiguous non-question as hers, a straight faux-answer seemed to be the only way to go.

Good, because there isn't any. Not of the kind you are thinking there is, anyway.

Then I realized that Kouma Yon is ambidextrous, but I wish I had found that out under more normal circumstances. She barely looked at my reply and started writing back right away with her left hand, while easily copying text from the blackboard to her notebook with the right one (which is a very impressive skill that must require a lot of training and good coordination from the start). I guess it would be safe to assume that she already had her next line ready before I handed her the paper. Soon came the confirmation to that thought, and I was not pleased to find out that my intuition was proven right.

Oh, and what would that be?

Great, now she'll just play stupid and expect me to keep speaking until she gets enough evidence to prove her points. Well, I'm not going to fall for that. That game is something that can be played by two individuals.

Don't do that. Don't pretend to be pure and naïve on the subject when you called me "teacher's pet" earlier today. You know exactly what I am talking about.

While I probably should not respond like that to someone playing the role of super detective in her head, I assumed it would be the best way to deal with Kouma: to fight cynicism with more cynicism.

She comes to your house at night and you need to hide the fact that there was another girl with you. Not only that, you knew it was her before you even looked through the looking glass, which implies that you knew she would visit you. Could it be that our teacher has gone to your house at the same time since day one? And what kind of "extracurricular affairs" would a male student and a female teacher have need resolved during nighttime?

So, Kouma does care about my relationship with Reikoku-sensei. To be honest, I even detected a hint of jealousy in her words. However, pointing that out right now would probably just make this discussion worse and not help me at all with my argument. Therefore, my only option is to distract her from the core of the subject as much as I can. Reikoku-sensei would get into serious trouble if rumors like those

spread, and I don't want anyone to be hurt just for caring about me. As a reply, let me see... Oh, I know: *reductio ad absurdum* seems to be a good way out.

Now you're just being unreasonable. Seriously, do you really think someone like me would be able to successfully seduce our teacher? Not only that, but in a single day?

When I looked at Kouma Yon after delivering the piece of paper, it initially seemed to me that my argument had found a reluctant target. After a few moments of observation, however, her deep sigh gave me an idea of what would come in the next message. Apparently I had won, although not without some sort of resistance.

You obviously could have talked to her before, just like you did to Ryo-chan before coming here. However, even if you had the chance to talk to our teacher before, it does sound impossible for someone like you to even attract the attention of someone like Reikoku-sensei.

That one actually offended my pride, but I'd better deal with it. A victory that requires some sacrifice is probably better than losing. It comes along with the job, I suppose.

Trying to look completely innocent (which technically, I am), I turned to face Kouma and saw her twirling her finger in the air. I'm not sure if I was distracted or something, but it certainly took me some time to understand what she meant by that gesture. As I turned the piece of paper around I saw what she meant by that hand sign. There was more.

What's happening, then?

There were two paths I could follow, and choosing between them would directly affect my future, mostly because of the Butterfly effect. However, this time I think the typhoon will happen here in Japan. And yes, I know that's not exactly how it works. I just needed an analogy, so go ahead and sue me.

I could either lie and keep lying until everyone found out or tell her a plausible yet toned down version of the truth and hope that she doesn't investigate any further. Despite my reputation, I don't consider myself a good liar, therefore, the solution to that problem is obvious.

It's really hard to explain, but Reikoku-sensei is taking care of me, nothing more than that. Truth is, I don't handle being alone in that big house very well. I'm really sorry I freaked out last night, I don't know what I was doing. Now that I think about it, I had no reason to make you leave. Could you forgive me?

I saw the eyes of Kouma Yon moving quickly and reading the paper not once, but four times, like it was a business contract where she assumed the other party had planted some kind of trap clauses in microscopic writing font. I wonder if this is how obscure spiritual entities feel when offering deals to people in this century. Now that I think about it, I could have asked how they felt. I've had many, many chances to do so. Instead, I would just run to save my life. Now I'll have to hope to meet another one in order to find out. Wait, what?

She crushed the paper and threw it at her bag, without any apparent intention of proceeding with the interrogatory. Then she looked at me, and her face was the same but somehow looked slightly different.

It doesn't make much sense even to me, and it makes me wonder if I'm the only one on Earth that can see the small hints of emotions in her face.

"...good."

That was pretty much it.

After that, we went back to that particular state where she practically doesn't talk to me that is not as uncomfortable as the state where she locks arms with me for no apparent reason. I guess that means things are alright between us then. At least enough for Ryo not to suspect anything during lunch.

No memorable events happened from that moment until the end of classes, except maybe for the occasional small talk with Ayaka, who unlike the other people I know in this town, is not a disguised teenage expert at anything or a grown woman who is probably unreasonably feared by the ones who should feel at ease around her in order to learn as much as they can in an environment they find safe. And yes, since even my dear friend Shiina Ryo showed an exquisite side to her I wasn't aware of when I needed help, I cannot count her as a 'normal' person anymore.

Morimoto Ayaka was just your normal, regular, common, usual, habitual, familiar, ordinary, plain, standard air head girl character that would have no particular characteristic worth describing if it wasn't for her cartoon-like verbal tic (which she forgets occasionally, and makes me wonder if she didn't subconsciously develop that in order to blend in). It was nice to talk to someone that could actually speak like someone my age is supposed to speak, even if her topics are a little bit dull when compared to the information dumps I get from everyone.

No wonder I was suspicious of her in the beginning. I never get to meet normal people.

The students quickly left the room after the school bell rang to announce the end of classes for that particular day, leaving behind only Kouma Yon, Shiina Ryo and the transfer student that prefers to be called by a nickname that he doesn't even remember how, when or why he got it. Said student would have happily followed the hordes to the mystic gates that led to the world outside if it weren't for his unusual friends who apparently couldn't discuss how the plot of the game they were currently working on should go and walk at the same time. The student was extremely disappointed at their lack of ability in multi-tasking, but also knew that with those two, the best thing to do was waiting.

"Koukishin-kun?"

"Yes, Reikoku-sensei?"

"I will speak to you now." It was not a question or a request, like people usually do when they want to have a conversation with each other. My teacher, just as my friends, seems to have absolutely no common sense. She briefly looked at Ryo and Kouma, who stood by my side. "In private."

As the girls hurried out like they saw something awfully life threatening (and they probably did, if you think about how the other students react to our teacher), Reikoku-sensei proceeded.

"In the future, please refrain from being late and having the girls conceal the evidence of your laziness. Consider this as a warning, because it's your first offense. It won't work, and you'll just make everyone worry about you."

Maybe it was because I already expected most of that or because I have a sort of selective attention deficit, but it is fact that the only element that interested me was the one that was completely new in that kind of speech.

"Were you worried, sensei?"

"I don't know where you picked that idea from. I never said such thing."

And yet she didn't deny it.

"...thank you, sensei."

"You're welcome," she said while sorting papers. "Now I would be pleased if you go and stay out of trouble, although I am fully aware that you will ignore the latter part."

"How much do you know, sensei?"

"Nearly nothing, but enough to see that having two girls walking around asking questions of practically everyone on the school staff is an easy way of getting attention. I won't ask you to tell me what are you up to, but your group should be slightly more careful. Considering that the three of you are working on something that requires secrecy, that is."

"Understood." I bowed, which seemed slightly unnecessary a second after I did it. "We'll be more careful from now on."

"Excellent. You may go now. Just be sure to let your friends know that I do not like it when my students stay outside the room trying to listen to conversations I specifically classified as 'private,' will you?"

The incredibly fast sound of footsteps rhythmically stomping the floor that followed came from the hallway and seemed to fill the whole school.

"Seriously, how did you know that?"

"Oh." Reikoku-sensei bit her pencil softly and grinned. "I didn't."

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 4 [C4A4]

"We need a name."

Kouma and I were still eating when Ryo said that, completely out of nowhere. This is how our investigation actually began.

Now using the house of the Kouma family as their temporary base, the unnamed, clearly improvised detective team gathered to start working on the unusual case that had directly affected one of their members. Against my personal expectations, Kouma Yon's bedroom is absurdly normal. Probably as normal as it gets, I'm afraid. There is not even a single thing here worth describing with a shower of adjectives or comparisons to nature forces. This is really plain and disappointing on so many levels.

"A name, you say?" said the unusual girl whose room didn't reflect her personality in any way.

"Yes, a name."

Now that's weird.

"I'm sorry; I am a little bit confused." My right hand rose to gather their attention. "I am aware that you are a novelist and probably know more about plots than I do but, much to my dismay, my vast experience in the Mystery field taught me that in this particular kind of case the name of the offender is usually the last thing you are going to get." Pondering that last sentence, I stopped my speech for a while. "Unless, of course, you consider the possibility of having the criminal try running away after the revelation moment, thus making the last scene an action-fueled chase. It is also possible the accused party will try to kill or restrain the detectives in order to keep their dreadful secrets safe, but I suppose this kind of development is not that popular anymore thanks to the boom of crime investigation series. Hopefully we are not dealing with an old-school villain, otherwise one of us will get kidnapped very, very soon."

As soon as I finished talking I noticed the way Ryo was looking at me, and it didn't take me a great deal of time to understand that the odds were incredibly high that the face she was making was exactly the same as mine when she started talking about music. Oh, dear. I just remembered that. She was so absolutely perfect at that moment...

Silently we kept on glaring at each other's faces for a while, burning deep down with unresolved tension in such a powerful way I could not even think of a reason holding back our foreseeable incandescent eruption.

"No, not on my watch."

And there it was.

Literally between us was a person who remained a strange element in our relationship and had a thing for making me remember how fierce her pinch could be. Her moderately long yet unreasonably sharp

baby blue fingernails served as a call of the real world for me and often reminded me that we weren't gathered for a party. We had a supernatural case to solve and technically no clues to do so.

Certainly it's not time for us to relax and I probably will remember this in the future even when Kouma Yon finally goes back home, but not for the right reasons. My arms will have become giant, deep purple bruises by then. What a fabulous memento.

It could be worse, right? I mean, it's not like her fingernails are tainted with my blood or anything. Unfortunately, there is a great chance she is avoiding that only because she just got her nails done. I cannot blame her for that, since baby blue *is* a fairly decent color and it sure matches the rest of her deceptively cute look. I just wish she would be more considerate of others (particularly when 'me' is an element of that potentially finite group 'others'), that's all. It's not like I am asking a lot, really...

By the time I came back to reality, I noticed Kouma's concerned look. Maybe it's because I had stood still for several minutes but most likely it was because the 'call of the real world' attack of her pretty claws of absolute doom not only didn't help, but produced the perfect opposite of the effect she was expecting.

"Hmm..." I looked to Ryo. "I just had another one of those moments, didn't I?"

Her face had already given me the answer I anticipated, but she insisted on stating it.

"Yes, you did. It was really awkward, but at least now I know you weren't ignoring me when it happened Sunday. You probably have the same problem with daydreams as that main character from that particularly famous medical television series."

"You mean that particular show that decided to change a little bit of its formula after a faux-finale at season eight?" Kouma said, suddenly interested. I wasn't that surprised, considering it's only natural for a young girl to like pop culture. Not that there is anything truly 'natural' about Kouma Yon. "Specifically that one. I really like it."

"Me too. Back to the topic, I believe Shin-tsu does that kind of thing just because he enjoys being rude to people."

Ryo shook her head and started twirling her long silky hair.

"Hmm, I find that argument very unlikely to be true. Shin-tsu has always been polite to me, and he does call you by your family name as a sign of respect. Obviously, he could use a few lessons on daily usage of Japanese language, since the quality of his speech alternates between extremely basic textbook-like sentences and complex television references that might sound obscure to the average person. Except for his utterly disturbing, almost complete lack of honorifics, it's not that bad, anyway."

Listening to her talking like that made me think that it's really a big deal.

"It might be just a trait of his personality or a result of living abroad for so long, but I guess he will get better with practice." She finally took a break after another lecture and then added in a much lower, nearly whispery voice. "Hopefully."

“What would be your hypothesis, then?”

Ryo had a serious look on her face, and for a moment I thought she was going to tell me that I suffer from an incurable disease or that she was my father. I’m terribly sorry about that particular reference, but I couldn’t help it because it was a lame joke but full of Force.

“He is a hero character in denial. He has everything he needs to be a strong protagonist that could solve the mystery and defeat the bad guys after an epic battle, but never used his powers for the greater good and probably not even for his own good, and that’s why the plot never advances as it should and you can hardly see any character or relationship developments. He is completely stuck at the second act of the story, forever.”

I assume this is the moment where I’m supposed to explain to the reader what they are talking about, considering the following facts: a) my assumptions were right and this is a story; b) there is a reader who is interested and c) he or she is not a writer or a literary critic, therefore probably could not understand that. Obviously this still sounds very unreasonable to me, but in light of the events of my life, one can see that nothing good would come out of getting upset about such things. So, let’s play along for a change.

Many stories use the Three-act Structure, at least enough for your subconscious to have learned it and make you ‘expect’ things from movies you never saw before despite being brand new. Most Hollywood movies are like that, and you cannot blame them: the only reason why a trope becomes a trope in the first place is because it worked fine.

The first act is where the main characters and the setting are established, and it is called ‘the Setup.’ At some point, something bad happens and takes the protagonists out of their comfort zone and makes the story actually start (without conflict, there is no plot). One can say that in my case, I have lived in this particular stage for a surprisingly long time, and this leads us to the second act, ‘the Confrontation.’ Here the protagonists try to fix everything and end up making it worse because they are doing it completely wrong. So far, check.

If only I could find out what I need to change in my attitude to reach the next act.

“That’s an interesting point of view.” Kouma took a pause, and seemed to be seriously pondering it. “So, all the bad things that supposedly happened to him would just be mere unused plot devices?”

“Exactly. But the situation has changed now he has two sidekicks, so there is a great chance the plot is advancing as we speak.”

“Hold on, I am definitely not okay with that.” Raising her left hand, Kouma stated, “The idea of being a sidekick does not please me at all, so I would like to offer an alternate interpretation to this matter.”

I could feel the levels of tension rising between the two of them, which was probably due to Kouma Yon disagreeing with Shiina Ryo. It’s safe to assume that this kind of thing does not happen often, and for a good reason. They both seem to have taken it personally.

“Please proceed,” said my closest friend after clenching her teeth, her eyebrow clearly wanting to reach the skies.

"From my point of view, we are equal main characters representing the three parts of Freud's model of the psyche. It has been done many times before, and it still sells because it makes a balanced team that people can relate to."

Several moments of silence followed, and just when I was fully prepared to start a discussion over her Freudian approach to nearly every single thing Ryo spoke, leaving me open-mouthed.

"You know what, that actually fits." The tension vanished as quickly as it came. "So, you think we're representations of *ego*, *id* and *superego*?"

"Precisely, except one of us is not playing his role properly." She glared at me with sheer accusation in her eyes. "That's right Shin-tsu, I'm talking about you."

"Wait, what?" The fact that someone finally decided to start talking to me took me by surprise, I admit it. Does that mean it's my turn to become one of the actors with lines instead of just being an observer whose life is being analyzed and criticized on stage?

"As one could deduce from my statements, two thirds of this team are playing their roles properly. Being a natural stoic, absolutely rational and highly competent, I should be classified as this group's *superego*." She said it like was something to be completely proud of, intentionally forgetting to notice the 'socially inept,' 'apparently emotionless,' and 'cynical'. The attribute 'super' certainly fits her *ego*. "Then we have Ryo-chan, who is emotionally mature, balanced and compassionate; a clear example of *ego*."

Since I didn't see a problem with that second statement, I decided to save my rants for the end of her theory presentation.

"I see where you're going." Ryo smiled, but not with the lovely innocence I so quickly got used to. "You're implying Shin-tsu needs to act a little bit more like an *id* guy instead of having that *ego* attitude?"

"Exactly." Kouma seemed completely satisfied. "Sounds very reasonable."

"I am glad we agree on that."

Do I need to point out that I wasn't pleased with that?

"Excuse me, but what are you talking about?"

"Look, it's not that we don't like you the way you are..."

"On that matter, speak for yourself." Kouma Yon abruptly interrupted Ryo's speech, and the reason behind her actions was so obvious it was almost suspicious.

"Alright; it's not that I don't like you the way you are, but I honestly believe that in order to tip the balance you'll have to be, well... slightly more impulsive."

“Hedonistic.”

“Whimsical.”

“Overtly lecherous.”

That was the exact point when both Shiina Ryo and I turned to face a clearly embarrassed fashionista whose face desperately tried not to admit it in front of others. It's safe to say my team had reached a moment that could be only described as 'awkward.' Several seconds later, the absence of sound still lingered.

“Just for the record, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that; it's a valid characteristic of the *id*.”

Even after she tried fixing it, the nearly solid silence created by Kouma Yon's reckless words would not go away. I just had to do something about it.

“...could we just move on?” I suggested. “We still have a mystery to solve, after all.”

Suddenly I felt my shoulder being patted, and a mere turning of the head confirmed that Ryo was the source of that friendly gesture. Yeah, like there was a chance Kouma would demonstrate any kind of affection towards me in front of Ryo. Wait a second... she locked arms with me in public yesterday, so I'm not sure of what she is capable of. There is no need to worry, anyway, she was probably just feeling cold. Hopefully.

“Oh, relax. We still have plenty of time, and it might be a good idea to make the mood a little lighter.” My friend gave me one of her signature smiles and it was convincing enough for me to want to feed her milk in a bowl. “I too was a little worried in the beginning, but there's nothing good that can come out of rushing or despairing over such things. Your mind will probably work better after you spend some time not worrying about your problems, so I want you to treat this stress release moment as a measure to get yourself ready to fully understand the case.”

“I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but it's clearly not working.” This whole pointless analysis was actually making me more nervous about my current situation. “Your intentions might be good and I am thankful for that, but this is not a common state of affairs for normal people, this is a...”

And then I realized.

I have been thrown into this kind of situation so many times, so it's very hard for me not to search for patterns instead of proper clues. Surely it feels like I have a built-in mechanism for the unusual, and that's why I wasn't immediately able to see through this; it's something completely different from the things I have fought (or rather ran from) before. The only thing I didn't have the chance of dealing with.

If you manage to ignore the increasing supernatural elements and the fact every single person that crosses my path always seems to be on the verge of insanity (or much past it, in several cases), and if only you ignore the continuous flow of the plot you will see too.

They are all completely normal, in the end.

After all, they are just teenagers, all of them. Just essentially common youngsters living in a world made of youth with their sad teen issues, being and acting just as weird as their age allows them to because deep down they know that soon will come a time where they won't have the chance to do so. There is absolutely nothing complex in it, despite their masks and monologues to an audience visible only to themselves.

Therefore, this case can be solved quite easily. It might leave an awfully bad aftertaste in my mouth, especially because when compared to other detective stories and even my own previous 'cases' it will certainly look like cheating to everyone, including myself. Like one of those cheap *novellas* where the bad guy only appears in the last two pages, not being directly related to anyone in the plot and dying soon afterwards. Like a classically trained musician who decides to play in a pop-punk band for a living.

Through this stress-induced catharsis, I may have found a game breaker.

Instead of wasting several days pursuing small or useless clues that would just act as lies-to-children, forcing us to seek for a bigger Truth, I am going to skip the boring parts and go straight to the clever tactical maneuver moment just because I can.

The reason for doing such a trick, you ask? It's very, very simple: my opponent is also not following the rules. Obviously, in a mystery/crime and punishment story you should expect that at least one person is not following the law. If they were, there is a great chance you wouldn't have a case from the very beginning. Despite that, my unknown foe broke rules so basic that, in order to be on the same level and achieve victory I must 'cheat.'

The hidden enemy broke a Father Knox's Commandment, and that action is completely unacceptable to me.

When you see yourself involved in so many cases as I have, you realize that the only way to survive until the next school transfer is to trace patterns and know your tropes. I mean, how are you, a common teenager, supposed to hide from a six-meter-tall one-eyed wild creature if you don't know when it appears/attacks, or what can you do to make an ancient yet incredibly in-shape mummy dizzy enough for you to escape safely from a pyramid full of traps that at the very least will hold you back for a moment or two? You ought to have information, especially when your life depends on it.

Books were my first choice as sources of information. Despite not being a technology hater like my grandfather (who doesn't even trusts telephones), there is something about the scent and the feel of paper books that make me calm and relaxed. Believe me, there are not many things that can get me into that state of mind.

Unlike Ryo, who will indiscriminately read any novel of any genre she comes across and then spend a great deal of time writing not unusually sharp reviews and articles about it on the Internet, the only genres of book that interest me (and not for reasons I should be pleased with) are Mystery and Horror. Forensic science articles (which I suppose both Kouma and Reikoku-sensei read in the same fashion as other people would read Sunday newspaper's comics) were never something I paid too much attention to, especially because I have always assumed that the day I actually needed to get directly to a morgue for a *causa mortis* analysis it would be my own, and then I wouldn't have much work to do other than stay there while other people with pointy things opened my body and found an alien baby in my chest.

Or something like that, I am not so sure right now.

Back to the topic, classic mystery novels were the best. Of course, they were usually filled with cheesy and unrealistic dialogue and the solutions got either predictable or impossible after a while, but their cases, murders, and other crimes were decent escapes from an everyday life of, say, murders and other crimes. They provided me methods for solving cases and occasionally an accurate insight into the criminal's modus operandi. While reading them, I realized that the mysteries of this world are ruled by tropes.

Father Knox's Ten Commandments for the Detective Club were a good set of them, and they show exactly what a good case should avoid in order to actually be a good case. Without abiding by those rules, the stories often end up looking like a mess and making the reader feel cheated and like the author was too lazy to provide a decent ending. Readers don't like unrealistic novels, even when the genre is Fantasy; if the author fails to suspend disbelief, the story suffers.

Why do those Commandments work in several of the mysteries I came across so far? Simple; they are rules especially designed to make a story believable and the closest to real as it can be. Thus it is obvious that, if properly created, they would also work in real life; otherwise the laws would be pointless because they would fail their only purpose.

So far, the setting was good: a developing town attracts a lot of attention to itself, and high school crime stories are selling well these days. The rules were being respected or subverted decently: the detective did not commit the crime (which would be the most awkward situation ever, unless I had another personality I was not aware of), my Watsons are far from stupid but they certainly do not conceal their thoughts, no poison involved, I'm pretty sure the criminal has been mentioned in the story, no secret passages anywhere to be seen (although that's probably the point), no visible twins either, I have shared all the clues I have so far and if anyone classifies as the foreigner in this story, that guy would be me. The only accident that happened in this story didn't help me; instead it brought me the whole mystery and this doesn't sound like 'helping' at all.

Only one Commandment left.

The law my opponent broke was the most important to me, the one I always hoped would be respected in the case: there should be no supernatural or preternatural powers involved. It's exactly what makes cases believable and honest. Therefore, I now have the right to stop being a nice guy and break the formula.

"Oh." Kouma's face was very close to mine, and she was holding a small lit flashlight in front of my eyes. After she realized I was awake she turned it off and kept looking directly at me while talking to Ryo, who was not in my line of sight. "It seems like he is back."

Footsteps pattered.

"Gosh, you scared us!" I saw my friend running to me from the kitchen, her cell phone in hand. "You haven't said a single word in seven minutes and just stood there, completely motionless. I was calling the hospital already!"

She was obviously worried and for some reason it made me smile, probably because it's nice to know that I have people who really care about me.

"By the way, your telephone signal here is really awful." She added slightly more calm, with the clear lack of common sense people have in those kinds of situations showing.

"Suspend the ambulance, I'm alright. Instead of that, please bring me a *kanji* dictionary." I stand up, mostly to prove what I said. "I was just thinking, and I believe I have the answer to the question we were going to spend days working on."

Kouma merely nodded.

"You take the expression 'lost in thought' a little bit too serious, Shin-tsu."

"Why, have you got an idea?" Ryo said, ignoring Kouma's unneeded remark.

"An idea, you say? I think I just solved the case."

Savoring the glorious moment of my epiphany, I mischievously looked at them. Now I know why detectives speak like this: it feels really great and I suggest everyone to try it once in a while. After waiting the proper time to give the final blow, I deliver the mysterious sentence that would close the current part of the show with a fade-out.

"All we have to do is to organize a thematic party."

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 5 [C4A5]

We were just two distorted shadow-like figures walking in the sunset until we actually reached our destination.

"Come." I said without showing a trace of shame while opening the heavy metal doors, desperately trying to keep my facade. "Everyone is waiting for us."

"Aah, why are the lights off, Shin-tsu?" she whispered. "You didn't say this was supposed to be a surprise party."

Ayaka was not yet aware that there was not going to be a party and I was actually leading her into a trap that was much more dangerous for me than her. I might be mistaken about her and including an innocent person in this creepy setting, which might cause greater problems with the police and other less forgiving factions in a near future. However, I have already gone too far to simply walk back now. I have to do this or I won't be able to live like a normal person.

So forgive me, Ayaka.

"What exactly do you have in mind, Shin-tsu?" Ayaka continued with syncopated pauses, and unfortunately I was able to detect more than a mere hint of flirtation in her words. Although I was flattered that she thought I had planned this just to be all alone with her in a dark place, it didn't please me to know that her attitude in this situation didn't match the patterns I had traced.

"Lights."

Some lights were turned on, illuminating only the center of the warehouse. The spotlights were rather strong and intimidating, just the kind of lights the police should use in interrogations. Ayaka would finally be able to see the chairs and tables that were hidden in darkness just a few moments ago. If she is smart as I truly believe she is, she probably already realized why the chairs are aligned like that and why we're here. Which finally brings us to the third act, known as 'the Resolution.'

I guess it is show time.

"It was you, wasn't it Ayaka-chan?"

Ayaka looked genuinely surprised at the unspecific accusation, but it didn't mean she was not the culprit, just that she wasn't expecting a confrontation at that very moment. No mistakes on her part so far, and she actually gained a few points with that flirting that was certainly unlike the character I had in mind when I 'solved' the mystery...

...however, with the lights on it's easier to see things that would otherwise be ignored such as the no longer concealed yet still closed pantographic knife she held in her right hand. That whole flirtation thing was most likely a bluff of hers, and despite the damage my self-esteem suffered, it did feel good to know

that the target I picked wasn't a saint after all. Even if she thought I intended to attack her, walking around with a German post-war knife is not something every Japanese high schooler does.

"W-what are you t-talking about?"

I guess she realized that she was looking too scared for someone who didn't know what I was talking about and quickly recomposed herself. Too quickly, exactly as I expected; that fit perfectly in the pattern I had in mind and showed me that I was going in the right direction.

"First you brought me to this... this abandoned warehouse without an apparent reason. Now you start talking nonsense." Ayaka was starting to show her true colors, and then suddenly started wearing her good girl mask again. "Aah, I don't know what you intend to do, but you can count me out of it. I'm leaving. Bye bye."

Rapidly, I snapped my fingers and the doors were closed and locked. Ayaka looked back when she heard the noise, and when she turned to me again her face was expressing much more than the fear of someone who is alone with a possible attacker. I was right, thankfully: without a trace of doubt, Morimoto Ayaka is guilty. And I know I'm not supposed to, but I certainly love this.

"You're not going anywhere until I finish talking."

I started to walk through the rows of chairs, apparently aimlessly. "If this was our class you would sit right there, am I right? And that place behind you used to belong to your best friend Minato." A calculated pause "Please forgive me, I've made a dreadful mistake. It's 'former best friend,' right? Not many people stay friends with the people dating the ones they love."

Her astonishment was much more than visible, being nearly as tangible as herself.

"H-how could you know that? You haven't even met Minato-chan!"

"My, my. We're in a class full of girls, and girls talk."

I consider myself a feminist, but even I have to agree with that.

"You really should not underestimate the power of gossip. Rumors, stories and ideas are just like sound; they will spread as long as there is air for them to travel. And girl, do they run fast as the winds."

I take a small break to breathe. This light is too hot and it's going to make me sweat buckets, but I must keep my act together. If I don't keep it cool now, I might never find out what I truly want to know.

"So, I heard you liked this guy from another school but couldn't bring yourself to confess to him. Now it's time for some speculation of my own: you even went as far as stalking him for a while, always from a safe distance. Then your best friend started going out with the guy, and you found that out by seeing it yourself on one of your stalking trips. You got mad and decided to start a vendetta against her. Am I right so far?"

She didn't even need to reply; the answer was stamped on her face and it made me feel awfully great.

"So, you wanted her to feel the angst and sadness you felt but you didn't exactly know how," I continued. "You have been raised as a good girl and had never done something like that before, so instead of trying to beat her up you opted for psychological terror. Scaring the hell out of someone seemed much easier."

Morimoto Ayaka was probably unaware of the fact she was trembling with visible anger, as I could guess from her next speech; her body seemed to know she had been caught, but her mind did not.

"You speak like your assumptions are facts but I can see that, along with the fact that you have absolutely no way of proving what you just said, there is another big blind spot in your theory."

Just the kind of line I was expecting.

"That is exactly why I brought you here instead of looking for the enormous amount of evidence an amateur such as you must have left, taking, for example, your fingerprints on the card Minato was supposed to get."

A grin quickly formed on my face when I saw that she shivered when I mentioned the 'fingerprints on the card' bluff. Not only that, apparently only then did she realize that someone had touched the card instead of Minato and seen the hallucination trap Ayaka had prepared to her. It showed that I am indeed dealing with an amateur here, and I was hoping for that; if my opponent is still a first-timer, I have a better chance not only of being the battle's winner, but also saving her from herself. "I want to know how you made that trap. At first I assumed it was some sort of 'brown note,' but after giving it a little bit of thought I noticed two things: one, a blank paper card was too vague for delivering an effect of that magnitude and two, there was nothing else different in the environment. believe me, I would know: I have a nearly photographic memory ."

I really shouldn't be enjoying this, but I simply cannot help it. This is actually making me feel alive, although I know I won't be proud of what I'm doing when it is over, nor want to do it again. I might even feel dirty for acting like this, but the future always seems to be a distant thing to those in the burning heat of the battle. Well, at least I know now that it's not about some sort of messiah complex. Right now, all I want is to defeat my enemy. I might regret every action of mine later, but right now I am but a duelist and nothing else matters.

"Checkmate," I finished. "You already lost the battle, Ayaka. I now have you at my mercy, but I don't intend to harm you if you explain what method you used to cause that strong hallucination. You can trust me. Just tell me what exactly **Shugoshin** is."

The *kanji* dictionary showed me how to read it and the girls confirmed it: that was the meaning of the symbols I saw inside the hallucination. Literally, it means 'guardian spirit,' and according to Kouma there is a protein with that name. I don't honestly think there is any relation to the protein in this particular case and now I need to know what this is about: there might be others of this... whatever this is.

Ayaka's body was shaking like an earthquake was happening inside of her, but that didn't distract me from my focus; I heard the gentle click when she finally opened her pantographic knife.

Things were finally starting to get serious.

"So you have pretended to be my friend to get something you want, just like Minato-chan did before you." She started panting furiously, and I considered the possibility of her anger resulting in a nervous breakdown. "I am indeed surrounded by liars; rats and vultures, all of you. You are all the same, playing your stupid games. Every single one of believe you are the good guys in your heads, and assume the rest of the world is composed only of allies and enemies. And you think that it justifies what you have done just because you really wanted to know what 'Shugoshin' means?"

She had a wicked smile on her face, and the terrifying look in her eyes revealed the fact that she was currently far beyond madness. She raised the ancient German knife; its reflection of light blinded me for a moment. "I! WILL! SHOW! YOU!"

And this was the point where things started going not as planned.

What happened next lasted only for about a second, but I managed to grasp all the details once my full vision returned as a torrent, a giant wave of information coming together all at once.

As if by magic, a slightly humanoid form started to materialize around Ayaka's body. It started as a transparent, ethereal creature made of surrealistic light. Eventually it became a grotesque reptile being that enveloped Ayaka's body inside its own gem-like translucent flesh, tainted redder than blood but still apparently insubstantial enough for me to see the shape of the mad girl inside it. And for some reason, I knew a thing or two about that. Maybe it was just simple logic or an instinct my mind developed because of the strange things surrounding me, but I knew deep inside Ayaka completely lost control of that thing and was now being absorbed by it, in the same way as I knew I had to keep breathing in order to survive.

The creature enveloping my classmate started moving in my direction, fast as a bullet.

Honestly, I wasn't expecting it to come down to this. In the end, Mystery with a capital M had really found me once again. What should a common person do now? In such a situation, practically anyone would be too astonished to breathe and would let themselves be near-instantly killed by that translucent lizard from outer space or another dimension. Fighting or immediately running might seem like the obvious answer to someone observing them from a safe place, but no one has the right to judge them for that kind of reaction; suspension of disbelief is not something that comes easy to people and they don't enjoy admitting that there is an awkward situation happening right in front of them, something they always believed that could only happen in a movie or anything. They are not supposed to be ready to fight back against something they cannot accept as real.

I'm just glad I'm not at all like them.

From the very beginning, I have faced many, many situations as weird as this and occasionally some even weirder. What terrifies me is that I'm not even afraid of that kind of thing anymore, which classifies

me as a real freak even by my broken standards. It kind of sucks when you realize you are indeed a complete mess in your own eyes but I don't think I can change that, no matter how hard I try.

What I can do is change myself. I meant it when I decided to fight back against Mystery if it came looking for me again, even if at that time I didn't intend to do it, well, literally. I will stand my ground, once and for all. If that's what it takes for me to solve this case and to have a chance of leading a normal life (preferably by Ryo's side), I guess will do it. Not just because of her, but mostly because it's a small price to pay for the peace I have dreamed of for so long.

So, I am actually going to earn my right to live decently by beating up that sinister and menacing creature that came out of nowhere. Sounds like a decent plan to me.

Better than the last one, anyway.

"Kouma, run!" Reality struck me less a second before the creature delivered the first attack, when I finally realized that despite having gathered all the courage I needed, I was still but a common human fighting a supernatural entity. Hopelessly, I crossed my arms into an 'X' to defend against the amazingly strong blow of the creature's axe kick. "Take Ryo with you and run away, now!"

The kicks and punches seemed to come from everywhere, and I don't think that was far from the truth. That creature was way too fast for me, and I didn't think I had a chance to beat it up with my bare hands. I could only wait for an opening and then hope for the best (and surely it's not usual for me to hope for the best). Until then, I would have to serve as a sparring bag for this monster, trying my best to defend against its strikes.

Although I don't want to believe that, it might be the only thing I'll be able to do.

The moment it decided to give me an uppercut, I saw a small opening and decided to go for it, but at the very same time I coincidentally showed the monster an opening of my own: I almost tripped over a wrench on the floor and the creature decided to use that moment when my defenses were down to attack me with a direct hit.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attack it because my own lack of caution created that opening. In fact, I realized that I wouldn't even have a chance to so much as defend myself from its next blow, and it seemed to be a decisive one. As that deformed fist quickly came towards my face, I had only time to clench my teeth and think a single sentence: this is going to hurt an awful lot.

"Like Hell I'm going to let you save the day on your own!"

The creature was completely distracted by Kouma's sudden attack and turned its attention to her. The opportunity I was looking for was right there and I didn't need to think twice. I grabbed the wrench and used it to hit the monster's chin by thrusting the tool upwards at full strength, and fell afterwards due to my loss of balance. The attack was effective and I must thank the monster for that; after all, I just copied and adapted its uppercut. After my hit, Kouma quickly sent the creature flying away with her signature butterfly kick.

"Are you okay?" Kouma said as she offered me a hand to help me stand up.

"I'm alright. Thank you for the help, but I really need you to protect Ryo right now."

"I'm pretty sure Ryo can watch over herself, and I'm not your sidekick! If anyone is going to play the 'knight in shining armor' role here, that's me!"

We ran towards our common enemy, who was starting to get up.

"Stop being so childish and leave!" We might all get killed if things keep like this. "This is not a competition, Kouma!"

"It is, but this round we're on the same side." Her voice was raspy, and at that moment I could actually see her as a living person instead of a doll with occasional bursts of emotions. "Right now, we need to join our forces and finish that thing off. Are you ready to rock, partner?"

I could not stop myself from smiling.

"Partner, huh?" I stared at her for a moment while we ran, whispering the words with a smile on my face. I like how that sounds, I really do. "Let's do it!"

Together we rushed and attacked the creature in perfect synchrony, combined like I had never expected to be with anyone in my whole life. It would have been a beautiful moment if we weren't teenagers fighting barehanded for our lives and now without the element of surprise that saved me a few seconds ago.

The battle went on, but despite the addition of an ally, we soon noticed that we were losing territory and willpower every second.

We had the strength we needed to defend ourselves and occasionally attack (depending on our foe's moments of distraction), but there was a big chance of us getting tired before that thing did. It was a supernatural entity after all, and that meant it probably takes more than two young martial artists to bring that monster down. What we need right now is someone that can attack from a longer range than Kouma or I, even if it's not too long; just enough for that person to attack uninterrupted from a safe distance while Kouma and I distract the creature without taking too much damage.

I suppose it would be too ambitious of me to hope for Ryo getting a crossbow right now along with perfect sight and the skills of a trained sniper. I know I am being picky, but just the crossbow really wouldn't be enough, because Ryo's current eyesight at long distance meant we had as much chance of becoming the target as the creature did...

"Hah!" A female voice said, and shortly afterward, a sound that could only come from a strong impact was heard.

Recognizing the sound of that voice, I turned around to confirm my suspicions, and there she was. No, it wasn't Shiina Ryo with a crossbow. That would be too weird, even for this particular story. I couldn't honestly be expecting that, and so neither should you. That would be completely unreasonable, like

Reikoku-sensei coming out of nowhere with her telescopic pointer extended to a length that was at the very least 'surprising,' and attacking the monstrous creature by using it like a whip. Very unlikely, I know. Especially because the mechanism that would allow it to morph both into a long lance-like stick and a folding whip with just a movement would probably take a ridiculously long time to devise and it doesn't sound very practical to anyone, except maybe for a teacher who is an oddity hunter in disguise. Not only that, the chances of such a character suddenly popping out to help us exactly when we need her are absurdly low. Less than one in a million, I'm afraid. That would be too unreasonable.

However, it was exactly what happened. How strangely convenient, indeed.

"What are you even doing here?" I asked when the creature fell.

"An old fat man dressed in red told me you would be here and that you would need help. It wouldn't be logical to just believe anyone as easy as that, but since he was standing in front of your house and things are often weird around you, I figured it wouldn't hurt to try." Did she just justify her appearance by quoting the first line of the story? That's it, I'm calling my agent. "He asked me to tell you that the two of you are even now and..."

Then we three hit the floor.

At that moment, we learned a valuable lesson that they certainly don't teach kids in school these days, especially in fictional villain schools: don't stop attacking to start a dialogue because your enemy probably won't be polite enough to wait for you.

Proving it was not just a stupid creature without the ability to evolve, the monster developed a brand new body part in order to mimic the whip Reikoku-sensei used: a prehensile tail made of plasma that reminded me of a scorpion's, except for the surprisingly well-devised claw-like sting. The fact that thing created this deadly weapon after seeing how another worked in such a small amount of time makes me genuinely worried, yet relieved that Reikoku-sensei didn't bring a sub-machinegun or a nuclear bomb to this fight. We already have enough trouble as it is right now.

I raised my face off the cold floor only to meet something that can only be defined as 'bloody dreadful.' No, that's not right; there are probably several other fitting adjectives for what I saw, but I didn't mind much since we were about to be obliterated and we who are about to die do not care much about sounding good. Also, spending last moments thinking on adjectives never helped anyone to go out with a smile as far as I'm concerned.

Did I just say a scorpion-like tail was bad enough? Oh, never mind, it's never enough. Said prehensile part was dividing itself into several members right before our eyes and becoming one of my greatest fears, and I am not talking about trees but the exact thing those ancient forms of life have that scares me the most: tentacles. That's it; we're officially as good as dead.

A shattering sound filled the warehouse.

Just when I thought we were going to be defeated, hope came from above. One of the enormous spotlights suddenly fell on the monster's deformed head. Struck by both the surprise attack and the

heavy equipment while it suffered a transformation, the creature kissed the definitely solid ground in the most audible, painful way I could ever imagine. Mrs. Gravity attacked again!

"I told you... not to ignore me."

I looked up and saw Ryo on the warehouse's roof metallic structure. She was controlling the lights from a cabin, according to the plan, while Kouma was the one who would manually operate the door in the darkness. I guessed it had been really hard to get up there, especially for her; she was not the most athletic girl I knew, but her effort might have saved our lives by buying us time to counter-attack.

"Ryo!" I screamed, surprised by the relief just saying that name gave me. "You saved us!"

Despite the darkness we were in, I could somehow see she was smiling at me.

"I might not be a fighting freak of nature such as Kouma and you, but I'm not a damsel in distress either, you know!" All the echoes of her voice died quickly, yet her deep heavy breath lingered and slowly spread through the warehouse. "On the other hand, that girl inside the monster is!"

And Ryo was right.

We all could just run and leave the mutant lizard monster behind, but that would mean leaving Ayaka behind as well. She might have done some bad and potentially awful things, but I don't think she deserves being possessed by this thing as a punishment.

Right now we're the only ones who can save her. We are her only hope.

Relying only on my companions and my instincts to save someone I met only a few days before, I put everything on the line. I looked around and saw something that could be used as a strong weapon, but might be much more effective if strategically used as a tool. It might be our key to victory.

"Kouma, the chain!"

After throwing it towards her direction, I raised my left arm and firmly wrapped the chain around it. Kouma immediately understood my plan and did the same. Once she was finished, we ran with all our might; not away from nor towards the monster, but around it. We encircled the creature several times with the metal chain. Once restrained, the **Shugoshin** went berserk and tried to get free by breaking the chain (as expected from a beast), but since its arms and tentacles were tightly bound, the monster could not use its full strength.

"Now, sensei!"

Reikoku-sensei took off her glasses, revealing the face of a true sadist. She extended the telescopic pointer that now glowed green in the dark to its maximum (and dear, was it long) and raised it like she was going to deliver punishment to a kid I certainly wouldn't want to be.

"Have you been a naughty boy?"

Now, that was completely unnecessary and uncalled for. Why would anyone say such a thing, especially during a battle for survival and salvation of a not-so-innocent girl? I have no doubts right now, that line was just pure fan service and I apologize for that. Well, unless you liked it and decided to buy the book just because of that. In that case, I won't apologize but I feel forced to warn you that you are a broken person who should really seek help, preferably not from women dressed as school teachers.

Moving on.

"FIVE!"

Contrasting to my teacher's unbelievably loud battle cry which I could not make sense of, the creature moved its mouth as if screaming from the excruciating pain, but there were no words or sounds. That I understood a little bit too well.

"FOUR!"

Then it finally dawned on me: it was the countdown she showed at class that everyone was completely terrified of. Reikoku-sensei proceeded with the torture that was almost too painful to watch.

"THREE!"

The creature fell and evanesced, leaving behind only the shivering body of the culprit that was my classmate. While she seemed to have a fever, it was good for me to see that she was still alive and reasonably safe. It was finally over.

Kouma seemed to be as tired as I was, but she still found the strength to raise her thumb to tell me we did a good job, along with a faint, creepy smile that was almost sweet at that particular occasion.

We did it. We solved the case, we saved the day and everyone survived. Despite what Ayaka-chan pointed about the *modus operandi* we adopted, that still makes us the heroes, right? We are still the good guys here, right?

Right?

"What a weakling," said my teacher while putting her glasses back on, without any trace of mercy or compassion, just like one should expect from someone who did that sort of thing all the time, but not from an educator who dealt with young minds every day for a living. "You can barely call that an exorcism."

It was the last straw for me. How could she act cold like that after seeing the lives of three of her students in danger? I was just about to start an inflamed argument that would bring a little bit of storm to our calm moment, but then everything decided to change and definitely not for the best.

It was only reasonable that a sick girl with practically zero physical strength and stamina shouldn't engage in activities that required much of said attributes she lacked. It was also reasonable that, after doing something that required both attributes in a desperately fast way, the girl would probably faint, as

she almost had done many times before while doing things that clearly required much less of her abilities.

Why couldn't we foresee that, then?

How could we not expect her to pass out and fall from such height? Why did we only notice that Shiina Ryo was pushing her limits when we saw her unconscious body diving like a missile to the ground, without a single chance to defend herself?

How is it possible?

Shiina Ryo was now falling, special thanks to Ms. Gravity acting like a major female dog like she always does. There was no stopping that, and unlike Kouma or even myself, there was absolutely no chance of her showing crazy fight movie moves and saving herself from the fall. No mysterious magical creature would envelop her body like in Ayaka's case. She would not discover any psychic or anti-gravitational powers that would stop her from dying.

She was a common person and she was just going to free fall and hit the warehouse floor full of tools, chains and sorted mechanical parts with her back and head, most likely dying or becoming paraplegic with the trauma.

My own words resonated in my head.

A victory that requires some sacrifice is probably better than losing. I know I am the one that came up with that earlier this week, but I don't want to believe it. If I do, then Ryo is going to count as the sacrifice for our victory and it would make everything fair.

I don't want it to be fair, not this way.

The price should be the time and power we spent on this situation, and only that. Despite all the effort that was put into this battle and the trouble we had to create a situation where we could happily spend our days together, my best friend will probably die in front of me. Just like that.

There are many things in life we cannot control. Whether we are born into a good family or not, whether we're extremely talented or below average, or even if we are of the right species, race or mindset for survival in a certain environment.

At which point does a parasol becomes an umbrella?

What we can control is our behaviour, thus making our families good by fixing the problems between members and bonding with each other in times of need, and work hard until a commoner surpasses a genius in his own game, and tricking a robot into making you mortal to be accepted as human. It's now about how good your tools are for that service, but how you use and improvise with them as you go. If life gives you lemons, you'd better find a way to make an electrical battery out of them and to use the energy for something useful. Which is exactly what I am going to do.

When you need it to.

I am going to bend Time and Space, right here and right now.

(This is the part where a powered-up variation of the opening theme should start playing)

Probably, I didn't actually do it the first time. In fact, there is a big chance that was just an impression caused by me over-reacting again like I usually do. Bizarre oddities and mysteries aside, I admit I am too much of a paranoid and prone to delusions, so that kind of thing could happen to me. And that doesn't mean anything to me. Even if I was mistaken, even if that was a lie, I will have to make it become truth in order to reach Ryo in time to save her.

And you know what? There is a great chance I am going to fail miserably, but I am going to do it anyway because this is what heroes do. Against all odds, probabilities and even common sense I will attempt something way beyond my capabilities with only sheer will power on my side and honestly, I still expect to win.

Because I couldn't care less about Science than I do right now.

Because I have faced so many unrealistic things in my past that it wouldn't be completely unreasonable if I didn't develop some sort of power at this point.

Because I have already changed inside and now it's time to make the whole world change around me.

Because.

"UORYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!"

Unfortunately, I couldn't find a good catchphrase in time: I was too worried about defying Physics and forgot to look unbelievably cool, which also seems to be an important part of being a hero. I should have said something that the fans would be able to repeat at conventions and post on the Internet, and that would be used (even if slightly altered) in every big battle or dramatic situation. People love that kind of stuff, right? It could be worse, though. I may have failed to look completely awesome, but I did manage to distort reality with the sole purpose of saving Shiina Ryo. Nothing is perfect, anyway.

That's right. I made it.

Now, what a mystery I am becoming to myself. I never thought I had this 'alpha male must save the girl' thing inside me but that's probably a built-in feature of my model, like the passion for soccer that burns in the souls of everyone in Brazil. Wait, I did meet a Brazilian guy who disliked it, but he was a novelist and they just aren't like you and me and therefore don't count as 'people' when it comes to statistics. Just sayin'.

Thump.

In case you didn't notice, I was just trying to get my mind to ignore the impact I was going to suffer when my friend landed on top of me. Now that it already happened, I see that it sure wasn't great but not as ugly as I thought it would be. Just like a syringe injection at the doctor, or politics.

Her body felt unbelievably light when I held her in my arms, a fact Ms. Gravity desperately wanted to disagree with by still throwing me against the ground. It felt like I was holding a baby, and I didn't know that about Ryo. Once again I am starting to realize that there are a lot of things about her that I don't know.

I heard footsteps coming to my direction.

"Koukishin-kun, are you okay?" My teacher seemed to be honestly concerned, and that made me realize that I might have misjudged her. She is not a bad person, probably just a lawful neutral kind of character. "Answer me!"

"He took the impact to stop her fall, he is obviously not okay. Look at all those tools he fell on." Kouma started checking on me with that small flashlight of hers again. I wonder if she carries it around all the time. Girl purses sure are amazing hammerspace devices, with the capability to carry an infinite number of things. I should get one of those, although it might get me the wrong kind of attention considering I'm not in France anymore. Oh well, you can't have everything.

"Did you even consider Physics before doing that stupid action of yours?" She said, now directly to me.

No, I didn't consider Physics: I was too busy defying it and trying to come up with a good catchphrase, and thankfully I only failed at the less important of those two. Wait, maybe that meaningless scream could become a catchphrase. It happens once in a while in fiction, so why not? The girls could be right. Maybe deep down, I am an '*id*' hero in denial just waiting to bloom as a hot-blooded macho protagonist like those found in eighties' manga.

"Shin... tsu?"

My dearest friend and first person to actually believe in me was the legitimate owner of that sweet voice. She turned to face me, her eyes getting teary. I must be in a worse condition than I thought, and I'm pretty good at imagining awful things. However, I am better at pretending every single thing is alright when they're not.

"Hello, sleepyhead." Even I realized my voice was barely audible. "I'm glad you're awake."

"But..."

Surprisingly, it wasn't raining or snowing as one should expect and all we had as a background, other than the mixture of steel and concrete above our heads, was the dying dusk that slowly faded to a newborn dark, reaching us from the now open metal doors.

"Don't worry, I'm tougher than most." I reflexively smiled, not to reassure her of what I was saying but actually at my own awfully bad bluff. "I just don't think I'll be able to do what I promised we would."

Coughing was slightly painful to me that time, and from the look on her face it's safe to assume it showed. "I guess we're not going to run together under the rain any time... soon."

Then it was my turn to lose consciousness.

Chapter 4: Ayaka Part 6 [C4A6]

Everything was so calm and silent it was hard to believe a battle had occurred here.

Actually, no. Not really. That would be an understatement. I have been in a few battlefields before, and after the heat of the battle is gone they all seem like this. It feels like you were listening to the world's loudest and most chaotic crossover thrash metal band ever and then suddenly you go completely deaf (yes, 1997 was a good year indeed). It's weird and you cannot help but feel empty, and it doesn't matter if you were enjoying or even understanding the song at all; from the moment it stops, you'll find yourself wishing it come back even if you hated it with all your heart and soul.

Because it made you feel alive. There was action, and it was so fast and incredibly random it would seem constant to untrained eyes. It pierced your ears with its colorful riffs and striking drum hits. It made you dizzy and you felt like your head was about to explode because the song was so loud you couldn't hear yourself screaming. And then, there was nothing. Nothing, after a massive avalanche of vivid sounds.

It's just painfully awful, but so is life: we will learn to deal with it as we go and make it a pleasant experience by our very own effort, always hoping to have others that care enough to support us when we fall. This is what some of us call 'living.'

Having that meaning in mind, I can honestly say I have never felt so alive.

"You really are tougher than most, aren't you? To do such a brave yet stupid thing and walk out with nothing but bruises is really amazing, especially after that theatrical death speech. It was too well done for a first-timer, so I assume you're already used to that."

"Reikoku-sensei." I finally opened my eyes and saw that we were outside the warehouse. "How is Ryo?"

My teacher sighed.

"Now I see why you're not interested in Kouma-san at all." I don't think I understand what she meant by that or how is it relevant to this situation. At least, I think I don't. "She is alright, just terribly worried. I sent both girls to buy us something to drink after Kouma-san finished patching you up. The way Shiina Ryo looked at you was getting on my nerves, really."

"What do you mean by pat..." As I tried to move, I noticed that under my jacket (that was covering me like a blanket) I was not wearing my shirt. Instead, what covered my torso like a female top were bandages and I could feel the scent of herbs flowing from them. "Kouma did this to me?"

"Yes, right after I finished taking photos of you for my personal gallery." She looked away, probably because of the lack of reaction on my side. "You're not in the mood for jokes, I get it. Yes, Kouma took care of Morimoto Ayaka and you. She took several things out of her tiny purse of hers just to find you medicine. You'd be amazed; it was just like a magician's number. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't believe it,

and I know that because I was here and I still don't quite believe it." Yeah I would. "Be sure to thank the doctor when she arrives and... never mind, here she comes."

Feeling much better than I expected to but still very stiff and sore, I stood up and looked in the direction Reikoku-sensei faced and received something that in my condition could be considered a surprise attack. I was not given a chance to fight back, and in such circumstances there is only a single thing one can do: receive the blow and hope for the best.

At that moment, I was completely overwhelmed by Shiina Ryo's embrace.

There was no need for words. We both had a long day and a not-so-short week and there was plenty of time to strengthen the bonds that were born online, so we actually knew how each other felt. We both have done our best to overcome personal obstacles. We both had won.

That time I actually hugged her back.

We stayed like that for a while, and it didn't felt like an eternity at all. In fact, I honestly think she let me go prematurely, but I didn't say anything because it would sound clingy in front of Reikoku-sensei and Kouma Yon. Oh, right...

"Thank you very much for taking care of me, Kouma." I felt somehow embarrassed by that public demonstration of affection, although I knew I shouldn't. Maybe it's the cultural shock of being in Japan, I'm not sure. "I wouldn't have made it without you, partner."

"You're welcome." Her face remained still. "Just keep in mind that this round is over, but not the competition."

It didn't take me a long time to see what she meant by those words, but it certainly took me longer than it should because I couldn't make sense of Reikoku-sensei's hand resting on her shoulder. Was she... being comforted? What for? I mean, I'm the one who fell upon assorted tools and mechanical parts.

As soon as Reikoku-sensei realized I could see what she was doing, she removed her hand gently enough for an untrained eye to take her gesture as natural. Then, in an obvious effort to avoid further questioning on that subject, she moved towards us and started talking to Ryo.

"You suggested a special task force to investigate and deal with **Shugoshin** or any other exquisite phenomena appearing in the city, right?" Reikoku-sensei looked like she was seriously considering that idea. "Sounds interesting. I suppose we can talk more about that on Monday."

I was a little confused.

"Excuse me, what?" Did I say I was a little confused? I believe 'borderline desperate' fits much better. "We barely finished that monster and you are honestly considering turning this into a hobby? Not only that, isn't it a little bit too soon to assume there are others?"

My teacher turned to face me.

"There are, and I refuse to say anything else right now."

"Do you actually have a reason for doing so?"

"While I personally would love to, there is something slightly more important than that on my priority list right now." She pointed to the girl who was still asleep, but not look feverish anymore. Right, there's the Ayaka situation. "About that, I need to talk to you in private for a second."

"Sure."

We took a few steps and then she whispered, presumably so neither Ryo nor Kouma would listen to her.

"I need you to take them away from here, because I will have to deal with Ayaka's parents now and that is most likely going to be the hardest part. Believe me, fighting that thing sounds like a piece of cake compared to having to explain to her parents that their daughter was technically possessed and might have problems with the local authorities, especially because of small things such as carrying weapons around. I don't think I will be home for dinner tonight, and I probably won't be able to visit you tomorrow as well. So, don't worry about my portions, okay?" Slightly numb I nodded, honestly trying to ignore her calling my place 'home' once again.

We would only find out Monday morning, but Ayaka had to transfer.

I didn't pay attention to the reason given by Reikoku-sensei, but I'm pretty sure most of the class will end up buying it. A certain group of girls will probably spread extremely surreal theories about this, and most of them will be about Minato and Ayaka's moving being directly related (which would be pretty much obvious, even for a complete idiot; I don't think anyone could actually believe it was a coincidence).

For a while, I suppose everyone will be talking about a big fight over a boy (partially truth) or how a friend made her family move in order to keep living close to the other and even about a romance between the two of them. I guess the way this story will end depends on their creativity alone, since calling one of the involved girls to ask what really happened would spoil everyone's fun. In this particular case, it's probably for the best.

And then, just after the heat of the moment is gone, everything will go back to normal again because small but economically developing cities are pretty much like that. I suppose that is what peace truly means: not the complete lack of problems or any events whatsoever but the unusual ability to make things get back on track and reach the same outcome even when they took different trajectories, completely ignoring the fact butterflies were tiring themselves flapping their magnificent wings on the other side of the world. It's the real world's version of the literary reset button, and surely it is useful.

Thankfully, the rest of that weekend was uneventful. There were no supernatural or mysterious elements from that point on and because of that, even Kouma seemed able to enjoy herself when we decided to meet spend the rest of Saturday evening at Le Ciel Bleu after briefly heading to our

respective homes to take the hot showers we deserved and needed so much. The mood lightened up and Kouma even tried to smile at a certain moment, but she wisely stopped herself when she saw the terrified look on the other customers' faces.

Sunday was calm, nearly monotonous. I woke up surprisingly early for someone who had just solved a mysterious case and fought, barehanded, a grotesque supernatural creature with reality shifting powers. From its very first moment I knew the day would be really empty and instantly grabbed my cell phone with the intention of calling Ryo. Then I remembered Ayaka's case.

It's time for some 'book end epiphany,' which fits this story pretty well since I have not let go of that hypothesis yet. I have already grown a lot in a week; I learned that I should face my problems instead of running away because that's the only way I can protect the things that matter to me. If I had only learned it before, I bet my life would have been easier, but I can't change the past. I can, however, avoid making the same mistakes in the future and keep learning every day. And if I learned anything in this situation with Ayaka, it's that I should not base my happiness on other people. I am not sure if I am honestly romantically interested in Ryo yet, but even if I end up finding myself in love with her, I'd better not be too dependent on her.

Besides, there is still plenty of time for us to actually decide on how we feel towards each other and develop something that could be properly called an amorous relationship. As I evolve, so does my hypothesis, and I'm starting to believe I am actually living the beginning of a novel series.

Leaving the cell phone on the mahogany bedside table, I go to the window and once again gaze at the beautifully simple view of the city. After standing in front of the window for a while, I decide to do something I haven't had time to do since I got here. I turn on the amplifier, the bass guitar in my arms, and get ready to practice for a couple hours.

I am certainly going to text her later, I know I will. After all, we're friends and it's not like we have much to do on a Sunday but chat. But right now I don't feel such an unquenchable thirst for that. All I need to feel alive is my own self and a brand new jazzy tune.

I'm looking forward to the next week.

Afterword [AF]

Greetings, I am Ryuno.

Forcing myself to keep this afterword short, I cannot help but feel uneasy. This being my first finished (and hopefully published by the time you're reading this) work, there is not much for me to say. It sure was nice creating this world, but it was also very hard for me to actually write it.

However, now I can say I make part of the second most underrated class of workers in the modern world (plumbers being the first, because without them we would have to both rethink our water and sewage systems and travel through several worlds and castles only to find out that the princess is not where she was supposed to be): the novelists, smiths of words and conqueror of wild dark seas. Without us, most people wouldn't dream.

This is my masterpiece.

Not the modern usage, though; this certainly is not going to be my best work, since I hope to evolve as a writer and make several other fiction books. I meant it as the original usage of the term: this is the work I present to the guild as an apprentice willing to become a master craftsman.

Even if my effort is accepted, this will not be the end of the quest: *au contraire*, new possibilities and obstacles will branch out every minute at the moment this dream I idealized for so long become a reality. Pretty much like every single thing does every second, according to some scientific theories...

Oh dear, there was I being all meta- again; either my words are too filled with metafiction or with metaphysics, which is probably just the long term result of methodically listening to metal music and letting myself be carried beyond and between (it varies depending on your Greek thesaurus, or shall I say dictionary in order to avoid another rapid fire series of puns and wordplays) the constant metamorphosis of metaphors into metaverses due to the growing belief in Many-Worlds interpretation.

Since being humorous is not something I often succeed at (most likely because of my unconditional, endless love for meta-jokes), allow me to try a completely different approach to this.

Considering **x** as a hypothetical world where I did manage to get this story published, a few new issues appear as the previous problem (not being published) is solved.

- I don't have a fan base yet.
- I don't have a defined, predictable writing style yet.

- I don't even have an "Other books by the same author" section on the back cover, for crying out loud.

However, finishing my first novel (and I don't think I can call it that, because of the word count monster) allows me to shield myself and even counter those fierce self-accusations.

- I might not have any other works yet, but I suppose I have the time it takes to make them; not only that, this "novel" is only the beginning of something much, much bigger. Right now, I am thinking "novel series", but hopefully someone with great financial resources will look at this and think "franchise".
- I might not have a defined writing style, but it just means I still can evolve and amuse you all for a few years until you realize that my writing have become formulaic. Not that it will be such a bad thing, as long as I manage to play with the tropes I will have established myself.
- I don't have a fan-base yet, but (pardon my intentional misquoting) "build it and they will come" sounds very good for a plan. I got this misquoted tip on the Internet, therefore it must work; it was posted on the Internet, after all.

So, only Time shall prove if x is a possible outcome or not. Not only that, it shall also prove if this me is currently living in the x world. The same Time whose existence I don't quite believe in seems to be a valuable ally on my way to becoming a not-so-bad novelist and a wonderful storyteller.

Maybe I should believe in Time. He is probably not as tricky as Santa.

- Ryuno